

OPERATION: WAY OUT

PART 1: The Path

38 ABY

Elizabeth 1 - Kal'Mar Crater

Cor'Neria System

"We've got visual," came a voice over the Voidbreaker's comms. In the distance, where the horizon blended into the blue-green wash of verdant Nei'Kapo, a dim strip of light sparkled. The installation was exactly where Manu had promised it would be. Multiple times, actually. The chubby Twi'lek had been blubbering out the coordinates before Sera had even gotten him back from Selen. The Brotherhood's seekers had only served to confirm that the location that he'd supplied was, in fact, valid.

Now, the fact was finally confirmed. Sera's hard work -and the assistance of her Mandalorian friend- hadn't been in vain. Manu's confession had led them to the moon of Elizabeth 1, a tiny, frozen, heavily cratered rock orbiting the fertile world of Nei'Kapo. It had barely enough mass to qualify as a moon in the first place. Hardly noticeable enough to be charted, and well hidden in the literal shadow of the Collective strongholds down on Nei'Kapo's surface, its natural isolation proved an excellent cover for secretive operations. The facility that Manu had referred to as '*Fortress Echo*' was well hidden, tucked into a deep crater on the border of Elizabeth's dark side, covering it from conventional scanners. Beyond that, seventy-five percent of its orbital cycle was spent locked in night, perpetual darkness. For most of the year, Fortress Echo was virtually invisible, undetectable to those without specific navigation codes. Codes that Manu had been unable to provide; all he'd had was an administrative bypass code, for getting through security checkpoints. Not enough. That left them with a month-long window for the operation, and a razor-thin margin of error.

Unfortunately, getting the location of the prison was only part of the job. They still needed to somehow get into what was described as a virtually impenetrable facility, and get the deputy grandmaster out in one piece. Something that was far easier said than done.

So, who better to tap for the job than the Zabrak who'd tracked down the intel in the first place?

"You don't have to do this, you know," Karran offered, dark eyes concerned. Beside him, Tali Sroka nodded her agreement, violet lekku swaying. Ostensibly, Sera's captain and Quaestor

were just escorting her down to the Voidbreaker's main cargo ramp, where their carefully orchestrated plan would commence. Of course, Sera herself hadn't actually played a part in the planning process. She provided the brawn and the blades. The rest had been graciously provided by her summit, Tali included. Even now, she could hear Lucine playing it out for her. Simple, elegant, direct. How could it fail?

Step one. Acquire Fort Echo on visual guidance processors. Cut engines at sixty kilos out, and enter silent running mode, skimming near the lunar surface. Open the port cargo bay. At this point, Sera will exit the vessel via a single-engine craft, and begin traversing the surface, headed towards the Fortress. The Voidbreaker is to remain on silent running until the onset of step two.

She must go alone.

The Zabrak smiled as she ran over the plan once more in her head, checking her shiny new armor's hermetic sealing. All it would take was one busted clasp to doom her out there; the vacuum didn't play games. Completing her check, Sera turned back to Karran and Tali, giving them both a toothy grin. She didn't quite understand their hesitation. Everything had worked out just fine before. Couldn't they bring themselves to share in her confidence, at least a little bit?

"Karran, you know I'm not gonna take the easy way out on this one. You know I can't. Honor is clear; they asked me to help... and I will." she replied, meeting both of their gazes in turn. In truth, she was touched by their concern. These were two people who mattered deeply to her, people that she trusted with her life. Tali was her former master, the woman who had taught her much of what she knew about the Force. Karran was her captain, her leader, her *friend*, and more. There was a bond in those things, a tie that couldn't be broken. She understood their fear. But, she just didn't share it. "I'll be fine; it's a quick job, right? Get in, knock a few heads around, grab him and get out. Simple. Easy."

They both gave each other a look, and sighed.

"Sera... it vill not be as simple as that. You know this, correct? This is the Collective, not some backwater pirate's nest. They are more dangerous than you know... and honor won't keep you safe." The Twi'lek frowned as she spoke, crossing her arms before her. Karran mirrored her posture.

"You... don't need to go alone, y'know. Me and Tali could follow you. I doubt-..."

"*Karran*," Sera interjected, stepping forward. "Tali. It'll be okay. I'm not some... helpless little apprentice. You *know* that. I can cover my own horns. Don't worry," she stated adamantly, giving a firm shake of her head. Neither of them looked convinced, and even without concentrating overly hard on the Force, she could feel the waves of doubt rising off of them.

Finally, Karran shrugged, stepping forward. A small smile crossed his lips. "You promise you'll come back?"

Sera gave him a warm grin, pulling him into a tight, familiar embrace that ended with a kiss that was *entirely* off regulation. "I promise. On my honor, Karran," she affirmed as she stepped back, finally reaching for her helmet. From behind the larger Zabrak, Tali just chuckled.

"You mean you don't want to give your master a kiss too?" she laughed, an overly innocent expression blooming on her face.

