

A VISION OF OSTARA

-a Zakai Biask story-
by Vodo Biask Taldrya

PROMPT 1 - New Visitors

There was no doubt in the boy's mind that his father would be angry. That wasn't unusual, the Warlord Vodo Biask was seemingly a tempest from the moment he awoke to the moment he skulked off to bed. Zakai was a dutiful apprentice and a largely-obedient son so that meant this escape to Ostara was something of an unusual activity for him. His father hadn't said he couldn't go to Ostara but Zakai hadn't exactly given him a chance to weigh in on the subject. Nor had he asked if he could take the ship-- Vodo's beloved opulent, ungangly, slow, highly modified Upsilon-class shuttle *Karufr Knight*.

Dyson, a Kiffur Apprentice to another of Taldryan's venerable members, had bragged to Zakai about Ostara. He'd talked about the dense jungle forest, the strange alien creatures and flora, and of course the temple. Untold thousands of years old it stood there in the midsts of the jungle untouched by the encroaching vines and trees who strangled the life out of each-other in a vicious competition for light, water, and nutrients but avoided the stonework pedestal atop which the monument stood. It was as though, as vicious as they were, they knew to avoid the Temple. Dyson had said how his master, a Grey Jedi, had spoken of its known history (or what little they knew of it).

It had belonged to an ancient Sith lord who had forced aliens to worship him and dedicate enormous monuments in his honor. Dyson had bragged about the statues lining the entry hall, the massive pillars that supported the stone ceilings within, and the ornate carvings that covered every surface in the temple. Somewhat disbelieving Zakai had teased Dyson. Vodo had taken Zakai on hundreds of missions over the last five years to long lost Sith worlds, places of particular interest in the Force, and he'd seen the ruins of the once pervasive Sith Empires. A temple on a backwater moon of no note couldn't have compared. The Kiffur had countered that if Zakai was so experienced he should go to the temple himself. It was said there was treasure within waiting to be found, after all. Boys will be boys and it was only an hour later that Zakai was in the pilot's seat of the *Knight* powering up its systems.

Zakai piloted the massive shuttle through the Moon's atmosphere and pin-pointed on his scanners the location of the fabled temple. It was nestled between three rises of hills, all densely covered in foliage, but stood out like a sore thumb. It was all hewn of rock and stood proudly like towering spire. It was surrounded by a geometric arrangement of flat stones that created the top of the pedestal, elevated off the jungle floor, providing more than enough landing space for the ship. A chill settled over the boy as the ship touched down and he felt it land in the pit of his stomach like a lead weight. He would be in so much trouble when he got home but he was already here. If he didn't prove to Dyson he'd come here and at least explored a little he'd look like a coward. He shook off the chill and shut the ship down.

Exiting the rear ramp Zakai set foot on the flat surface of the pedestal and looked around. He was a boy of 15, a half-Hapan and half-Twi'lek hybrid, and the product of a tempestuous love affair between a courtesan-assassin and a domineering Sith warlord with delusions of grandeur. Unlike a full-blooded Twi'lek his Lekku head-tails appeared stunted, stuck at an awkward length between sticking straight out from his skull like two firm meat-sacks and hanging down behind him. Unlike his father Zakai was unable to drape his lekku around his neck let alone perch it over his shoulder as he'd jealously seen full-blooded Twi'lek do. He hoped as he grew and matured that the head-tails would grow in length so if nothing else they appeared in proportion to his body. That was his Mom's voice in head, constantly preening him and shaping him into some semblance of Hapan beauty. Zakai was by no means vain, his father would have beaten such a useless trait out of him years ago, but he had deep-rooted programming from his earliest years with his Mother impressing upon him the importance of personal appearance. *I'm going to have to talk to someone about my terrible upbringing someday*, he sighed to himself.

