

# NEW FACES

## PROLOGUE:

### QUEEN OF HEARTS

Tali wasn't quite sure how long they'd been waiting. A few minutes, perhaps. Lost in their conversation, the duo paid little mind to the frenetic hustle and bustle of the hangar around them, bursting with life as House Qel-Droma's new home in Ol'Val slowly took form. Both of them watched for one thing; the arrival of a shuttle from Selen, a shuttle with only one passenger.

"So... you're actually being serious?" Sera asked, her voice uncertain. She gave the violet-skinned Twi'lek at her side a sharp, questioning look, her lips pursed together. It was rather rare to see such a lack of self-assurance from the Zabrak. Much more like her to rush headlong into whatever faced her, regardless of whether or not it matched the course of wisdom. In fact, a great deal of Sera's decisions seemed deliberately *unwise*. She had turned flaunting good-sense into an art form.

That was the likely explanation for the glow of amusement in her former master's golden eyes, the amused upturn of her lips. Little was quite as satisfying as watching the youth deal with the same vexations that they had dealt out to their elders. The saying, as Tali remembered it, went "What just dessert goes around, comes around." She had often struggled to predict the actions of her spirited young apprentice, constantly put on the defensive in the face of her flighty, mischievous, and often rash courses of action. This time, however, the tables had been turned. Her student had been making waves -her recent performances onboard the Voidbreaker had seen to that- and now it seemed that it was time for her to be paid back for her efforts.

"Yes, I am being serious, Sera. What reason would I have to lie to you?" The Twi'lek questioned, a knowing smile crossing her face. "Just think; your own *apprentice!*"

That was the first blow.

Tali grinned, and Sera sighed, her blue eyed gaze dropping to the datapad in her hands. Her master could see the screen over her shorter apprentice's shoulder; the zabrak was examining her prospective-students file, a simple holopic of the man set in the upper-right corner. Tali knew all of the info; she'd constructed the man's file herself, afterall.

*Zaric Jarard. A slave since very early childhood. Migrated between various owners, many of them hard labor. Freed by an unknown individual once his innate Force sensitivity was discovered, and directed to*

*Arcona specifically. Mistrusting of authority and prone to rash outbursts of anger. Doesn't work well with others, but continues to seek connection and belonging. Smart, adaptive, resilient.*

*A perfect match*, Tali thought to herself, her grin only growing wider. Despite her amusement, the Twi'Lek truly believed in that fact. Zarić's story was not all that different from her own... and she could think of no one else to whom she would rather entrust one such as him than Sera. Sweet, kind-hearted, unflinchingly-friendly Sera. If there was anyone who could draw him out of his shell, it would be her. Tali had faith.

Even as she thought it, the Twi'lek felt a ripple cut through the Force, a drop of water falling into the pool of her mind. The two of them looked up in unison, watching the shuttle approach, turning to keep the thruster's backblast out of their faces. Here, Tali reached over, and handed Sera another file. Giving her master an odd look, Sera thumbed it on, sifting through it for a moment before giving a hiss.

"A mission?!"

"Yes, that is what it appears to be," Tali responded coyly. "You'll have a little bit of time to train him before the contact expects you on Ol'Val. Think of it as a... little rite of passage." She gave her apprentice a bright smile, brushing a playful hand over her horns, before lagging behind, watching her.

"Well... as long as he's not like, a foot taller than me, like everyone else is," Sera sighed, pausing before the shuttle's ramp. She took a deep breath, making a visible effort to reset her expression. After a few moments, the zabrak's usual, effervescent smile slid back onto her face, pointy teeth shining.

The shuttle's landing-ramp finally dropped, ponderously lowering to the ground. Zarić Jarard stepped out, pausing before the Zabrak. Pale locks hung around his skin, hiding pallid skin, and a small smile. There was a small scar on his chin.

He was also six inches taller than her, which prompted a small sigh. Still, her smile refused to dampen.

"Sera?" he asked, his voice quiet.

"Yep!" She responded brightly, nodding to the hangar behind her. "C'mon; lets blow this kixt-nest before we get our heads taken off by some hotshot pilot. I'm thinking... a few drinks at the cantina could do some good. A little... welcoming party. Sound like a plan to you?"

Tali watched them go, her smile only growing.