"Not unless she asks for one," Sera shot right back, beaming. Pressing her helmet -custom made to fit over her horns- firmly on, she pushed her two friends back into the air-lock, which shut between them with a sharp hiss. "Give Sulith and Ziggy a hug for me... and get some drinks ready for when I get back!"

Through the air-lock's glass plate, they nodded in unison, watching as the cargo bay decompressed around her, the contained atmosphere slowly draining out into the vacuum. Open the door all at once, Sera would be blasted out into the void. Not exactly a smooth start.

Now firmly immersed in the vacuum, Sera gave her two friends an odd half-salute, which contained just about all of the military formality that she could muster. Finally, she turned, stepping towards the opening bay door. Her Joben T-85 was waiting for her, ready to carry her to her destination.

Sera straddled the speeder-bike, revving the engine for just a moment. Outside, Elizabeth 1's surface flitted by at about five kilos a minute, still more than fifty meters away. That was about as slow, and as low, as the Voidbringer was going to get.

The Zabrak closed her eyes, and took a deep breath. She had faith in herself, and in her Ancestors. She would see this through.

Then, pressing down on the clutch, Sera gunned her speeder forwards, the low gravity carrying her in an arcing path towards the lunar surface. She hit the powder going sixty kilos an hour... and had absolutely no intention of slowing down anytime soon.

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The moon's landscape only grew more alien as Sera drew nearer to the base. A fine, silvery dust kicked up behind her, disturbed by her speeder's repulsorlifts, framing looming canyons and yawning pits as she cut her path. Her heavy armorweave cloak whipped behind her as she went, like a pair of dun wings stretching to the stars. Thankfully, no fancy flying was required to maneuver around these obstacles. Sera wasn't exactly the greatest pilot in the world. With just a little bit of focus on the Force, she overclocked her internal metabolism, driving away the worst

of the biting cold. If needed, she could even cut off her breath, saving precious oxygen in a pinch -her armor had a limited supply, stored in a few external tanks- but the Force wouldn't be able to save her from the vacuum. That much had been made apparent in the briefing. Gunning her speeder's engine, Sera crossed a deep chasm, the bottom falling away into inky-blackness, the moon's low gravity helping her along. By now, the Collective facility was rising up before her, a series of three jet-black pillars jutting up from the moon's crust, titanic in scope. She would be crossing into surface sensor range by now. If the Voidbreaker didn't make it...

From above her, there was a sudden flash of crimson light, cutting through the void. She couldn't *hear* the report of her vessel's turbolasers, or even properly see it. She did, however, see the lasers slam into the Fortress, detonating off of its deflector shields. Then, a series of lightning-blue streaks crossed her vision, exploding against the shields.

The space-battle ended as quickly as it began. Just as Fortress Echo's defenses activated, spraying a hail of emerald-green fire at the Voidbreaker, it jetted away, quickly jumping into hyperspace. By the looks, it was fleeing. Now, Sera was well and truly alone.

But, the ship had played its part. No alarms reported as the Zabrak speeded across the final stretch to the base, no automated systems blasted her. By Zig's calculations (approved by Rhyllance), the Voidbreaker's ion cannons would be able to disable the Fortress' external systems for right around ten minutes. Just enough time for Sera to slip in while Echo was blinded and reeling.

She chose the central pillar at random, disembarking from her speeder at a conveniently placed external air-lock, likely used for surface patrols when necessary. Hearts hammering, the Zabrak removed a proton pack from her satchel... and sprinted to the *left-most* pillar, away from her primary entrypoint, fixing it to the exterior. A five minute timer would probably do. Probably.

Then, groaning, Sera ran all the way *back* to the center pillar, skidding to a halt outside her chosen airlock. It was eerie, watching her lightsaber ignite without hearing it hiss. But, it would still cut. She would make it in; one way, or another.

Five minutes later, ringing detonation shook the whole of the facility. She was in, and beginning the process of slowly stripping away her exterior oxygen tanks and bulky helmet -she wouldn't be using them again, and they would only slow her down- as the alarm rang out. Immediately, she heard voices, shouts, and heavy footfalls, pounding down the corridor, and moving past her. Excellent. She might not have come up with the plan, but she could respect its objectives. A good huntress knew to lure the bulk of the pack away from her path, afterall.

That left her... on step 3. Again, Lucine's voice sounded in her mind, stolid and confident, reassuring.

After luring the bulk of the security away with the false-breach, find your way to Taelyan. Free him, arm him, exit to the hangar bay, obtain transport, and escape to the rendezvous point. Do not attempt to rescue the clan representatives. They are secondary. Unnecessary.

Secondary. Unnecessary.

Sera frowned. Everything else seemed so simple. So, why did this step give her pause? It was simple, clear-cut. Try and get the rest of the prisoners out, and here was no guarantee that any of them would escape. Much better to play it safe, smart, simple. Follow Lucine's plan. Leave the rest of them behind.

But... even as Sera stepped out into the corridor, falling into her deep, huntress' crouch, she knew she wouldn't. She couldn't.

