

# STAR THE DARKEST MIND WARS

**By Jack Freeman**

*(Bale Andros - 826)*

Kaela Val was neck deep in archeological holocrons when the *Nesolat Platform* turned to chaos. The golden glow bathing the private booth died with the flick of her hand and the hovering devices clattered to the floor around her, already forgotten. She was up on her feet, fast alert, her nimble steps taking her to the doorway. The surge of adrenaline carried her down one hallway then another before her reeling mind could wrest control again. By that point, she realized that for all she knew, she could be running straight for danger. As it was often the case when danger was afoot, her instincts went into survival mode. As a group of acolytes rushed past her to the sound of blaring sirens, she sunk into the shadows, careful to keep out of sight.

A Twi'lek in elegant robes jogged past her, speaking into a commlink device. The insignia on his chest marked him as a researcher for the Shadow Academy. There was a tremor in his voice as he said, "Vituri, I'm on my way. Do we know what's happening exactly?"

A female voice on the other end responded, "The station is under attack. Several frigates and heavy cruisers are inbound. All signs point to the Collective."

The Twi'lek disappeared around the corner in a sweep of his robes, taking with him her one source of information. Pressing her back to the wall to let more academic types pass her by, she considered her next steps carefully. The last thing she wanted was to be drawn into another conflict between the Dark Brotherhood and the Collective. The deaths of both her father and her mentor, Elinia Rei, a year past had liberated her but memories of the assault on *Meridian* and the atrocities she was forced to commit in the name of this so-called Brotherhood were still fresh in her mind. She needed to slip out from under their noses, and for that, she had to get to the *Moonhawk*. She set out down the hall in the direction that led to the docking tower where her transport waited. As she moved, she kept thinking that she shouldn't be there, over and over again. She had been reluctant to come despite the Master's insistence, fearful that using her Brotherhood credentials to enter the facility would land her in a heap of trouble, though, until now, everything had gone according to plan. She had found the holocrons that her master sought and extracted the information, and for all of five minutes she thought that she might get away with it. That is, until the Collective came knocking. Perhaps she could still make it. For that, she needed to reach the docks.

As her father used to say, there were no two ways about it. So long as the captain of the *Moonhawk* waited for her. Those were some pretty big if's.

There was a distant but deep and sudden thud, the sound of an impact, and she felt a tremor in the durasteel floor underneath her feet. The station was truly under attack. Panic was gaining the population and more and more of them began rushing past her, moving inward, away from the docking towers. The further she got, the harder it was to navigate through the throng, to the point where it felt like she was swimming against the current. As she squeezed through them, the Force carried whispers of their inner thoughts to her. *I can't believe it! They're boarding! We are going to die! Where is the Dark Council when you need them?* The thoughts were not her own but she heard them all the same. She could feel the rampant confusion, the terror, the panic as if they were her own. Perhaps they were. The tension was palpable even without the Force and Kaela realized that it would not take much for this to turn into a stampede. In these cramped quarters it would be a meat grinder. Kaela pushed on. Her mind focused on getting to the *Moonhawk*. That was all that mattered.

Suddenly, she burst out of the crowd into an empty corridor. As the commotion died down behind her she felt alone and the hallway took on an entirely different kind of tension. Soon there was only the sound of her boots on the durasteel tiles and the wail of sirens. She finally reached the lobby that led into the docking tower. She could sense a great many lifeforms beyond. The Force swirled with a mixture of fear and anger and something else entirely. There was a hollow thud. An explosive. It was faint but she could hear the shriek of blaster fire. In the Force, she felt someone die. Then another. A third. A fourth. She recoiled, whimpering, as the death count mounted. She took a deep, shuddering breath.

She took one careful step towards the blast doors then tried to activate the panel. It refused to budge. *Sealed*. She was startled by a sudden hiss. A light flared to life at the top of the door then moved slowly downward along the seam. Someone on the other side was trying to breach the door with a plasma torch. That's when she felt *them* on the other side. She could not tell how many there were standing beyond the door and there was something strange about them, a lack of emotion, as if their brains were too busy processing information. It was unlike anything she had ever felt in the Force. Their mental imprint was like a maze or a network,

interconnected in a way that made it difficult to tell each individual apart. Her brow furrowed, she focused, using the Force to weave a link between her mind and theirs. She tried to focus on an individual's thoughts but she couldn't quite lock it down, and the more she tried the more it felt like she was spinning out of control, caught in a maelstrom of multiplying thoughts. No. Not only multiplying but *duplicating*.

Who were these peoples?

*HIDE.*

The word boomed in her mind and reverberated across her psyche, wrenching her from the maelstrom with a gasp. The Master was speaking to her from across a great distance, his voice ancient and ethereal as he commanded her. She felt cold, as if an icy gale swept over her, but she brushed it off. The Master was right. The Collective was moments away from breaching the door. She had to hide. Her eyes darted across the lobby to the concierge's empty desk, then the potted synthetic plants and the tapestries and the cargo crates. She considered every nook and cranny. She slid behind the crates as the door swished open. She pressed herself against the container so that her body was fully concealed in the shadows. Her breath caught in her throat as a platoon of hulking black-clad soldiers poured into the room with calculated efficiency and a swiftness that should not have been possible in such thick armor. If this truly was the Collective, they had acquired some serious upgrades. Without uttering a single word they swept the room for stragglers. When one looked in her direction, her hand shot to her lightsaber instinctively but she stopped short of igniting the weapon. He did not see her and didn't investigate further. After all, why check behind a bunch of crates? What fool could possibly bother hiding back there? She felt compelled to reach out with the Force, to tap into their mind and unravel their secrets, but she feared doing so would reveal her presence.

Ten heart beats. That's all it took for them to secure the room and move down the hall. She rose slowly, keeping her ears peeled, well aware that another platoon could flood the lobby at any moment. Another ten heart beats passed, then twenty. No one came through. She crossed the lobby, pressed her back against the wall next to the open blast doors. Then she peered inside.

The first level of the docking tower, or what remained of it, was a warzone. Ships were smoldering, filling the landing bay with plumes of swirling smoke. Bodies littered the runway, the catwalks, the ramps, they were everywhere. Soldiers, scholars, acolytes, civilians, the slaughter was conducted without discrimination. She recognized the dead officer lying nearest to the door, a force disciple with carbonized scorch marks still smoking on his chest. As far as she could tell, there were no black-clad invaders amongst the dead. Her eyes followed the mayhem to the *Moonhawk*, or atleast what remained of it. An explosion had torn through the cockpit and inside she saw the captain, still strapped into the pilot's seat.