*Watch out Ol'Val*, she thought turning back to climb aboard the shuttle. *For you know not what's been released upon you.*

Happy with her work for the day, Tali set her course for Selen, and got on her way.

# JACK OF CLUBS

## One Week Later

“So... truth or dare?”

Zaric’s brow knit together, his gaze dropping down into his mug as he pondered the choice. To be totally honest, he was still rather... perplexed about his Master’s tactics when it came to teaching. There was a great deal of what he’d expected, of course; sparring, early every day -with her, Motraraka, or other members of the crew, variably- followed by intense physical conditioning. *‘Hardening the body, and strengthening the soul’*, she called it. Beyond that, however...

Really, he wasn’t sure when, or if, training ever ended. She seemed to pull lessons out of everything, always coming with a toothy-grin and a mischievous glint in her eyes. *‘Sneak up on the Captain, Zaric; a hunter should have a silent step.’ ‘Crawl through the ducts blindfolded, Zaric; I want you to sharpen your other senses. If you get stuck, Ziggy can always help.’ ‘Get black-out drunk with me, Zaric. If you can use the Force to sober yourself, you’ll be prepared for anything.’*

That seemed to be the objective of their current ‘training.’ Lounging at a tiny table in one of Ol’Val’s resurging redlight districts, they had already stacked up a decent amount of empty glasses on either side of their puny table. He had a good buzz going, a slight sheen of sweat rising underneath his silvery locks of hair. Meanwhile, Sera might have been drinking water for all the ill effects that she displayed. Both of them were kitted out for combat, of course. Sera’s dun-brown cloak pulled close around her form-fitting combat suit, where Zaric’s simple robes marked him out clearly. Scowling, he ran one hand over his saber, as if to make sure it was still there. Considering the dank and shady nature of the pub, it wouldn’t be surprising for there to be sticky fingers about.

“Truth,” he eventually sighed, glancing away from her to gaze around the establishment that they found themselves within. The strip-bar was crowded, packed to the gills with workers, freshly off from their shifts. None of the joint’s denizens noted Zaric’s questing gaze, however; most of them were focused on the ‘staff’ of the restaurant, whose uniform consisted of... less than concealing garments. The former slave glanced at one particularly fiery Devaronian server and swallowed hard. “Master, I don’t see what we’re doing here. The contact for the mission...”

“...wanted us to meet her and her favorite place on Ol’Val. And don’t call me master; Sera is just fine.” The Zabrak turned her glass over and plopped it back on the table, her bright-blue eyes seeming to search his face. “So... truth. Tell me, Zaric... What do you think of our waitress? I caught you looking at that shapely little Devaronian.” He almost choked on his drink at the question, a bright-red flush rising to his cheeks. Sera just snickered, kicking him softly under the table. “Kidding. I want to know your thoughts on the mission. What d’ya think of this Geldi character?”

Still forcing down his drink, Zaric paused for a moment, blinking hard. Her constant antics wore on him. He couldn't quite understand why *they* had been put together; she was younger than him, more energetic, and constantly, unerringly bright and optimistic, always seeking to drag him into conversations that he would rather not be a part of. She also didn't like him smoking, something that he couldn't help but feel begrudgingly offended about. Often, he felt like they were total opposites.

Sighing, Zaric reached for a datapad, pulling up what information they had already. "Well, we don't have much to go on..."

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"...reports about Geldi have been conflicting, and we've only managed to confirm the name in the last month or so. Don't have a face for it, or any idea of their last holdout -that's what our contact is for- but we know that they're male, and we know that they're dangerous. That's about it."

Sera nodded, her mind buzzing with ideas. Alcohol too, but she didn't let that on as much as Zaric did. As her apprentice continued to extrapolate on possible hideouts, she watched him closely, examining his face. He was... intense, to say the least. Latched onto things like a hound onto a scent trail. It was a good trait to have -she shared it, in some regards- but she couldn't help but feel that it was...lacking, in some regards. Zaric hardly seemed to live when he wasn't training or working. Hardly talked, never sought the company of friends or crew. It might have made him more efficient, but it also meant that he lacked perspective.