She wasn't going to leave anyone to rot here. Not if she could help it.

PART 2: Never Easy

Evant Taelyan remained unbent. Undefeated. Unbroken.

Not that the Collective hadn't tried, of course. He had lost track of the days and weeks and months of cruelty, of course. After a certain amount of time spent in unceasing anguish and excruciating pain, everything started to blend together. The past became a red blur, washed out, events lost to broken splatters of blood and snatches of shadow. The future grew murky, his precognitive abilities clouded, blocked, cut away from him. The present was all that he had... and the present was pain.

He had managed to count the first thirty days. On the first, he had been dragged into his cell, half-conscious. His hands and feet had been manacled together, locked at the wrists and ankles in tight steel cuffs. Then, they had suspended him in a containment field. That, he hated above all else. Left floating a meter in the air, stretched, the electro-static field cutting him off from the Force, he was completely and totally helpless. He couldn't fight back. He couldn't even *move*. If they had wanted to they could have simply left him there, and he would have starved to death. A withered, shackled skeleton. He wouldn't have been able to do a damn thing about it.

But, of course they hadn't done that. Hours later, the torturers arrived. The first was a pallid, balding human, Dr. Kravvits, a high-ranking officer within the Technocratic guild. The second was a female nautolan, clad in sparkling commando armor. It wasn't Ghafa Ordam -her eyes were wrong- but he assumed it to be one of her officers, or even a sister. The rest of his attendants were faceless, clad from head to toe in steel-grey robes. The first two, the officers, never did the torture. They only watched and ordered and commanded, letting their silent

assistants do the work. It was their periodic coming and going that had allowed Evant to count the days in the first place. For a month, they worked to 'convince him' as they called it, utilizing the field to their advantage. They had tortured him while he was stretched spread-eagle, hands to the ceiling. They had tried the same as he was turned to the side. They tried torturing him upside down, blood rushing to his head, pouring down his face. They had electrocuted him. Flayed him. Burnt him. They pulled, and twisted, and snapped things, and used bacta to heal him before pulling and twisting and snapping again. He'd never seen the bones within his hand before. Now, he knew. Many times over.

But, they never asked him a question. Not once. They already knew everything there was to know, or so they claimed. They weren't trying to interrogate him. No... they wanted to *Convince* him. Every day, at the start and end of their bloody work, they would bring a camera to his face. Dr. Kravvits would lean close, putting his lips to Evant's ear, and whisper a single question.

"Do you renounce the Force?"

The answer was always no, and the torture would begin anew. That went on for thirty days. The torture. The question. Over, and over, and over. Of course, they had no idea who they were dealing with. Physically, Evant was a wreck. Mentally...internally, he never budged. Never questioned. His amber eyes remained just as bright and fierce each time they came, undulled by the pain, even as his face thinned and his hair grew ragged.

So, they changed tactics. Seven clan representatives had been captured alongside him. On the thirty-first day, his mute attendants wheeled a massive screen before him, and played a video. One by one, the clan representatives were told what was going to happen to them. Told that unless Evant renounced the Force, unless he gave them what they wanted, they would each be tortured, one by one. Until it was done.

Evant didn't break. So, the torture went on. Sometimes, they all got the same treatment, Evant included. Sometimes, they left him alone, letting him watch what was being done to the others. That was worse than anything else. He could bear his own pain, his own suffering. But, their screams haunted him. Their whimpers cut him. Not because he was overtly compassionate, or especially empathetic. These people were strangers to him.

No. It hurt him because every second of *their* torture reminded him of his own defeat, his own loss, his own *failure*. He had been so sure, so able, so *confident*. He was the Deputy Grand Master of the damned Brotherhood... and he'd lost. Captured like a dog. Now, they all paid the price for it.

It had to have been months now. Months after months. The Clan representatives had started dying by now, one by one. The first, that miscreant from Clan Vizsla, had tried to escape on his own, without his comrades. By all reports, he had been half-disintegrated by Technocratic troops. Not long after that, the executions started. Sure that the threat of death would spur

Evant into motion, the representatives from Clan's Plagueis and Scholae Palatinae had been singled out. Individually, they were tortured, over and over, without pause or cessation. Only when Dr. Kravvits decided that it was useless were they finally put out of their misery.

And through it all, he was made to watch, and listen, and know that it was his fault, his failure that had brought them here, and his sheer stubbornness that kept them suffering.

Evant hadn't broken. But, Force damn him, the days were beginning to feel long. His will grew thin. How much longer? How long could a man last, until continuing was a moot point? Oh, by *whatever* lay above, how did he know that he hadn't broken? How could he tell?

Perhaps he hadn't broken. Not yet. But, he was growing close. So close. The cracks widened, the walls melted, rotted away by guilt and self-disgust. He had failed. Sometimes, he felt sure that it would be better to die than to live with that fact, than to see their screaming faces once again. He couldn't do it anymore.

Willpower could only last a man so long.