Dead.

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Kereban Zolar was as shocked as anyone else on the *Nesolat Platform*. The station had served as his home and office since it was put in orbit around Arx and it was difficult to believe it was now under threat. Indeed, his safe harbor was not only under attack, but the enemy had already boarded them and taken at least two of the three docking towers. Chaos and death now reigned the hallways and for the first time in a long time, he felt in danger. Worse, his research was in jeopardy and that terrified him. Years stood to be wasted and he could not afford such a setback. There was also the matter of the countless acolytes and civilians currently onboard the *Nesolat*. He wondered, not for the first time, if they would live out the day.

The Twi'lek scholar led a progression of security officers down the winding corridors toward his office. He brought his commlink to his lips and said, "Vituri, is everything in order?"

Vituri's voice responded through the device, "Yes, Seer Zolar. We have packaged the research equipment. We are preparing to move it to the administrative center."

"Outstanding, I knew I could count on you. I am almost there with the escort."

This was the first bit of good news he had heard all day and that drove him forward at a brisk pace, a procession of security guards behind him.

“The invaders have taken the third dock, but we received word that Brotherhood forces have dropped out of hyperspace. They have engaged the Collective fleet. The administration has sealed the towers and are urging all personnel to head for the observation deck,” Vituri’s voice broke with the last few words. She was overwhelmed and Kereban could not blame her.

“Remain where you are, Vituri. You will join your husband soon enough.”

There was no response, which meant she was either placated or that she didn’t believe him. With her, it was always one or the other but the simple truth of it was that she had no say in the matter. She *had* to wait for him, and he knew the girl well enough to know she would never disobey, which was just as well. If she left her post now, any ne’er-do-well could stumble upon the cargo and pillage his research.

They were almost to the research center when an explosion rocked the *Nesolat* and sent Kereban sprawling on the ground. The hall turned to darkness, then lit up again in a baleful red hue. He pushed himself up off the ground, eyes wild.

“What was that?” he asked, his voice a frightened squeal.

“A direct hit, sir. Something penetrated our shields.”

“We must hurry!”

They picked up the pace and reached the research center in no time. He tapped an elongated, sharp-nailed finger on the door’s control panel. He was met with a negative beep. He tried again.

“Blast!” he hissed where the panel beeped again. This time, he tapped in his personal override code. The results were the same. “By the Star Chamber! What is happening? This should have worked!”

“Sir,” one of the security officers behind him said.

Kereban tried again. Once. Twice. A third time. Each time, the panel emitted a sad cry. He could feel the blood pumping at his temples, the heat rising in his cheeks. He ground his pointed teeth and threw his hands out, summoning the Force to his aid. He visualized the doors in his mind’s eye and prepared to yank them open when the officer’s panicked voice stopped him.

“Sir! Look!” The officer handed him a datapad.

On it, he saw the schematics of the *Nesolat Platform*. Multiple sections were flashing in red, signaling damage. He found the research center and zoomed in. He gasped and the datapad clattered to the floor. There was nothing but space beyond

the door. The explosion had breached the hull and if not for the administration's preemptive sealing of compartments, they would have all been sucked out into the void. Just like Vituri. Just like his research.

He stood for a moment, staring in disbelief at the electronic device at his feet before his legs gave out beneath him. A ball of anguish and terror formed in his ribcage and he could barely breathe. His hands were shaking. He wanted to scream but he found that no sound was coming out. Or perhaps there was but the *thump-thumping* of his racing heartbeat was drowning out the noise. Then, as if a switch had been flipped, he grew calm again, composed. He took a deep breath between his clenched teeth, then swallowed hard.

He would get his revenge on these ignominious thugs.

For his research, for the years now wasted.

And for Vituri, *of course*.

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War had engulfed the station. Strike teams from each clan swarmed to the *Nesolat's* defense and skirmishes erupted all over the platform as they engaged the invaders. Many were caught in the crossfire, including Kaela who was now hiding with a group of civilians inside some private booth not unlike the one she had been studying in when this whole mess began. With the *Moonhawk* destroyed and the docking towers now serving as ground zero of the engagement, her hopes of a swift escape were all but shattered. A young boy whimpered by her side, clinging to his mother's arms as if she might leave him behind. His eyes were red and puff, his cheeks wet with tears. A girl no older than seven or eight leaned against the back wall, staring into the middle distance, her eyes slightly out of focus. The Rodian sitting next to her had saved her from a volley of blaster fire that had cut down her father. The others inside the room sat clumped together making sounds not unlike those the boy made. Kaela had to focus to keep their thoughts out of her mind, lest she be overwhelmed by their collective fear.

She had grown quite powerful in the Force under the tutelage of the Master, her connection to the mystical energy more stable than ever before, but she still struggled with her unconscious tendency to tap into the minds of people

surrounding her. She often found herself lost in someone else's thoughts until she realized what was happening. It once terrified her, but it was a fact of life. Some couldn't help but talk when they were nervous. She couldn't help but eavesdrop.

She moved over to the scruffy-looking security officer named Byrl and knelt beside him. He never looked up from the heavy blaster in his hands. She knew he was trying his hardest to look unaffected, likely for the benefit of their companions, but she didn't need to tap his mind to tell that was anything but the case. His white-knuckled grasp on the weapon and the way his shoulders slumped spoke volumes. She offered him a friendly smile, or as friendly a smile as one could muster at such a time, then looked to the others and back before whispering.

"What is the protocol for an invasion? What happens next?"

"Next? *Pfassk*, kid. Next we hope the clans and the Iron Legion drive the Collective out of the system before they find us in this closet," was his answer.

"No. What's the protocol onboard the station? Surely there was a plan established in the likelihood of an invasion? Don't tell me *you lot* are all as dumb as you look." Her voice was louder and her tone snappier than she meant it to be.

"Watch it, kid. I'm the one with the blaster here." He tried to sound threatening, but she saw in his eyes the same fear that struck the rest of these hapless souls.

She called upon the Force and waved her hand before his face and whispered, "You will reveal the security measures."

"I will reveal the security measures," he repeated, then he continued. "In the advent of an invasion, all non-essential personnel and civilians must be evacuated to the administrative building which is designed to, in a last case scenario, separate from the rest of the platform and navigate to the Shadow Academy on Arx."