*He thinks like a pit-fighter, always pulling for the upper-hand. I don't think the drinking helps; he doesn't loosen up at all, unless he's smoking. Maybe if I took him outdoors a little.*

The Zabrak nodded to herself, running a hand over her horns. Her gaze shifted at a spot of movement over the human's shoulder; a Rodian was approaching them, clad from toe to neck in dark, shining leather that contrasted sharply with the acid-green hue of her scales. Pausing, she gave the two of them a quick look, antennae flexing, before pulling up a chair. It appeared that their contact had arrived.

**"Enjoyin' the view?"** She questioned coyly, her voice deep and jarringly sultry. Sera gave a quick up-down look before responding, examining the woman. She was certainly the mercenary type, gun-holsters hanging from either side of her hip, though they were empty. The leathers fit her... rather closely.

"I am now," Sera responded, one brow quirking up. Somewhere to her left, Zaric just groaned.

"You have what we're looking for?" He questioned sharply, his amber eyes dark. The Zabrak gave him a sharp glance and a kick under the table, which he reciprocated.

**"Depends on what you're willin' to pay, hot-stuff,"** the mercenary crooned in reply, brushing Zaric's face with a suction-cupped finger. He recoiled just slightly in his chair, features twisting into a harsh

sneer. Sera's brow rose. Not good. Emptying her mind, she focused on the blip that her apprentice represented in the Force, reaching out gently.

*"Relax. We can parse this out without trouble,"* she murmured into his mind, giving what she hoped was an encouraging smile. He didn't seem to notice.

"We're not paying you a karkin' thing," he growled, to which the Rodian just tittered.

**"That so, babycakes? Shame."** She turned to Sera, and shook her head, lips pursing. **"Deal's off. Your lil friend here being a karkhole rubs me wrong about your chances taking Geldi down, and if he doesn't go down, he'll know to come after my ass. Sorry, babe, but them's the..."**

Sera felt the warning before Zaric moved, a small thrill shooting through her body, like a kiss of static. There was a slight metallic click as a saber was pulled from its clip, and the Rodian stiffened. The ashen-haired human gave a small smile at the sight. "The deal's still on, but the reward just changed. Tell us about Geldi, and I won't press the little red button on this saber, here. That sound good?"

The mercenary shivered and nodded, producing a hiss from the Zabrak. "Zaric..." she warned, her gaze darkening. The Human paid no heed, prodding at the reptile. "Go on. Spill it."

There were a few moments of silence as the Rodian tried to collect herself, swallowing hard. Even in her alien features, the spectre of fear reared its ugly head as her voice wavered and antennae quivered for her life. **"I... I don't know the full name. Just Geldi. The C-Conclave doesn't have the men to keep operations anymore, y'see. They b-bring in mercs to share the load. I was one."** Nervously, she tried to edge away from the saber. Zaric didn't move to follow her. **"They were lookin' like they was off-loadin', trying to jump station... but I don't think so. Too much gear. Too many defenses. They's trying to trick you, I think; trick you into thinkin' they're leavin', when they're really just puttin' up new airs."**

Sera frowned, her eyes flat and unhappy. None in the pub had yet taken notice of the shakedown, but these methods disturbed her... especially coming from her apprentice. There was no honor shaking down an unarmed, neutral party, in fear and undue violence. It left more than an unhappy taste in her mouth... but it was getting them results, at least for now. So, her voice quiet and her gaze downcast, she joined in the questioning, as gently as possible. "And Geldi? Where did you see this? What does he look like?"

Zaric twisted the hilt further into the Rodian's soft ribs, and she groaned in fear. **"I met him twice. Short, red-headed humie; your height. Intense. Obsessed with perfection. His men cling to 'im, but he creeps me kark out,"** she detailed, nodding to Sera. **"They're based up in the old dry mines, the abandoned quarter. Mercs and Enclave all over. He keeps 'em tight. It'll be a tough nut to crack."**

"We'll crack it," Zaric responded darkly, smiling as he replaced his saber at his belt and stood from the table. "It was a pleasure doing business with you."

The Rodian just cursed, flinging an oath in her native tongue as she fled. Sera, for her own part, stood and glared at her apprentice. “We’re going to have a little talk about this,” she warned, her words clipped as her anger pushed her back into her harsh zabraki accent.