Hefting the tool belt at his waist Zakai surveyed the temple and set out for what was very clearly the entrance. If it weren't the fact that the massive opening served as an architectural focal point he would have determined this was the place he needed to start as jet black lines of volcanic glass, inlaid to the stonework, lead from all directions to the entry where they converged into a swirling design of complexity and arcane meaning. Standing atop the swirl at its center Zakai felt a tickle down the skin of his lekku and shivered. It was a feeling his Dad had described, a whisper from the Force. This place, untold millennia old, was still strong in the Dark Side of the Force. One of his boots stepped backwards as he had a fleeting thought that now would be a good time to turn around and go home but he stopped himself and instead put the next boot forward and proceeded into the Temple. It felt like the right decision, the Force told him so.

It was pleasant and warm outside under the warmth of the star Caelus but as soon as he entered the shadow of the temple he became filled with cold. He pulled up the hood on his robes, pulled the glow rod from his belt, and moved into what appeared to be a grand hall. Pillars, two meters across, towered up to the ceiling where they disappeared into the darkness. Infact, Zakai could not even see the ceiling so far up there. Row after row the pillars led him deeper into the temple until the rectangular window of light created by the entry lay behind him so far he could hold his palm in front of his face and cover it entirely. This place was massive! Sure enough, Dyson hadn't exaggerated about the carvings. Every exposed surface of stone was covered in the stuff. Some were pictorial, demonstrating scenes of subservience and worship of a figure (presumably the Sith Lord), while others were arcane and had no discernable meaning to Zakai's limited knowledge.

He walked along, examining some and brushing his hands over others. He leaned in close to one carving which seemed to depict a triangular object of veneration to a bowing line of supplicants when he heard a whisper in his left ear.

"Go".

He spun, his hand reaching for his lightsaber, but there was nothing there. He looked around and realized he didn't know where he was. He wasn't in the grand hall any longer and couldn't see the last vestiges of light from the entry in any direction. He couldn't exactly remember where he'd come from to get to where he was. His mind raced but he forced his will upon it, took some deep breaths, and examined the room around him. Glowrod in one hand and his saber hilt in the other he walked around the room and was confused. There were two doors, one at either end of the room, but there was nothing to distinguish which would lead him deeper and which would take him back to the ship.

"Great", he hung the saber back on his belt, closed his eyes, and after a few more deep breaths he opened himself to the Force.

The eddies and currents of the Dark Side flowed through the room, far stronger than he'd ever experienced, and it clearly moved in one direction. In his heart he knew that to follow the Force would lead him deeper into the Temple and that he was already in enough trouble as it was. Everything told him he should return to the ship, return to Vodo, and face his punishment. Instead his feet lead him towards the other door. His lekku tingled like goosebumps rising and falling as he walked. Whispers followed him, always just out of range of his hearing. Occasionally he thought he thought he saw a person moving at the corner of his vision but whenever he turned to glowrod on them there was nothing there.

His heart was pounding as he plodded on and Zakai had to remind himself several times that this temple had been abandoned here thousands of years ago. It didn't help that he'd read many of his father's histories of the Sith; they were replete with tales of young Jedi wandering into temples just like this one, presuming them to be empty, only to meet the ghost of the long-dead Sith Lord Marka Ragnos or Naga Sadow. Vodo himself had spoken of similar experiences in his younger years though he was always vague on the details. He was a smart boy and these stories fed him a cautious fear but he was also a young man and the threat of adventure drove his boots onward.

He continued to follow the Force current until it led him into a chamber of magnificent proportions. He'd descended many stairs and been led continually downward so he judged that he was likely below the temple's pedestal and under the ground at this point. From where he stood on a balcony he overlooked a circular room a hundred meters across. Above him it rose into a cone-like point and was mirrored below as the floor sloped downward and inward steeply. An elevated walkway proceeded at a less-steep angle to a platform at the center of the chamber, perched atop of a tower rising from the bottom below. The room was bathed in a golden light that emanated from the tower-platform which highlighted the fact that here, unlike anywhere else in the temple, the walls were smooth and bare of any carvings.

"You have come."

Vodo again spun at the whisper in his ear and grabbed for his lightsaber.

"You will not need your weapon, Apprentice. Come."