"Then why are we hiding in here?"

He didn't respond.

That was it then. They had to get to the administrative building. That was their one chance of survival, but that also meant crossing hostile territory, and she didn't think they could count on the clans for protection. They were bound to have their hands full already. She looked at all the pitiful people hiding with her and for a moment considered going on her own. She would certainly have an easier time of it without a bunch of helpless civvies tagging along.



*Leave them,* she heard the Master whisper in the Force. *Their lives are inconsequential, you must survive this.* He was right. She should leave them. They would only slow her down, they would be a liability. They would get her killed. But this wasn't her. Not yet.

She gave a long, drawn out sigh. It looked like she was getting drawn into another conflict whether she liked it or not. She pushed herself to her feet, turned to her companions.

“Alright, listen here, folks. No one's coming to save us. Not the Legion, not the clans, and certainly not these boys,” she explained pointing over her shoulder to the security guard. Byrl's shoulders slumped even lower. She heard his voice in the Force repeating *coward* over and over again. She continued, “We have to look out for ourselves. We're in this together.”

“But we're unarmed. You've seen what they can do!” said the Rodian.

She was right.

“Let me worry about the killing,” Kaela said. As if moving of its own volition, her lightsaber slipped out from underneath her coat, spun through the air into her hand. She grasped it and twin purple blades spat to life. She wasn't much of a leader, but if these people were to survive, someone had to step up. If she had learned one thing from her father, it was that hope could carry a man. “Here's what we are going to do.”

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Kereban stepped alone inside the vault. What remained of his retinue of security guards stayed outside, establishing a defense perimeter around the antechamber. Not that they stood much of a chance if the enemy found them. They had already lost eight officers in a skirmish with the Collective's new abominations and survived only by the will of the Force, retreating into the *Nesolat's* labyrinthine maintenance corridors where they were able to lose their pursuers. The Twi'lek was grateful that they knew the station better than the black-clad soldiers, though they had shown an uncanny sense of navigation. He was no military expert but there was something about the way the enemy moved, the way they behaved, the

sheer cohesion of their assault despite a lack of any discernible communication that was nothing short of impressive. And terrifying.

The vault was bathed in the same excoriating red light that permeated the research level since the explosion that gutted his research. A lifetime of exploring dark places had trained his eyesight to adapt itself quickly to the penumbra, allowing him to navigate the countless shelves and crates and cabinets without stubbing his toes and smashing his face. As he searched, he feared hearing the sound of blaster fire outside, worried that the invaders could find them at any given moment. To make matters worse, it took a nerve-wracking amount of time to find what he was looking for.

The *Nesolat Platform* housed only an infinitesimal portion of the Shadow Academy's secrets but its collection of ancient artifacts was enough to make even the galaxy's wealthiest collectors envious, surpassed only by the fabled vaults of Emperor Palpatine. Most of these relics held only historical value, painting a fresco of history that begged to be deciphered, but some held great power locked within their ancient bodies. Kereban took great pride in unlocking these powers. He was after one very specific artifact now, one that was recovered five years earlier on *Vanir II*, a moon in the *Odeon* system, a place that resonated with the dark side of the Force. There, Scholae Palatinaen scouts had come in contact with a crazed Dark Jedi who claimed to be the guardian of the world. They later discovered this man to be Cyris Oscura, or the Black Hand, a former member of the Dark Brotherhood and a sorcerer of particular renown. He had in his possession an ancient skull, which, upon his capture and imprisonment, was turned over to the Shadow Academy for study and research. Kereban remembered it well. It had been his first appointment as a newly promoted seer and he had poured months into studying the twisted skull.

He recalled the relic's unique resonance and sought it out with the Force. Sure enough, he found it, a primal, pulsating darkness. It was locked inside one of many safeboxes protruding from the back wall. The Twi'lek brought his hand up, then clenched his fingers. The metal hatch crumbled on itself. With a downward sweep of his fist, it came off the hinges and clattered to the ground below, revealing the elongated skull. It was just as he remembered it, the great twisted visage, the sharp canines still lining its upper jaw, the four empty orbits, a structure that matched no

known canid in the galaxy. Again, Kereban called upon the Force and pulled the artifact to his hands. The moment the polished bone touched his fingertips he was overtaken by a surge of power that tore a breathless gasp from his throat. The energy washed through him, enhanced him, amplified his connection to the Force. He could feel the creature's presence in his mind. Not a sentient presence, but something raw, primeval, feral, a will to dominate and consume.

A small voice at the back of Kereban's mind begged him to release the artifact lest it consumed him. It took him a moment to realize that this small voice was his, an echo of his subconscious. He risked losing himself if he held onto the item for too long. He remembered his research subjects and the corruptive effects the skull had had on them, but he also recalled how he had longed for it to be his.

He *needed* this power.

It was the only way.

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More dead. Kaela stepped lightly over the corpse of a security guard, minding where she put her feet as to avoid tripping. There were eight of them and a single black-clad invader. She gave the body a wide berth, half-expecting him to rise up and attack her. It was a naïve notion, but such was the impression the deadly warriors had made on her. The civilians followed closely behind, with Byrl bringing up the rear. The young girl, which she now knew was called Tiani, approached the invader, then knelt beside him and pressed her fingers gingerly against his helmet. Behind Kaela, there was a shuffling sound and when she turned to witness the Rodian picking up one of the dead officers' blaster pistol. Others mimicked her, including Tiani who took the Collective soldier's blaster carbine.

A confident, eager look passed between them but Kaela wasn't so sure about this. The carnage was telling. What chance did a bunch of civilians have to survive against trained soldiers?

"Are you sure you want to do this? If you hide, there's a chance you may survive." She stepped between them, raising her hand and lowering an elderly

man's blaster which had been pointing straight at her. "If you engage these killers, you will die."

"Better to die defending myself than getting shot like a womp rat," said the man.

Kaela shrugged. It really wasn't her problem. It was enough that she was sticking her neck out for them. She wasn't about to tell them what to do. "Just don't shoot yourselves, ok?"