The door to his cell slid open with a sharp hiss, rousing the Elder from his slumber. His grey-clad attendants never let him fall fully asleep. Short, fitful dozes were all that he could manage. Now, his head unbowed, rising to greet Dr. Kravvits' gaze as he strode through the door, the same half-smile stretched across his face as always. The Nautolan, for whatever reason, was not at his side. Perhaps it had to do with the strange detonation that he had felt earlier, rumbling through the facility. Odd.

"Ah, Master Taelyan, awake so soon?" the doctor asked, stepping close to Evant's suspended form. "I am surprised. Our last discussion was so... energetic. I was sure that you would be exhausted."

"Really, Doctor... I feel fine," Evant mumbled, his gaze returning to the floor. Kravvits just chuckled.

"Do not worry, my friend. It will all be over soon; you have my word," Kravvits promised coldly. Immediately, Evant's eyes had snapped back upward. His instant reaction spurred a cruel chuckle. "Yes, you heard me right. Rath has finally given me permission to end this. We have greater concerns, you see, than the word of a broken man. Our real offensive has only just begun, and we no longer have time to...convince you. You will be brought before him, and executed as the galaxy watches. Then... your corpse will be given over to Fragus Mouk. The Reanimate program has lacked proper subjects for so long. I am told that he would love your.. Contribution."

The Doctor's grin was like the dark side of the moon. Cold, endlessly cruel, and totally pitiless, his too-white teeth shining. Before Evant could respond, he was standing, already turning

towards the door. He cast a quick order over his shoulder as he left, chuckling. "You may do as you please with him, but leave the man alive. The rest have served their purpose. Dispose of them."

The door slid shut once more, Kravitts' snowy-white cloak fluttering away... and with it, Evant's life. He was done; soon, it would all be over.

Or, so he thought.

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Pressed against the corridor's wall, Sera concentrated on holding onto the cloak, clinging to the Force as tightly as she could. From her entrypoint, she had managed to make it to the fifth level of the facility, taking full advantage of the emptied hallways that her faux-breach had provided for her. Figuring out the location of Evant's holding cell hadn't exactly been difficult. When she touched at the Force, reaching out to sense the minds around her, practically every soldier to a man had been thinking about the Taelyan. Picking out his whereabouts hadn't been difficult. Actually getting to them proved more difficult, even after her diversion had emptied the corridors of their usual population.

She had been waiting outside of what she was *sure* was the Master's holding cell for a few minutes now, fervently concentrating on keeping herself cloaked. An opportunity to slip inside hadn't yet presented itself; every time that a moment seemed to come, someone showed up and interrupted her just before she let the cloak drop. First, a whole patrol of infantrymen clanking down the corridor, passing her with only inches to spare, then that creepy doctor-looking guy, laughing to himself like a psycho. Absently, Sera wondered if the Collective had ever gotten into the habit of hiring *normal* people, or if the only ones that they had at their disposal came with pre-packaged crazy.

There wasn't really time to fully explore that train of thought. The creepy doctor hadn't come back for a few minutes now. The hall was empty. Time to go. Grimacing, Sera let her Force-cloak drop, blinking back into view as if she'd stepped out from behind a curtain. Quickly, she reached for her Inquisitorious scanner, ensuring that it was set to jam any short-range transitions. Reaching out with the Force, she could vaguely sense people in there. If they called out for help, she wanted to make sure that no one heard it.

Footsteps were approaching down the corridor. It was now or never. Stepping forward, Sera quickly inputted the security bypass code that Manu had so willingly provided -12345- and darted into the cell as soon as the door hissed open.

Five people waited for her. Four were strangers, silent figures that didn't even turn as she walked in, so focused on what they were doing. The last man was her target. Evant Taelyan in the flesh.

By the looks, he was still wearing the robes that he'd been in when he was captured. What was left of them, at least. The once fine cloth had been reduced to bloody tatters, cut down to the trousers and left to stick to the man's wounds. His amber hair had grown long, ragged, and matted, soaked through with blood and sweat. It hung over his face like a hood. Most of the man's flesh was covered with bruises and half-healed scars. They had to have been torturing him for... Ancestors, months now.

The Zabrak's bright blue eyes grew cold. By the looks, they were about to do it again. The frakkers were so damn focused on it that they hadn't even noticed her. Their mistake.

Gritting her pointed teeth, Sera turned, and made sure that the door was locked. Then, she ignited her lightsaber.

That got their attention really quick.

They didn't scream as she cut them down. They hardly even made a sound. It was... eerie, really. They charged her as one, torture implements in hand, and she sprinted to meet them, golden saber flashing.

The fight was over in moments, smoking bodies dropping to the floor around her. For the moment, honor was served. That left her, and the Deputy Grand Master, still suspended in his restraints.

Slowly, he looked up, matted hair falling away from his face. He refused to meet her gaze, staring first at the corpses, before flitting away to give her an up-and-down look. "Aren't you... a little short for..."