Blinking he looked around him. There was no one there. At least, he didn't see anyone until he looked down upon the platform. There a man stood, robed from head to foot in black. The man stood, 50m away, standing still and looking at him though the definition of his face was hidden beneath the brim of his hood.

"Who are you!" Zakai called across the chamber at the man.

When the man made no response Zakai called to him again. The Man made no move to respond and remained standing still. *He can't be real, can he? Am I hallucinating?* Zakai scratched the side of his face but knew deep down who and what the man was.

"Why do you wait? Come."

Zakai did as the ghost bid and walked the elevated path to the platform. As he approached he saw the man stood motionlessly beside a podium which at chest height displayed a pyramid-shaped device. The boy recognized it immediately as a Holocron-- Vodo had a small collection of them displayed in his office and were some of his most prized possessions. An excitement rose within Zakai at the possibility of returning to his Father with the artifact in hand.

"You covet my Holocron?"

Zakai stopped before the ghost and tried to peer under the hood, "No, Master."

"You lie. I sense the Dark Path upon you but I do not sense your dedication to its cause."

Zakai swallowed hard, unnerved by the fact the ghost had penetrated so quickly to the deepest of his secrets. He was a dutiful Apprentice to his father and he applied himself diligently to all of his Master's lessons but unlike his father Zakai had no natural, innate darkness. He did not hate unconditionally, he was not a boy of inflamed and petulant passions.

"I serve my Master faithfully", Zakai responded, raising his chin defiantly.

From under the ghostly hood he saw the man smile in a satisfied manner, "I see that. Do you know who I am? Boy?"

Zakai walked around the podium, examining the Holocron while keeping one eye on the man, "You're a ghost."

"I am no ghost, Boy. Sith of my time learned to overcome the limitations of the mortal coil to live eternally. My flesh will never decay and though my heart no longer beats I stand before you."

The man watched Zakai as he examined the Holocron and continued, "I am Lord Horuz ka Valen. You stand in the heart of my Temple and you have come at my summoning. If you prove worthy, I will grant you possession of this Holocron."

Greedily Zakai glanced up at the man, "Worthy?"

"Tell me, Boy: Do you know the Sith Code?"

Zakai smirked, "Do you want it in Basic or Old Sith?"

Horuz reached up and lowered his hood revealing a ghastly face. Desicated skin stretched tightly across his skull, pulling back his upper lip so that his teeth were semi-permanently visible. His eyes were jet black under a horse-shoe of grey hair that still ringed his scalp. The man studied him intently before nodding, "Tell me then, Apprentice: What must you do to call my Holocron your own?"

Tearing his eyes away from the walking corpse of the Sith Lord he looked at the artifact and thought momentarily, "I must prove my strength."

"Good. You may begin."

"Huh?" A thrumming groan followed a hiss over Zakai's shoulder was all the warning he got.

The boy lunged forward, landing on his shoulder, and rolled forward. He misjudged the distance and rolled off of the platform but luckily caught himself as he went over the edge with his left hand on the ledge. There had been a rush of air followed by an enormous snap of teeth and he'd jumped. He hung there and saw the body of what it was that had attacked him and his eyes bulged. It was enormous and serpentine. Its body coiled around the platform and rose above the level of it to where, presumably, the head was. It would take too long to pull himself up so instead he dropped down. He landed atop the body of the great serpent to which it reacted animalistically, jerking its head down and back from the platform.

Its head was huge, easily the size of a speeder, and arrow-shaped with four enormous fangs emerging from its thin lips. Its yellow eyes focused on him into tall slits and it tasted the air rapidly with a forked tongue that was as big as he was. The creature's head darted forward with impossible speed, its jaws expanding to swallow him whole. An emerald blade of light emerged from his lightsaber hilt and he brushed it across the monster's snout as he leapt backwards, flipping feet over head as he flew. The blade singed the creature's scaly skin and it recoiled in pain and anger. Zakai landed further down the serpent's long body and looked around for options.