“We can talk in headquarters, after we’ve reported our findings, Master,” Zaric responded curtly, moving towards the door. A vice-grip on his shoulder stopped him. He had seven inches, fifty pounds, and four years on the little Zabrak; but, she had the Force on her side, and a will that was pure folly to challenge. Looking into her blazing blue eyes, the human realized just how badly he had miscalculated his move.

“We’re not going to headquarters. We’re going to the mines, to check up on our contact’s report. Information given up in fear can’t be trusted, *katka*. Like trying to track lopers by the piss they leave in the dunes; give it a second or two, and the sun’ll dry it right the hell up.” The Zabrak sighed angrily, shaking her horned head. “C’mon. I want you to keep your damn mouth *shut*, you hear? You’ve done enough talking for one night... and we’ll need to be quiet, anyway, if we’re gonna get a glimpse of this prey’s face.”

Zaric scowled. Sera scowled right back.

The night was young... and their hunt was just getting underway.

## KING OF DIAMONDS

Zaric sure knew out to cloak, at least. Sera was begrudgingly proud of that. Her apprentice had taken to the trick like a nexu to the sands after she’d shown him the first time. Now, where she still needed several moments of strained concentration to even get the cloak started, he had it done in seconds. Silent, totally hidden from view, the pair moved through the twisting corridors of Ol’Val’s abandoned quarter, crossing over charred rubble and melted pockmarks where fire and battle had consumed all. Sera’s mind, hanging open to the Force, guided them. Once she found the minds of the Dawn Enclave fighters, their wary thoughts standing out like candlelight at midnight, it was only a matter of navigating their way through the maze of ruined buildings and refineries. Zaric followed close behind her, clutching the trailing edge of her cloak to guide his path.

The Rodian hadn’t lied about the Enclave defenses. Even invisible, moving on near-silent feet, it took a few minutes of tense waiting for a gap into the base to open. The guard was kept tight, patrols moving constantly; whoever Geldi was, he was efficient and effective, much to the pair’s joint woe.

When fire came to Port Ol’Val, great stretches of the Shadowports mines were left abandoned, the charts lost in cyberspace or destroyed. The Enclave seemed to have taken up residence in one of these ‘lost zones’. The space was narrowed, no more than forty feet wide at the most, still marked by the chisels and hammers of miners long-dead. As they snaked deeper into the headquarter’s inner workings, guard presence grew heavier, with roughly-clad mercenaries and bounty hunters standing out among the ranks of the Enclave regulars. The narrow corridors dripped with weaponry, barricades and hold-outs scarring

the path, each bristling with E-Web repeaters. If Qel-Droma wanted to force the Enclave out of their hidey-hole, carved deep into the hardened stone of the asteroid's minefield, the price of blood would be steep indeed.

Eventually, the twisting corridor ended, opening up into a cavernous space. Voices echoed from within, joined by the harsh whirr of plasma saws; it seemed that they had found the central chamber, the last stronghold of the Dawn Enclave. An adjoining hallway shot off to the side near the entrance, stone stair-steps marching upwards. A sign labelled it as the route to a catwalk; a perfect opportunity. Turning aside, Sera guided her apprentice upwards. If their prey was ahead, they would have a better view from high-ground. Better to hunt from the dune's peak than the sunken valley, afterall.

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**“So, did you see that new home-decor show, on channel X-32? Those countertops-...”**

**“Don't even kid yourself on the countertops, man. You're just watching for the hostess. That tight little suit of hers...”**

Two human guards flanked the door to the catwalk, bickering amiably, their E-11s held tightly in hand. Although they sat idle, there was no way around them; it'd be rather hard to pass off the door hissing open and closed as a technical malfunction. Reaching for her blades, Sera turned her mind back towards her surly apprentice, and relayed a short message.

*Take the one on the left.*

She felt a short tug on her cloak in acknowledgement, and she sensed him move up. The two men didn't see, or hear, or feel their deaths coming. In one moment, they had been standing idle, still chatting about granite countertops and Zeltron vid-hosts. In the next, they were dead. Sera's smooth, underhanded cast caught the man on the right through the eye, the throwing blade parting flesh and bone to embed itself in grey-matter. The guard on the left wasn't given time to react as Zaric cut a smooth channel through his throat, hidden-blade disappearing back into its gauntlet as the hapless fighters slumped. Sera gave the human a proud nod, while their faces were still visible to one another, which her apprentice grudgingly returned.