"The person who just rescued you?" Sera cut him off with a sigh, shaking her head as she moved across the room. Those consoles *had* to have a way to get him out of those restraints. Peering across the switchboard, she picked a few at random, before finally coming across the right key.

Evant dropped like a bag of wet sand, dropped to his hands and knees as the shackles clanked off of his wrists. A second later, the Zabrak was at his side, cursing herself for not better studying Force healing while she had the chance. "Here, lemme hel-..."

"I don't... don't need your help," Taelyan hissed, forcing himself to stand on shaking legs. Looking at him more closely, Sera realized that the problem wasn't that he had been wounded. Whoever those torturers had been, they'd made sure to treat whatever injuries they dealt out to him, if only to keep him alive and conscious. Rather, he just seemed... weakened. Drained.

"Look... my name is Sera Kaern. I'm here to..."

“Get me out, yes, I know. Did... did Cantor send you?” Taelyan asked, still pointedly avoiding looking her in the eye. Stooping down, he pulled a canister of bacta from one of the slain torturer's belts, pasting it over a long, half-healed slash across his ribs.

Sera blinked, watching him for a moment. “Errr... yeah? Hey, listen, we've gotta get you armed and armored, I don't know how long it'll take them to figure out that something's wrong. We need to move. As easy as these guys were to handle, taking on a Fort full of hopped-up technocrats isn't my idea of a fun time.”

Evant nodded, stretching to his toes, trying to work some feeling into the outer vestiges of limbs that had gone mostly numb during his captivity. His body still had muscle to it, strength... he just looked so *exhausted*. Turning, he gave her a cocked look, popping a kink from his back with a sigh. “I... I assume you have a plan? A way out of this Force forsaken place?”

The Zabrak nodded quickly, smiling. Getting him out had been easy, so simple. Her confidence, already unshaken, had grown even sturdier. “Of course,” she started, pulling out her datapad. “From what I've been able to tell, there's a hangar on the top level. We get there, take a ship, and jet out to our rendezvous coordinates the next system over. But... first, we've got more people to rescue. The Clan Representatives...”

Immediately, Taelyan stiffened. When she turned to look at him, his gaze snapped away. “There's no point in going back for them. Rescuing them is... impossible.”

Just a slight touch of the Force allowed Sera to sense the waves of guilt rising off from the Elder, mixing with pain to create an internal agony as he thought about the captured reps. Frowning, Sera stepped closer. “Well, we can't just leave them. I don't know if we'll be able to conduct another operation here. If we don't get them now...”

“We *can not*. I couldn't help them, when they captured us. I... I couldn't help them when they were being tortured. *For me*. They murdered them *for me*. Don't you see?” Evant turned back, his voice ragged, almost desperate. She could sense a different emotion now. Not anger, not exactly.

No. He was afraid. Afraid, and ashamed of it. “You don't understand,” the man whispered, barely audible. “Months. Months of pain. I brought that to them. It is my doing. My fault...”

There was silence for a few moments, as Sera thought her next move through. Then, sighing, she stepped forward, and took him roughly by the shoulder. He flinched, as if expecting that she was going to slap him.

Instead... Sera hugged him, wrapping the Deputy Grand Master in a quick, tight embrace. When she pulled back, she took him by the chin so that he was *forced* to look down at her, their

eyes meeting. Baring her pointed teeth, she uttered a single, pointed question; “Did they break you?”

He tried to look away, but she didn’t let him.

“I asked you a question. *Did they break you?*”

“I...”

“You said that you failed them. That what happened is *your* fault, that *you* failed. Is that right?” she questioned, her gaze unyielding. Finally, Evant’s gaze turned to meet her’s, amber clashing against icy blue.

“Yes. I led them here. I failed them.”

“So... what’re you gonna do about it? Leave them for dead?” Sera shook her horns, chuckling from the back of her throat. “No. You’ve got a choice to make. If these frakkers broke you, go on ahead and run. If not... if not, you *can’t* take the easy way out. You need to choose the hard path, and stick with it. Do that... and it won’t matter that you failed. Honor will be repaid. So...so...” she pondered, stepping closer, eyes flashing as she questioned one more time. “*Did. They. Break. You?*”

Evant hesitated, shutting his eyes. For a long moment, there was no sound in the room, save for his breath. Deep, steady, calm. When his eyes opened once again, there was a fire in his eyes that was unmistakable, glowing hotter than any sun. She didn’t need his answer. That look was proof enough.

Evant Taelyan remained unbroken.

Standing to his full height, the Elder gave Sera a thankful nod... and a small smile. In response, she grinned, reaching to her hip, and handing him her lightsaber. For a moment, he looked totally dumbfounded, his eyes questioning.

“Take it,” she offered, smiling. “You’re probably better with it than I am, anyways... and besides, if anything’ll get the Collective to tuck tail and run, it’s an elder with a lightsaber.” Grinning, she motioned to the door. “C’mon. It’s time to teach these karkers a thing or two about the Force... and I’ve got drinks waiting for us when we get back home.”