She sensed the anger in Tiani's mind. She could almost feel her tremble through the Force, her finger itching over the trigger. Her eyes were locked on the black helmet, her teeth bared in a half-snarl. *I hate you, I hate you, I hate you*, she could hear the girl repeating over and over again in her mind. She could not blame her. In fact, she could see herself in this child and it brought painful memories of her father's death boiling to the surface. She placed her hand on her shoulder. There was rage in Tiani's eyes when she stared up at her. Kaela projected her thoughts into the child's mind. *I understand how you feel. Be strong. I am here with you.* She feared the child would be frightened by her telepathic touch, but she simply nodded, then backed away from the dead soldier.

"We must continue. We're as good as dead if they eject the administration building. So, huh, follow me," Kaela announced before stepping over yet another dead officer and pushing into the next section. The distant sound of battle came from all directions now. It was inevitable. They had done well sneaking through the station, staying away from hot spots, hiding themselves when enemy soldiers swept through the halls. As the hallways converged and led to the administration building, their luck would inevitably run out, and run out it did, far sooner than she could have anticipated.

The sound of combat was unmistakable as they came up on what had to be some sort of training facility turned battleground. Kaela motioned for her companions to stay low and out of sight as she snuck into the chamber, using overturned furniture and other debris as cover. The barrage of firepower and explosives from the black-clad soldiers was so intense that the Brotherhood's force users were fighting on their heels, unable to gain the upper hand. A squad which Kaela recognized as Palatinaen stormtroopers by their purple pauldrons tried to flank the enemy but the Collective killers seemed to turn as one and shot them

down as if they were mere target practice. This did open a window for Arconan force-users to charge the enemy but for all their powers and their Jedi weapons they managed to take down only a handful of soldiers before they too were killed.

Kaela slumped against a crate. She was panting. Her hand gripped her unignited lightsaber white-knuckle tight. There was a sudden but all-too familiar *clink clink* of metal nearby and realized with blood-draining dread that they had seen her. And the sound was that of a thermal detonator. She scrambled away on hands and knees but the detonation threw her spinning head over feet into the wall. Her ears were ringing, nausea overtaking her.

As she lay there, heart pounding in her chest, she couldn't help but wonder if this was it, if a lifetime of illness, her discovery of the Force, the death of her father and mentor. Had it all been for nothing? Time wasted, thrown back to the void? She had failed the Master.

A tear beading in her eye, she called to him in the Force, begged him for his help. And in the Force, she saw him, she saw his wretched form, his scarred visage, his one golden eye. The eye of a Sith. She saw his hideous smile.

Then she heard him speak, his voice like a rattle of bones.

*Help comes.*

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The shadow swept over the pitiful worms cowering in the hallway, a group of men and women and children. They watched as it approached, their terror-stricken features drained of blood, their lips quivering, their bodies trembling. A young boy whimpered and the shadow smiled. What a pleasant melody this was. The sound of prey. A young girl aimed her blaster in its direction. Such defiance! Yet, the shadow had no interest in such vermin and so it passed them, their existence instantaneously forgotten. It crossed the threshold into a vast courtyard, ripe with death, then stopped over a creature writhing on the durasteel floor. A pathetic display, yet, this girl was different from the others. She shone brightly in the Force, a fount of raw, untamed power begging for the shadow's embrace and yet, she too was without question unworthy of its touch. It could sense her pain, savoured it,

but it could not linger for it had more pressing matters. Matters clad in armor as black as night.

The shadow stepped over debris, a leisurely pace to its step. Arms and hands outstretched at its side, it marched towards these insolent maggots. It felt them in the darkness, sensed their conjoined psyche. One of them saw it approach, and they turned in unison to face. Their blaster rifles followed. With a wave of its long, sharp-nailed fingers and a flick of the mind, the shadow tore durasteel plating from a nearby wall, used it to shield its mortal shell from the volley, then directed it at the enemy, forcing them out of cover. They moved as one, insects skittering over a barricade, firing their pathetic weapons in its direction. This time, the shadow raised both hands and it was as if the room was abruptly deprived of gravity. Everything floated upward, the enemy, their weapons, the hapless girl, the debris, the clutter, the dead. Even the so-called Brotherhood forces hiding on the other side of the courtyard levitated. Confusion spread like wildfire. The shadow cackled. When it clenched its fists, chaos ensued. A voracious, metallic groan filled the air as more metal plates broke away from the walls, the ground and even the ceiling far above. It could feel the ground trembling beneath its feet. Lights shattered, electric wiring was sectioned in a shower of sparks and soon darkness consumed them. It was no hindrance to the shadow for it was one with the darkness. The embodiment of the dark side of the Force. The chamber was suddenly deathly quiet except for its laughter. Lightning flared at its fingertips, then lit up the night, erupting in a torrent of raw energy that lanced through the air at the black-clad soldiers. Like their minds, their shrieks were one as the lightning arced from one soldier to the next. Their agony was exquisite as their very lifeforce burned away. The shadow's harsh, raucous laughter pervaded the entire chamber, echoing through the vast chamber as the lightning sputtered and its victims clattered to the ground.

The darkness returned.

Unsatiated, it sent its mind into the hallway and beyond, but it needed not search long. There were more out there. A lance of crimson plasma shot from its grip as it moved to meet them.

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Officer Byrl lay dead by Kaela's side, his body still smoking from the electric discharge. She sat by his side in the darkness, her head spinning, struggling to piece together what had just happened but coming up short. The security guard had somehow saved her but paid the price with his own life. She shuddered as she recalled the Twi'lek's crazed eyes, his demented chortle. It was the same Twi'lek she had passed by at the start of all this mess—it now seemed like weeks had gone by since then—but he had seemed like an entirely different person as he stood over her. She could still sense his feral hunger upon the Force. Over and over again she replayed in her mind's eye the way he so effortlessly tore the courtyard asunder and dispatched his enemies. She had never witnessed such a display of power before. Before her death, the Palatinaen empress had told her tales about Darth Sidious and his apprentice, Vader, but never in her worst nightmares had Kaela pictured such unbridled chaos. She had heard whispers of the power of Grand Masters, yet, this Twi'lek scholar was not one of them.

Her eyes fell upon the security officer's body in the darkness. Not all of the Twi'lek's victims had been the enemy. She could sense it in the Force. The Brotherhood's forces had also been devastated by the onslaught. How could one of their own do such a thing? How had he mustered so much power?

She needed answers.