Focusing once again on their cloaks, they stepped out onto the catwalk. A voice rose up to meet them; deep and booming, it filled the whole of the cavernous chamber, echoing across stone. It was a captain's voice, a *leader's voice*, cut perfectly to match. **“C'mon, people!”** It intoned, calling out across the space. **“We don't have forever, boys! The rats'll come any day now, eviction notice in hand. Ya know where we'll tell 'em to shove 'em?”**

The roared reply was, of course, quite lurid, producing a booming roar of laughter. Not a single eye was turned to the catwalk and Sera and Zaric stepped out. All eyes were turned close to their work, or to the figure at the center of the room, the one who must've been Geldi...

...save for the fact that he didn't match the description given. Not at all. The man speaking was a short, broad-shouldered older man, with close-cropped, iron-grey hair that befitted an Imperial admiral. He was clad in tight fitting cloth, a robe thrown over his shoulders. Aside from the height, he couldn't have been further from the man that they were looking for.

Frowning deeply, Sera turned her gaze to the room around him, searching for their man. There were dozens of other figures, men and women, Enclave-regulars or mercenaries. Many of them were bent over work-stations, sparks flying as they cut into what looked like missile-pods, dissecting warheads. Others trundled large, crimson-painted canisters marked with two words; *Rhydonium*; *Volatile!* It didn't take a technical genius to tell what they were making.

*Ancestors, it's a damned bomb factory.*

Grimacing, the Zabrak pulled her holocam from its place in her satchel, handing it to Zaric. He zoomed in close on the greying man's face. If this was Geldi, a holograph would spell his doom. Qel'Droma would have bounties on him from Selen to Coruscant, enough to get even his wily hide cooked. Still zoomed in close, he had a perfect shot of the Enclave leader as he turned, seeming to gaze directly at them.

There was a tiny, inaudible click, followed by a bright, unmistakable flash. In an instant, the entire damned room seemed to freeze.

*...The flash. 25 years of being a slave, of course he wouldn't know about the Ancestor's damned flash!*

Across the room, Geldi smiled, a thin, venomous look. He gave the men to his left and right a nod, and motioned towards the pair with one hand. **“Well, it looks like they sent a few rats early. Give ‘em a warm welcome, boys!”**

”Katka!”

Three dozen blasters, rifles, and repeaters clattered as they were unslung or ripped from their holsters. The delay would have granted Sera enough time to bolt. She was closer to the door than her apprentice, who stood like a duck in open water. Once his cloak failed, they would single him out easily, maybe without even knowing the invisible Zabrak had been there.

Gritting her teeth, Sera dove to her side... but not towards the door. Instead, she dove in front of where she had last seen her apprentice, using the delay to bring up a hasty barrier, bending the Force into a glossy, translucent shield before them. It came just in time; milliseconds later, a veritable deluge of crimson blaster-fire washed over them, splattering against the barrier, blasting the wall behind them to pieces.



Dozens of impacts against the glassy-wall turned into hundreds in only a few moments. Sweat rose up on Sera's scalp, dripping down as cracks appeared in the barrier. She couldn't hold it up forever.

One blue eye trailed down to the explosives lining the room, before glancing back at her apprentice. He seemed stunned, staring back at her without comprehension, his limbs frozen in stiff shock... about what, she wasn't quite sure.

Oh well. Worth a shot, in any case; the barrier was already beginning to disintegrate. Gritting her teeth, Sera raised her left arm, lining it up with one of the Rhydonium canisters.

The shot from her vambrace flew straight and true, colliding solidly with her target. There was a burst of sparks, cherry red in hue.

The world went white.

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"That... karking... *sucked*."

Groaning, Sera rose to her feet. Fine, pulverized dust billowed out from around her as she stirred, rising in the still air. The chamber had gone quite still. Understandable, really. The explosion, aside from ripping most of the people on the floor to pieces, also seemed to have caused a sizable cave-in, rubble and twisted rebar separating one half of the room from the other. Bodies, or pieces of them, were scattered throughout.

Panic rose in Sera's hearts. Her apprentice had been a little piece of *katka* earlier, sure, but he was still *hers*; to look after, to befriend, to love as a member of her own family. If that blast had killed him...