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Violet D’Slan waited to die.

She had known that it was coming for some time now. Since the Collective's torturers had caved in Clan Plagueis' representative while she cried out for mercy, she had known that it was coming. Naturally meek, reticent, and painfully shy, her imprisonment had been especially jarring, and abnormally cruel. The torture had never seemed to end, carrying on into her nightmares when she was allowed to drift fitfully to sleep.

Now, that torture had ceased. For what must have been at least a day, maybe even two, they hadn't received a visit from their tormentors, save for their periodic nutrition and hydration drip. Just enough to keep them alive. Perhaps the Deputy Grand Master had finally broken. Perhaps it was finally over.

That was alright. If anything... death would have been a mercy. Anything was better than this. Anything.

Heavy footsteps were approaching down the hall, stopping just outside their door. Two voices engaged in an indistinct conversation. One that grew louder, and louder, and louder. Suddenly, the tip of a golden blade erupted through the blast doors, throwing a shower of sparks and molten dross across the floor panelling. The door slid open, hissing in protest, the saber melting a clear path through the metal.

A corpse slumped forward, clad in a Technocrat's armor, a smoking hole standing out in its chest. Two figures stepped over it. The first was clad in tight, sheer armor, painted in shades of blue and grey. The second, loosely bundled in scavenged technocrat armor...

Was Evant Taelyan, golden saber still shining in his hand. Violet wasn't sure what she expected him to say, or do. Something inspiring, probably. The words of a leader, come to save the day...

"Well, that didn't go as well as I'd frakking hoped. Boring conversation, anyway..." the Elder muttered, extinguishing his lightsaber. He gave a heaving sigh, then turned to face the representatives, real concern shining in his eyes. "Kaern, can you..."

"Way ahead of you," the other figure interjected, pressing a button on the wall console. With a beep, Violet's restraints unclamped, and she fell limply to the floor, her legs totally unable to support her. She whimpered slightly as she fell. One half of her was exultant, finally *free*. The other half was... confused. Unsure. Afraid.

Then, she looked up, and saw the unfamiliar figure offering her a hand up. She was a Zabrak, with a smile like the sun. Evant stood behind her, *smiling*.

Violet took the hand gratefully, smiling back. Somehow, she knew everything was going to be ok.

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The alarm blared out once more while they were still halfway to the hangar. Under her breath, Sera released a string of sulfurous oath, grunting as she helped the representative from Odan-Urr along, her breath coming ragged. Only Violet and the tanned old-man from Naga Shadow had been able to move without assistance. At her side, Taelyan was practically carrying the Zeltron from Taldyran, who had passed out as soon as she had tried to stand.

They were a bunch of fools, running a three-legged race when they needed to sprint. Easiest damn prey in the galaxy. Sera couldn't help but grin, almost laughing as they bounded around the corner.

Well, Karran and Tali were right on this one. Easy mission my choobies...

They emerged into a hangar that was half-filled with enemies, raising blasters and sonic-cannons to their shoulders. Only luck, and their unpredictable, half-limping motion kept the group alive as they cut across the hangar floor, ducking awkwardly between cover as they made their way to the nearest source of escape, an Upsilon class shuttle. It would suit their purpose perfectly, with only one, small downside.

The shuttle's door was sealed tight. Right now, they had no way in.

"How the kark are we gonna get this damned thing open?" Sera cursed, ducking into the meager cover that the elegant craft offered. Leaning the Odan-Ur rep into a sheltered alcove, Sera poked back out, sending a yellow blast from her vambrace into a Technocrat's throat. Beside her, Evant set the Zeltron down, her lightsaber bursting to life in his hand. A moment later, he was deflecting just about every bolt to come their way, sending it back at their foes with unerring accuracy.

"No clue," the Deputy growled, bouncing away a blaster shot that had been blazing for Sera's back. "I can fly it, but slicing is beyond me. Never thought I'd have to learn."

Then, a voice squeaked out from behind them, where the Clan Reps were sheltering against the shuttle. Violet had raised her hand, her voice wavering as she spoke. "I...I can slice it! I j-just need a datapad, so..."

Sera and Evant gave each other a look, then shrugged in unison. Ducking back into cover, Sera yanked her Inquisitorial datapad from her satchel, passing it off to Violet.

"You get 'em, Vi! I'll just be, uh... y'know. Blasting!" Sera laughed, before jumping right back out in the line of fire. Behind her, Violet whimpered slightly, and got to work.

Sera and Evant held the line, and held it well. Both of them excelled under these conditions. Outnumbered, outgunned, they took it upon themselves to prove that they were not outmatched, backing their claims up with steel and saber, and utilizing their defensive positioning for the

best. On the defense, Evant was simply unbeatable. He clutched Sera's saber in a two-handed grip, hands deftly maneuvering the curved hilt to deflect every bolt that entered his sphere, his dominant right-side turned behind him in a fortifying posture. Just about every bolt that came his way found itself buried in another target. Sera, for her own part, utilized just about every tool at her disposal, her form fluid and loose as she ducked and dodged between her meager cover, driving the Collective troops back with blaster bolts and gouts of flame from her vambraces.