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The shadow fell upon the Collective, as its crimson blade made short work of their black purge armor. Their unity, their numbers, their augmented abilities, they were futile before the eclipse and they were forced to fallback before the unrelenting rampage. It swept through the platform at a leisurely pace, its laughter funneling through the hallways after them. Its heightened telekinetic force tore at the structure around it and as the soldiers gained distance, it hurled the debris after them. Its hunger was insatiable, the carnage unstoppable. Twice the enemy had tried to turn the tide. Once with explosives, which it swallowed and spat back at them. Another time, they tried to flank him, three squads coming from three directions. The storm left a carbonized smear of steaming carcasses behind.

When they tried a third time, they were ready. It could sense their sudden confidence, a thought that replicated itself from one mind to the next in an avalanche of data. For all its power, the shadow was not omnipresent nor was it infallible and when they counterattacked, they had a plan.

There was a flash of blinding light and the shadow recoiled with a hiss and when it touched the ray shield, the pain was scorching. It shrieked in anger, stabbed its red lightsaber at the bubble of blazing energy encasing him. It soon understood that its prey had turned the station's defenses against it, but they were fools if they believed they could harness the shadow. It turned its rage outward. Twin streams of lightning burst from its fingers and converged on the ray shield's emitters. The raw discharge overloaded their circuits and the shield burst in a spectacular display of sparks. A torrent of blaster fire burst through the sparks and, for the first time, the shadow was forced to fight defensively, its blood-red blade slashing the air in a figure-eight pattern as it struggled to deflect the overwhelming volley. As one squad's blasters overheated, another stepped into, depriving it of a reprieve. Again and again without relent, they took turns maintaining pressure. It could tell they had been trained to fight force users. The way shot at him from various angles and irregular intervals forced it to rely on its precognitive senses, making it difficult to reflect their fire back at them. It saw more of the enemy in its mind's eye as they flanked him. They came from two directions, spilling into the hallway behind. A first squad dropped to one knee, their carbines already up and firing.

It spun again and again, its blade now a blur. Abruptly, it stopped. And everything else with it. One last bolt exploded against the nearby wall. There was a groan in the Force as the shadow clenched its fists and suddenly dozens of soldiers hung in the air clutching at their throats. A tremor ran through its arms and its teeth rattled as it crushed their throats with the Force. A cacophony of crunching bone through the silence, followed by a clattering of armor as it released its grip on their bodies. The shadow staggered, then sunk to its knees, sucking the air through clenched teeth into its burning lungs. Its hands, the hands of the Twi'lek, Kereban Zolar, trembled on its lap. *Kereban Zolar*. The name sounded foreign yet familiar at once. *Kereban. Zolar*. It had known such a person once. A person that harbored deep fear. Fear of death. Fear of weakness. It had been this person until it



surrendered its free will. Until it became a vessel of the dark side. The shadow roared, its rage absolute as it fought back the stray thoughts.

It felt the lone surviving soldier in the Force a mere nanosecond before searing pain shot through its shoulder. There was a flash of purple and the shadow scampered into the depths of Kereban Zolar's mind.

Kerebran wailed as his consciousness came roaring back to the forefront of his mind. The stench of carbonized skin filled his nostrils overpowering his senses and causing him to retch. The pain in his shoulder was like a white-hot metal rod was branding his skin. He realized that he'd been shot. One his knees, every ounce of his strengths drained from him, he strained to recall how he had gotten there. He remembered taking the artifact from the vault, remembered the way his connection to the Force exploded upon its touch. He remembered the immense pleasure he had felt when... he murdered the Collective's black devils.

Carnage. Death. Pleasure.

Then searing pain.

The soldier!

Kereban turned, falling back on his hands, fully expecting death. He found a young woman standing over the black-clad shooter. A blazing orange line still glowed where her lightsaber had cut through his armor. She stared at him but it was not fear he saw. It was apprehension. She was debating whether he was friend or foe.

"Get up," she said. It took him a moment to realize her lips hadn't moved. *Get up and face me*, her voice demanded, booming in his mind.

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She watched the Twi'lek pull himself up slowly, his movements sluggish and uncoordinated. His plaid face was sunken with deep bags under his tired red eyes. Gone was his manic, wild-eyed gaze. From the way he swayed on his feet, she could tell that he was positively spent. Whatever power had surged through him was now gone and his smoldering shoulder was only part of the price he had had to pay. Her eyes flicked to the small bestial skull on the floor next to him, remembered seeing it hovering by his side when he had passed by her in the

courtyard. She had dismissed it as a figment of her imagination, a result of hitting her head after the thermal detonator blast. She found herself mesmerized by the gruesome artifact and it dawned on her that it was this artifact's immense resonance that she had felt all along, not the Twi'lek's. This then, was the source of his power.

"What is your name?" he asked, his voice a dry croak.

"Kaela Val," she answered flatly. Now was really not the time for introductions.

"My name is Kereban Zolar, scribe of the Shadow Academy and researcher of—" the hint of pride in his shaky voice was short-lived and died abruptly. "It matters not. You saved my life."

"I do not know who or what you are, Kereban Zolar, but right now, there's only one thing that matters. We must survive and for that to happen, we must reach the administrative building. Will you come with me?"

The Twi'lek glowered at his trembling skeletal hands but his eyes soon wandered to the skull at his feet. She did not need to tap into his thoughts to know what he wanted to do.

"There is no need for that, we can still win." he explained as he lowered himself and winced as he reached for the artifact. "I just need to—"

She was quicker than him. She propelled the Force into the skull and yanked it towards her outstretched hand. It spun through the air, a meteor on collision course, but it did not reach its destination. It stopped suddenly, hanging in the air between Kereban and her. Only then did she realize he too was pulling at the artifact.

"I cannot let you," he hissed through pointed teeth.

They were both visibly shaking as they tugged the skull in their respective direction, straining their connection to the Force to its very limit. Kaela feared that they might shatter it.

"I do not wish to use it but I do not trust you with it," she said and that was the truth. He had slaughtered more than the Collective and she didn't want to end up like Byrl. Now more than ever, she wanted to get off this blasted station set a course for Coruscant and go back into hiding. Blast the Collective. Blast the Brotherhood. Blast them all.

“You do not understand,” he tried to explain, every word straining out of his mouth, “The moment you touch it, it is too late.”

“And if I let you take it, I’m as good as dead!”

“I would never hurt you,” he said. “I only want the power to fight the Collective. The *Nesolat Platform* is as good as lost without it!”

“It’s already lost! You made sure of that when you wiped out the Brotherhood forces back in the courtyard! You almost killed *me!*” She realized she was shouting only after the words had left her mouth.