"Zaric!" she called out in a frenzy, before repeating the cry in the Force, reaching out to all she could. *Zaric, if you can hear me...*

"Sera!" came a sharp reply, echoing from across the wall of rubble. The human's pale face appeared through a small window in the pile, barred by twisted rebar. His ashen hair was smudged with dirt, sweat sticking to his brow.

*Ancestors, thank you*, Sera thought, crossing quickly to the mountain of shattered stone. It effectively cut the room in half, floor to ceiling; no way through. The Zabrak gave a slight frown, pushing against the rebar separating the two of them. It was no use; the snarled mess was hard as, well, *rock*.

"...We'll need to separate. Regroup at the mine entrance," she finally conceded, frowning deeply. She hated leaving him behind. That explosion would draw the whole Enclave back; they would have a tough fight on their hands. But... she didn't see what choice they had. "Go. Be quick. Be smart. Be safe. Please."

He gave a quiet nod... and a small smile. One of the few that she'd seen out of him. "...Yes ma'am. May the Force be with you, Sera." Still wearing that small, sad smile, Zaric turned to run. Sera watched for just a moment before joining him.

The corridor that she sprinted down wasn't the one that they had taken in, filled with unfamiliar twists and turns, and more than one adversary. She cut through them all, mercenary and Dawn Enclave agent alike. She didn't come out unscathed of course; by the end of it, she was bruised, and bleeding freely from more than one cut. But, Zabrak physiology numbed the pain, and indomitable willpower drove her forward. Her golden saber burning, zabraki dagger shining, she made short work of them all, the rhythmic beat of battle filling her hearts. All the while, the corridor rumbled fitfully, shaking under her feet. The explosion would set off more than one cave-in that day, it seemed.

Thankfully, no rain of rubble came down on Sera's head as she made her escape. Eventually, the twist of the corridors brought her back to familiar territory... and to a familiar face. Zaric was limping, his cloak pulled close as he made his way down the corridor, a thin trail of blood following behind him. He turned as he heard her steps behind him, a broad grin set on his face.

"Master!"

"I told you not to call me that, Zaric," she chided playfully, releasing another inward sigh of relief. Things had gotten messy, sure, but they had both come out in relatively one piece. As she crossed over to him, he turned and moved to meet her.

It was the eyes that warned her, first. They were on level with her own, sitting at the same height, where Zaric was seven inches taller than her. That... and his eyes were wrong. The color was the same; but now, her apprentice seemed to lack the intensity of gaze that he had once had, reduced to a flat, cold yellow. Pausing just a few feet away from him, the Zabrak frowned, reaching out to him with her mind, touching gently.

There was nothing. A wall of ice that betrayed little emotion beyond the simple, brutal joy of a hunter about to pounce on their prey. She felt the attack a second before it came. The not-Zaric ripped his blaster out from under the cloak, squeezing off a flurry of shots. In unison, Sera whipped her own cloak into the blasts, armorweave deflecting the bolts with a hiss, greasy smoke rising into the air. Snarling, the Zabrak ripped the cloak from her shoulders, igniting her golden saber. The blade glimmered as it cut through the air, sweeping towards the imposter's throat.

A blood-red saber extended to meet it. Sera's blue eyes widened as the blades met, molten plasma screeching in protest as they slipped against one another, sparking, spitting, screaming. Then, laughing, he pushed her back, pressing hard into the attack. Offense against offense, they were even. His footwork was superb, shifting with a dancer's poise as he moved to meet her whirling strikes, his short-bladed weapon working like a duelist's foil. It was on the defense that she suffered. His attacks came like a sand-viper's

strikes, jabbing out from his chest at blinding speed. More than once, Sera came within inches of being impaled, luck and instinct keeping her alive.

Gold against crimson, their blades met, hissing once more. Leveraging both arms now, Geldi pushed, angling his saber closer to her throat, inch by inch. His eyes met hers, the former, phoney coloring gone. Now, they shone with a crimson hue, glowing with amusement.

**“Ya chose the wrong nest to intrude on, little Rat. Thankfully... I don’t think I wanna kill ya.”**

Sera focused the strength of the Force into her musculature, forcing his blade back an inch. Still, he hardly reacted, stepping back before restarting his assault. The attacks came like rain; flowing, fluid, flickering in and out before she could stop them. The Zabrak grit her teeth as she was burned; once, twice. Still, she fought on, making him sweat for all that he had. Still, the riposte came, tearing her guard away, leaving her open.