Summoning the Force he leapt up, clearing the platform's ledge and found himself standing beside Horuz who watched him impassively. Zakai sneered at the Sith as his head

swiveled looking for where the monster would come at him from next. The Force told him to anticipate it behind him and he turned in time to see the snake-like head rising. He battled at it and the monster juked around the attacks. It snapped at Zakai but found itself short a fang which fell smoking to the slanted floor below. It clattered all the way down until it came to rest against the monster's body where it lay coiled around the tower.

"Good. Now tap into your anger, Boy."

Zakai ignored the Sith Lord and continued to battle the serpent. The creature's snout was pitted and gouged now with multiple lightsaber injuries but though it hurt the thing it clearly did not damage it. He would need to be creative to defeat this thing if he were to get out of this situation alive. Diving away from another snatching bite Zakai came upon an idea. He'd seen the creature's eyes tracking the waving lightsaber several times now. His free hand shot to his belt and grabbed for the glowrod. Activating it he threw it to his left. Momentarily distracted the monster followed the thrown source of light and was caught off-guard when the diminutive Apprentice launched himself into a leaping, cleaving strike.

Zakai roared in triumph as he descended, his lightsaber poised to sweep through the monster's neck as he fell. It caught him by surprise when the serpent reacted more quickly than he could have imagined. The monster's tail caught him across the chest and sent him flying backward until he hit the sloped floor with a thud. He coughed and sputtered, all while seeing stars, as he began to slide down the floor back towards the monster.

Sensing its moment the serpent gathered the stunned boy up in its coil and squeezed. He was like a rodent in the hand of a giant, so impossibly small against a monster of such magnitude. Above Horuz began to laugh, his cackling filling the enormous chamber, "You lose, Boy. You are not worthy."

Not Worthy? Zakai's mind filled with rage. His bones groaned under the tightening pressure of the serpent's squeeze but all that he could feel was rage. Not worthy!? All he ever did was try to live up to one man's impossible expectations. He was the strongest, the fastest, and the smartest of all the Apprentices he'd ever met. He heard when his father's associates mentioned how unexpectedly capable he was and yet he lived under the constant disappointing gaze of Vodo Biask Taldrya. Nothing he did would ever prove his worthiness to that man. Fueled by emotion the Dark Side filled him and he found it also guided him. His sword hand twisted, pulling the emerald blade in a long slough through the Serpent's flesh.

Recoiling in pain the serpent released him and he dropped to the slanted floor. Zakai didn't miss a beat however and launched himself back at the beast, reversing the grip on his blade. He planted the weapon in the serpent's spine, using it to anchor himself on the side of the fleshy wall that was the enormous serpent's body, and used it to climb atop it. He ran down the length of the beast, keeping his balance as the monster writhed and lurched beneath him. The serpent, distracted by its sudden pain, failed to see the small Sith Apprentice approaching its head.

Zakai pulled the saber back and swung it around his body with as much strength as he could manage. The fibers of his muscles, from his hips and legs up his back and through his arms, were filled with the power of the Force. The emerald lightsaber swept through the

monster's neck, below its head, up to the hilt and through the soft meat under the scales out the other side. The serpent, as large as it was, was not decapitated by the strike and the beast's head remained attached to its body by a thick flap of muscle but it was clear the deed was done. Zakai leaped back up to the platform with the assistance of the Force and watched as the monster's dying throes tangled it into a knot of flesh.

"You did well, My Apprentice."

Dripping dark green blood and viscera Zakai turned back to Horuz ka Valen who had moved noiselessly to stand beside him. Zakai glanced once more at the creature below, "I'm not your Apprentice."

He swept his saber through the Sith Lord's chest and felt almost no resistance as it cleaved him in two. The Sith Lord's desiccated corpse fell to the ground in a puff of dust. Putting the saber on his hilt Zakai summoned the Holocron to his open hand and left the chamber. Finding his way out of the Temple was not difficult and he was soon in the *Karufu Knight* and on his way back to his Father. He would be in trouble but he had a feeling the Holocron and the story of his encounter with ka Valen would emiliate his suffering somewhat. For now, he wanted to rest.