“No. No. That cannot be!”

She saw his hand waver as the realization dawned on him.

*Kill him! He is weak. Take the artifact for your own.* The voice of the Master was like an explosion in her head and she lost her grip on the artifact. She tried to latch onto it again with the Force but she was too late. The skull was firmly in the Twi’lek’s grasp. For a moment, he stared at the ancient relic, but no change overcame him. The skull did not begin to levitate by his side. He did not start leaking lightning. His eyes remained the same tired eyes. And for a split second, he seemed almost disappointed but it was soon replaced by terror. Perhaps he had drained the artifact of its power?

“We must get to the administrative building,” he announced grimly.

“Then let’s go. And you better hope my friends are still alive. Don’t make me regret chasing after you, *Kereban Zolar.*” The way she spat his name, she hoped that he understood the real message. *Do not cross me.*

The heightened fear that emanated from him told her that she was the least of his worries. Did he fear the Collective? Or perhaps retribution for murdering his own people? She could have found out, but something told her she did not want a glimpse inside his mind.

The two stepped over the dead Collective corpses and made their way back to the courtyard through the station’s corridors. Under normal circumstances, Kaela would have required a guide to get around, or at minimum the schematics on a datapad, but now the path was laid out for her. She needed only to follow the carnage. The Twi’lek moved slowly behind her, holding his weight against the durasteel walls, or at least what remained of them, and on more than one occasion, she considered leaving him. The truth is, she did not quite know why she had gone

after him. So he had used his incredible power to slaughter everyone. That did nothing for her. She had abandoned Tahini and their companions and now she feared it had been a foolish, and all too selfish mistake. What if the Collective found them before she returned?

“Blast it all!” she cursed. “Can you pick up the pace?”

He never answered. A bolt of energy grazed his thigh and sent him sprawling down on the floor. Through the Force, she saw the two thermal detonators flying towards them and was able to catch them mid-flight, then redirect them at the enemy. The explosion was enough reprieve for her to reach Kereban, sling one of his arms around her shoulders and help him up. A futile notion. They only made it a dozen or so strides before the black-clad soldiers attacked once more. Her lightsaber spat to life, twin violet blades a whirlwind of deflective energy. There was no telling what drove her forward, but forward she ran, her weapon fanning before her. A missile shrieked past her. When another soldier brought his arm up to fire a second rocket, she caught it leaving the wrist launcher and through the Force brought it crashing downward. A ball of fire swallowed the hallway but more soldiers came rushing through blasters blazing.

Kaela slid onto her knees, arching her back, then kicked at the ground. She barreled through the first line, landed amongst them in a vicious sweep of her violet blade. The plasma bit through the armor and three fell, bisected. Her feet touched the ground only long enough for her to launch again into a sideways flip over the other soldiers. She landed as their helmeted heads clunked against the floor. Their bodies followed soon after. She brought her lower blade backwards through a soldier’s chest but before she could pull her lightsaber free, a fist crunched into her face, sent her face first into the wall. She rolled to her back in time to see a blurry black shape stand over him, blaster pointed at her forehead. There was a flash of red and Kaela braced herself. She’d been shot! No. She was fine. Where was the soldier? She screamed as she was suddenly yanked halfway down the corridor. When the world came to a halt, she found Kereban standing between her and the Collective, his crimson blade burning in his hand.

“Run,” he said.

She wanted to. Run. Get away. Fly back to Coruscant. Forget the Brotherhood. She pushed herself up, got three steps down the corridor when Tahini and their

other companions came rushing in. They fell in besides the Twi'lek, unloading their weapons at the enemy. She sensed the confusion and disbelief that spread through the enemy ranks, the same thought cascading from one to the next. One went down. Then another. A third and a fourth. By the fifth, the confusion was replaced by the same inhumane, analytic focus and they returned fire.

“No!” Kaela shrieked as she dove past her companions, lightsaber spinning. She was too late to save them all. The Rodian lass was the first to go down, then an elderly man. Between them, Kereban and Kaela were able to deflect most of the fire, but they could do no more. Then she sensed them filing down the adjacent corridors. Her eyes met Kereban's. He felt it too. “We are done for.”

“I'm sorry,” he said. The comment confused her, but she saw his lightsaber lower and his opposite end go up. The skull rose from his hand. His eyes went wide, a voracious smile split his lips and his fingers crackled with lightning.

“Kereban, no!” she screamed, reaching out to him. Enemy fire cut through their defense, killing two more of the civilians.

Lightning lanced through the hallway, forcing the Collective soldiers to take cover, but it never reached the Collective soldiers. It died as the skull fell to the floor. The Twi'lek's red eyes rolled upwards, his smile sunk and he crumbled. When the enemy realized what had transpired, they resumed their attack.

Tahini went down.

That's when Kaela lost all focus. Nearby, someone else died. In the Force somewhere at the back of her mind, she could sense the flanking soldiers were almost upon them. All she could think of was the young girl she had failed. *I have failed*, she repeated in her mind.

The Master disagreed. *Take it*, his voice whispered in her mind. *Take the artifact. Save these people. Save yourself. Take it and embrace your full potential.*

He was right.

The master was always right.

*Take it!*

When her hand touched the skull's smooth surface, the world around her ceased to exist and she found herself standing in the void. Her feet were on solid ground, yet all she could see were the stars. That's when she understood that she had been duped. A cruel cackling filled the void, an ancient, primeval laughter that

reverberated across her psyche to her very soul. *A new vessel*, the shadow whispered in her mind. *So powerful for one so young*. Something took shape before her eyes, but it took her a moment to comprehend what it was she was seeing. A shapeless black cloud, nearly invisible against the starry void. It puffed up and took shape. First she saw a silhouette that resembled Kereban, a Twi'lek in sweeping robes, its lekkus draped around its shoulders, but as she watched on, the cloud morphed into something else. Something smaller, feminine. *Her*. And this new shadowy version starred back with a hungry, vicious smirk.

“I will not be so easily controlled,” she told her copy. The words had an echo to them as if a hundred other Kaela’s spoke mere seconds apart. The shadow reached out but Kaela recoiled from its embrace. Her violet lightsaber hissed to life. No. It was suddenly red. “What is this?”

Her shadowy self stepped forward into the crimson blade. It passed through the shadow with inflicting damage. Kaela found that she couldn’t move. She couldn’t speak. The shadow placed its hand upon her brow and smiled.