**“Much better... I think... to keep ya alive. So much spirit... the slavers’ll have a field day with ya.”**

“NEVER!” Roared another voice, echoing from their side. There was just enough time for both of them to turn before a sheet of lightning struck the imposter square in the face.

She’d never heard a man scream that way in her entire life... nor seen one quite as angry as Zaric was. The *real* Zaric. Face twisted in a mask of anger, he maintained the lightning for a few more moments, before cutting it off and falling to his knees, heaving.

Sera turned just in time to see the imposter stumble back. Zaric’s face was gone. Geldi’s mask had dropped, it seemed... giving the Zabrak her first look at what lay beneath.

His face was shriveled, scaly, dessicated flesh seeming to cling to the bones beneath like an ill-fitting mask. His nose was snubbed, and his eyes badly bloodshot... though that might have just been an aftereffect of the lightning. There wasn’t a single standing strand of hair on his head.

But, he was still armed with a lightsaber. .

Not for much longer. As the strange alien stumbled forward groggily, trying to raise his saber back up, Sera brought her own weapon around in a smooth arc. There was a hiss, and another groan of pain as the Enclave leader’s right arm was separated from his body, flopping wetly to the floor. Sera didn’t give him any chance to recuperate; thrusting one palm forward, a wave of pure force struck the man in the chest, throwing him backwards down the corridor in an unconscious heap.

She didn’t go back to finish him off. Instead, she looped one arm round Zaric, and started them moving out of the mine. The shaft behind them continued to rumble ominously, another, massive cave-in sounding imminent... but they never stopped to see it.

Geldi had been found. Now, it was time to go home.

## JOKERS AND ACES

### 2 Days Later

Zaric couldn't get the memory out of his mind. Every time he stopped to think, it was there. Even in his dreams, it stood out, shining. It was the first memory from outside of his life as a slave that had lasted. The first one that felt like it mattered.

When Geldi had pointed them out on the catwalk, he had seen Sera's opportunity to go back. The path was right there, open to her. Easy, hardly even an effort. All she had needed to do was abandon him; leave him to his death, and she would have been off scot free. He had acknowledged that, accepted it. When the blasters fired, he was ready to fall to his knees, and die.

Instead, she saved him. She dove *in front of him*, put her body before his, and saved him. It didn't make sense; the world as he knew it was a selfish place. No one was worthy of admiration, no one was to be trusted, for the only person who mattered in the end was, of course, themselves. That was what a lifetime of slavery had taught him. That was what he knew.

Sera had more lessons in store for him than he had originally perceived, it seemed. She had been willing to give her own life, just for the chance of saving him. To hear that karking bastard talk of giving her to the slavers... the lightning had come without even thinking about it, and oh, it had been sweet.

Practice. That was one thing that he could practice on. Maybe not with Sera -she frowned on such things- but in his own time, certainly. He knew of more than one person who deserved to taste the lightning just as much as Geldi did.

But, back to the topic at hand.

"...was most likely a Clawdite. A changeling," Tali explained to her apprentice, looking over the now defunct holos that he had taken. The Twi'Lek shook her head, lekku swaying softly. "A tough bindt. Tracking him down won't be easy."

"Maybe easier now, though. He might be able to change, but good luck to him on figuring it out with no right arm," Sera chimed in brightly, her wounds bandaged and eyes shining. "Only so many people with wounds like that on Ol'Val. We'll..."

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"...track her down, Sir. Not many Zabraks workin' with Qel'Droma, or Arcona, even. Trust me, we'll find her."

Geldi nodded, pointed nails digging into the arm of his chair. The phantom pains in his right arm were unbearable; mindless itches that couldn't be scratched, aches that couldn't go away, cuts that wouldn't close. It was sickening. Maddening. Made transforming all the more difficult... and it had never been easy in the first place.

“I only want ya to *find her*, ya hear me? Find her... and leave her. I want her for myself. I want to make her suffer,” he growled, curling one green-scaled fist. “The rat will get what she deserves... even if I need to burn this whole damned station to the ground first.”