But, there were simply too many of them. The Collective troops, a mixed force of rabid Liberation Front partisans and ruthless Technocratic supersoldiers, pressed in inch by inch, slowly but surely surrounding them.

They were running out of time.

Sera gave a savage snarled as a technocrat barreled at her, Z6 Riot Baton sparking through the air. Sidestepping the attack just in time, she shot a sharp, down-ward kick into the man's knee, shattering the kneecap, before ramming her stiletto dagger up under his chin. As the corpse went limp, Sera gripped it with the Force, tossing the heavily-armored stiff into a cluster of enemies. Bones broke. Men fell. They gained a few more seconds.

She ducked into cover beside Evant, both of them gasping lightly for breath. Behind them, Violet gave a high-pitched squeal... followed by a sharp hiss. The shuttle's doors were opening. It was time to leave...

But the Collective forces were pressing in once again. A few more seconds, and they would swarm over their position.

Sera thought for a moment... and her gaze met Evant's. Once again, amber clashed against blue, for just a moment. Then, the Zabrak grinned.

"You know what we've gotta do, Evant. Only one of us can pilot the damned thing."

"Not happening, Kaern. I won't..."

"You *will*," Sera interjected, pausing for a moment to blast a wall of flame between them and the oncoming troopers. Dropping back down, she gave a sigh. "You remember what I said earlier? About taking the hard path?"

"Don't..." Evant responded, shaking his head in refusal. But, deep down, he knew. There was only one way they were making it out of this.

"This is my path... and I need to take it alone. Tell my friends... tell them I'm sorry I missed our drinks. Tell them... I'll be seeing them. Promise me."

Evant looked at her. The woman that had saved him. Pulled him back from the brink. Then, he nodded... and left her. Turning, he retreated backwards into the shuttle, sprinting for the cockpit. Ten seconds later, the shuttle started to lift away.

And Sera held the line alone.

Zig...Sully...Tali...Karran. I'm sorry. But... it was my choice.

The Zabrak grinned, a dagger in each hand as the Collective troopers surrounded her. If this was the end of her road, what a glorious end it was. She gave no battle-cry as she charged. No last words, no parting jibe. Just one, last laugh.

It was a good life, spent in good company. Can't ask for anything better.

K'thri was a rather unique fighting style. Oftentimes, it was described as a dance, twisting, spinning, flying through the battle on nimble feet. That nomiker certainly applied to Sera's offensive, though she generally dispensed with such fancy moves. She hit the first man at a sprint, sliding on her knees to slice his hamstring with her Zabradi dagger, before slamming her stilleto up between his legs. Spinning on her knee, Sera swept the feet out from under the Technocrat next to her, ramming a blade under his breast-plate as he fell. *Duck*, whispered a frantic voice in her mind, and she did, ducking and rolling backwards onto her shoulderblades.

Sera scrambled away, still smiling. The Collective charged right on after her. On one knee, she brought her vambrace up and engulfed a tight-cluster of them in flame. The Technocratic soldiers didn't scream as they burned. No, they just stumbled limply, falling... and more came behind them. Always more.

I wish I'd stayed home a little long. I wish I'd found my brother.

Two Liberation Front partisans tumbled, choking on throwing-knives that had suddenly sprouted from their throats. The warning voice came again, this time shouting *LEFT* just fast enough for Sera's vambrace-shield to catch the riot baton. Unfortunately, it did nothing for the sonic-blast that took her in the face, sending her flying backwards. Troopers moved in to surround her, and she rose just in time to meet them, using the close quarters and her slim frame to her advantage. Posture loose, blades before her, she attacked. And attacked. And attacked. Every blow that she drove home reinvigorated her, every man that she sent to the ground with a cracked jaw, or broken knee, or cut throat fueling her. Sera wasn't a killer. But, today, she killed without thinking.

Three riot batons struck her at once, electricity coursing through her musculature. Gasping, she fell to her knees.

And a voice from somewhere behind her, outside the crowd of troopers, called out. "Take her alive!"

The last thought that crashed through Sera's mind was a happy one.

Not done yet. Maybe I'll make those drinks after-all.

PART 3: Honor

"You're insane."

"I'm serious, Cantor. I am," Evant replied, running a hand over his smooth-shaven face, through his freshly-groomed hair. By the *Force* it felt good to be clean again.

"The risks were clear going into the mission. Going back would be insane, and there's no guarantee that-..."

"They wouldn't have moved her, Mav. They're so... confident. Over-confident, really. They would never think that we would hit them in the same spot. Not again."

Telaris gave him a look, his eyebrows rising. "You *are* serious. And... you even recognized that they're overconfident? *You?*"

Yes, *me*, Evant thought quietly, rubbing over a spot on his left hand. The Collective torturers had broken that hand three times over, picked the bones out, and put it back together. He'd been awake through the whole process. Now, thanks to the wonders of Force Healing, there was hardly even a scar.