*You are mine now.*

The void exploded around her. When she came to, she was standing in a bright mist. The silence of the void had given way to a cacophony of sounds. The croaking of some unknown alien critter, the shrill song of a swamp-dwelling bird, the buzz of insects, the hollow whisper of the wind, it hurt her ears. She could see the faint, twisted outline of trees in the fog, and as she took a step back she found her feet slushing through a knee-high bog.

She knew this place. She had been here before. She pushed forward, the sound of stagnant water gurgling around her. She reached a series of ancient, broken steps and climbed them, happy to be freed from that dreadful bog. Up she went along the winding steps that led her through the mist, up along a cliffside. As she gained in altitude, her visibility cleared and she found herself staring over a desolate landscape of jagged rock spires and endless crags. A massive green gas giant filled over three quarters of the sky. As she moved, the sun swept before the great planet in the sky and darkness fell upon the broken. *Oedon*. That was the name of the gas giant. This was the moon *Vanir II*. The home of the Master.

How had she gotten here?

She did not know what guided her step, or how long she walked, but she found herself standing over a massive tree-like structure, with its great limbs rising upward but then falling away into the ground, as if a source of energy more powerful than the sun had drawn them down.

She spotted movement at its foot, someone crawling forward. She broke into a run, skittered down hill towards the creature. A man, or at least, what remained of one. Blood caked the pitiful wretch from head to toe. He pulled his twisted shape forward on one single arm, oblivious to her presence. Only a gruesome mess of bone and skin remained of his other arm. She stepped around him and still he ignored her. She knelt by his side, brushed his matted hair from his features and still he paid her no mind. She pressed her hand under his chin, pulled his face up to reveal a gruesome, disfigured face, the right side a shredded lump of discolored skin, the eye socket empty and drooping. She recognized him.

The Master.

He finally reached the foot of the tree structure and without pause, began digging into the dirt. Over and over again he raked the ground with his one good hand. She saw something white glistening in the dirt. He pulled something free from the ground and cradled it before she could see. He whimpered and shuddered but before long, his cries became vile, raucous laughter.

“Your Master,” Kereban said flatly, his shadowy form now standing by her side. What was he doing here? Did he know the Master too?

When she turned back, the Master was standing before her, a strange skull floating above his shoulder. She had seen this skull before but where?

“Behold the Black Hand. Lord Cyris Oscura,” announced Kereban. The Twi’lek turned to smoke beside her, then the smoke turned to a copy of herself. This new copy giggled as she spoke, “My master. And *yours*.”

When she looked again at the Master, he now looked as he had when she had first met him, a bald, disfigured man with a withered physique, his missing arm replaced by a jagged, skeletal cybernetic limb. The floating skull was gone. His one golden eye, the eye of a Sith, was locked on her. He stroked his thick, greying beard as he spoke, “Your training, your very *life* from the time you were born to this very moment, every hardship you have endured, everything has all led you to *this* moment.”

“This moment?” she asked, incredulous.

He stepped towards her. She fought back the urge to flinch as he clamped his mechanical arm down on her shoulder. Suddenly, she remembered the Collective, she remembered the *Nesolat Platform*.

“I beg you. Use the artifact. Embrace your *full* potential, my young apprentice,” his voice echoed in her mind. His clawed, cybernetic fingers dug into her shoulder. She screamed.

The shadow was standing in the chaos of blaster fire. The wretched worms were dying around it. It saw its previous puppet lying on the floor and could not help but feel satisfaction in this display. Without it, Kereban Zolar was as good as dead. It took a deep breath as the Force flowed through its veins in a way it had not felt since it was awoken by the Master on *Vanir II*. This girl, this unique vessel, had been molded for it. It was a momentous occasion, a victory and deliverance that brought tears to its eyes, but the euphoria would have to be set aside. It was time to put an end to the Collective’s machinations and through the girl’s power, it knew exactly how to achieve its goal.

All it took was a few seconds. The shadow projected its mind into the first Collective soldier it saw. It recalled what the girl had previously witnessed, the labyrinthine neurological link binding these creatures together, the replicating thought process, the information that bounced from one to another almost instantly. A hive mind. When one of these pitiful insects thought of something, they all thought the same. Where the girl had faltered, overwhelmed by this unnatural connection, the shadow dominated. It used its heightened connection to the Force to dismantle their barriers and as it forced its will upon their psyche, the walls of the labyrinth came crumbling down. The hive mind coalesced into a singular path.

They now belonged to the shadow.

“End it,” it crowed as it projected loathing and defeat into the first soldier’s feeble mind and savored its work as the thought rippled outward from one mind to the next like the outer ring of a shockwave blast. A shockwave of hatred. Its cackling filled the halls as their blasters went up and, in a single discharge, they fired onto one another over and over and over again until the very last one fell.



Soon, every hive mind soldier on the station—not just the nearby hallways but the entire platform—lay dead on the durasteel floor.

Its victory was complete, or so it thought.

A flash of red sent the shadow reeling into the eons.

Kaela found herself shrieking as the skull shattered against the floor, some pieces still glowing orange where Kereban's lightsaber had sliced the artifact in half.

"No!" she screamed, throwing herself at the broken relic. She clawed at the pieces, desperate to piece it back together even as the shards sliced into her fingers. "No! No! No! What have you done?"

"You killed them," he whispered, "You killed them all."

"I saved us."

"No. You killed them *all*," Kereban instead and with a sweep of his hand revealed that every single civilian lay dead. "They turned on one another. Like the soldiers. If I had not been unconscious..."

She didn't make a sound. She *couldn't* make a sound. The air was torn from her lungs. She wanted to scream. She wanted to cry. Not a whimper left her lips as she sat there, eyes locked on the middle distance. Kereban knelt by her side, his bony fingers on her shoulders. Like the Master had done. She slapped the Twi'lek's hand away with a hiss and backed away. Kereban looked at her with comprehension in his eyes but she ignored his gaze. All she could think about was the Master. The Black Hand. Cyris Oscura. He had manipulated her. Somehow, the twisted wretch of a man had foreseen that the Collective would attack the *Nesolat Platform*. He had known Kereban Zolar would retrieve the skull. *His* skull. She felt his presence even now, a darkness in the Force.

Then she felt something else. Something nearby. Tahini! She was alive!

She tried to reach for the girl, but her last bit of strength abandoned her and the darkness claimed her.