Force healing couldn't fix the rest, though. It had been a week, and he could still see his cell everytime he closed his eyes, hear Kravvits' cruel, sallow chuckle. Mav didn't know what he'd seen. Didn't know what he'd felt. The pain. The deaths. He'd felt *himself* start to die. He'd accepted his faith.

The Zabrak had changed that... and paid the price for it. Mav hadn't seen that, either. He hadn't seen the instant anguish, the rage, the grief on her friends' faces. Her Captain, eyes unbelieving, cursing. Her master, silent, unsure. The togorian and zygerrian, weeping, their strength gone out from them.

"I made a promise. On my honor," Evant murmured. Hearing this, the Grand Master just shook his head.

“How do you even know that she’s alive?”

Evant looked at him, and their gazes met. The amber eyes were unwavering, fiery.

“I can feel it.”

-

“Your friends won’t be coming for you, you know. We’re almost into the shadow cycle, now. Eleven whole months in darkness... eleven months with *me*. You can get out. Do you renounce the Force? Just say it. The words are so easy...” Kravvits murmured in Sera’s ear. All he got for his efforts was a derisive, racking laugh.

“The only thing that I renounce... is whatever the hell you call *cologne*...” the Zabrak chuckled. In response, Kravvits sneered, signalling to the torturers. They seemed especially enthusiastic, even in their mute state. Perhaps they wanted to avenge their fallen friends.

The shock-prods collided against Sera’s side with a hiss, her entire body convulsing, musculature twisting against itself. When they were done, the Zabrak went limp, gasping for breath. But, *somehow*, she remained conscious.

And *smiled*.

“Impressive...” the Nautolan at Kravvits’ side murmured, her black eyes totally unreadable. The doctor gave her an angry, incredulous look.

“Impressive? This... this *creature is not impressive*. She is...is...impetuous! Monstrous!”

“It is not my fault that every Force User you capture just happens to be more durable than your tools, doctor,” she replied. While the doctor glowered, the Nautolan snickered, testing the edge of the dagger that she’d taken from the girl’s gear. It was obviously of tribal make, must incredibly well forged. A valuable, unique find.

Much like the woman herself, she thought. Unlike the Technocrats, who’s heads were generally shoved too far up their own steel-plated port-entrances to care, Capital Enterprises was always on the lookout for... future investments. Evant Taelyan had been a known asset. But, Sera Kaern...

“Keep her alive, Doctor,” the Nautolan ordered, handing him the dagger. “We’ll see what we can make out of her. In the meantime... don’t play too rough.”

With that, the Nautolan left the quivering doctor alone with the Zabrak and his silent assistants.

There was silence within the cell for several long minutes, interrupted only by Kravvits' muttering, and a series of distant clangs, echoing throughout the Fortress. Finally, the Doctor turned, his usual smile replaced by a look that was totally and utterly dark, filled with a rage that Sera hadn't yet seen in him. His grip on her dagger tightened until his knuckles were white.

"You...you *whelp*, have angered the wrong man," he threatened, approaching her. "That damned fish said I couldn't kill you...but she never said I had to hand you over with your *horns*... or your tongue."

Eyes shining cruelly, he gripped her by the chin, lining the point of the dagger up underneath the root of her largest horn. Hefting it, he prepared to strike down...

When a blood-red blade pierced through the cell door, cutting downwards. It was soon joined by a second, crimson blade, cutting a horizontal path... and a third blade, golden in coloration, cutting down on the right.

Sparks flew. Molten metal dripped down, and smoke filled the new doorway. Dr. Kravvits and all his attendants cringed backwards, the dagger sliding limply from his fingers... and Sera just laughed, her voice weak, but triumphant. "Oh, you're so *karked* now."

The three sabers shined through the smoke, glowing bright as Sera's friends stepped forward; Tali on the left, Karran on the right, Evant in the center.

The torturers, once again, weren't able to put up much of a fight. Tali and Karran slaughtered them in unison, the Zabrak roaring as he split one from shoulder to hip, the Twi'lek cool and collected as she spitted another on her blade. Evant, ignoring that bloodshed, marched coolly forward as the detonations sounded across the facility, stepping towards Kravvits.

The Doctor whimpered, and cried out once as the Elder's ruddy lightsaber separated his head from his shoulders. Then, he split Sera's manacles, cutting them apart with two swift, accurate strikes.

She was laughing as she fell to her knees, legs shaking, a smile spreading on her face as she felt Karran's arms close around her. She doubted that they were going to let her walk on her own. Not if they could help it.

'I kept my promise. My honor,' spoke a quiet, confident voice within her mind. Looking up, over Karran's shoulder, Sera gave Evant a smile.

He offered her something else. The saber that he'd taken from her... and her trusty dagger, picked up off the floor. That only made her grin grow wider.

Their eyes met again, blue on amber.

Unbroken. Unbent.

They had found their way out.