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Kereban staggered through the *Nesolat's* corridors at a lumbering pace, his legs threatening to give away beneath his weight and that of the dying child slung over

his shoulder. Behind him, he dragged an unconscious Kaela by her collar, making every step forward a laborious ordeal. The destruction wrought throughout the station—much of it his doing—was making it difficult to navigate. The halls had lost their familiarity with their wiry innards showing and he was having trouble telling exactly where he was. Many times, he was forced to backtrack over dead bodies and piles of debris as he came up on a sealed doorway or recognized he was heading in the wrong direction. It all seemed hopeless. They were not going to make it in time.

He gave a start when he came face to face with six soldiers. He never heard them coming. Before he even realized what he was doing, his blade spat to life and bathed the hallway in red. Then he recognized their Mandalorian armor. Bounty hunters and warriors from clan Vizsla, no doubt.

They all froze. Then one of them recognized him.

“You!” barked the foremost Mandalorian.

As they blasters went up, each and everyone of them pointed at his chest, the Twi'lek raised one hand to communicate he meant no harm. Slowly, very slowly, he lowered the child, set her down besides Kaela, their blasters burning holes in his back as he did so. He turned back to them, bringing his second hand up.

“I only wish to get these two to the administration building,” he said softly.

“And I have a mind to end you here and now for what you did.” The soldier's finger twitched on the trigger but he did not shoot. Not yet. “Give me one reason I shouldn't gun you down like the blasted cur you are.”

Kereban was about to repeat his intention when a massive explosion rocked the station and threw everyone flat to the ground. A whole new round of sirens began blaring. He didn't know exactly what happened but it was no stretch of the mind to assume the Collective were none too pleased with Kaela's handiwork. Retribution was coming. Sure enough, there was a second explosion, then a third, making it hard for Kereban and the Mandalorians to get back to their feet, but when they finally made it, all animosity was at least temporarily forgotten. One of the men shouldered past him and threw the child over his armored shoulders. Another did the same with Kaela.

They pushed ahead into the corridor, but their leader—or at least, the one who'd spoken before—stood fast, glaring at Kereban. The Twi'lek could not see

what was going on underneath that T-visor, but he did not need the Force to know the man was deciding his fate. It lasted a moment longer, but a fourth explosion oversold the urgency of the situation. The Mandalorian nodded his helmet in the direction the others had gone, then ran that way at a jog.

There were three more station-shaking detonations before they finally reached the administration build. The doors swept open freely to a chaotic scene of wounded warriors, scholars playing medic and civilians huddling together. The Headmistress, Ciara Tearnan Rothwell Tarentae, stood out from the crowds as she ushered acolytes and barked orders at her subordinates. He had not known that she was present on the station at the time of the attack. When she saw him, she broke from the throngs and beelined for him. Clearly, she was aware of his actions. Kereban was so intent on her sharp, baleful eyes that he never saw the massive fist that crushed his nose, nor did he see the ensuing half-or-so dozen kicks that cracked his ribs. His vision swimming from the blow, he couldn't tell how many were hitting him. Again and again they hit him.

He knew he deserved it.

"That's enough!" Ciara's voice was harsh and commanding. They dispersed without question, but Kereban could hear their muttered disapproval and whispered threats through the ringing in his ears. The Headmistress motioned impatiently. "Rise, scribe."

He did not know if it was pride, fear or something else that drove him to stand back up and face the Headmistress but when he made it to his feet, he could not bring himself to meet her emerald gaze. One of her pointed fingers dug under his chin and guided his head upward, forcing him to. Her usual regal bearings and sharp, graceful features only made the defeat in her eyes all the more striking.

"You did what you had to do, Kereban," her tone was sour, but her words were strangely comforting. "You bought us precious time through your..."

She paused. *Cowardice? Wanton murder? Selfishness?* He could think of a dozen more adjectives and nouns that described what he had done. None of them were good.

"Sacrifice," she finished. The word was spoken sharply. "The clans may not forgive you, but know that I am grateful."

With that, she turned her back to him, her long cloak trailing behind her. He crumbled to his knees and wept as his very last ounce of strength vanished.

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As the administration building detached from the *Nesolat Platform* and undertook its rapid descent towards the surface of Arx, Kaela pressed her forehead against one of the structure's countless bay windows, the coolness of the surface relieving after such a day. Every inch of her body throbbed. Her head felt like a thermal detonator on the brink of detonating. She knew full well that it was her stubbornness and nothing else that was keeping her up. Her father's stubbornness. She could not help but think of him now that everything was quiet. Was this how it had always been for him as a mercenary and bounty hunter? Getting swept into other people's conflicts and trying not to get himself killed? For the first time in a long time, she wished that he was there by her side, his great big hand on her shoulder. She needed his crass wisdom.

*No matter how far you fall, no matter how much you bleed, you just gotta keep going. You stop, you die.* That's what he used to say to her. Say one thing about Bale Andros, say he had a practical sort of brain.

Beyond the window, Brotherhood ships had engaged with the Collective, forming a blockade to keep the enemy from attacking the survivors of the *Nesolat*. The battle was fierce, but Kaela could tell that the tide was turning in their favor, if only long enough for them to make it to Arx. In the background, the station's carcass bulged then came apart in a supernova of dust and debris. A blinding ring of plasma burst from its core, spreading out into the void.

Her mind wandered to that hardy little girl, Tahini. The shot had done some serious damage, but she was getting medical care and if Kaela were a betting sort of gal, she'd put her money on the child. She was a right fighter if she'd ever seen one. Tahini would be fine but she would be alone. Just like her. The sobering thought was enough to bring tears to her eyes. Life was unfair, and it seemed only to get worse in the vicinity of this blasted Dark Brotherhood. Maybe she could take the girl with her when she left for Coruscant. She'd be better off than with these

soulless vornskr. Maybe she could even teach the girl a thing or two, put that blazing spirit to good use. It was a heartwarming notion.

As the *Nesolat's* administration platform entered Arx's atmosphere, she found her thoughts shifting to the skull and the creature that had once housed it. Even now, she could feel its primeval rage, its insatiable hunger as if it were her own. *The shadow*. She shuddered. Kaela unclipped one of her belt pouches and emptied its contents onto her palm. Bone fragments. She squeezed her hand around them. There was no surge of power, no vision, but she could still feel its dark resonance in the Force. She was shocked to realize that she found it comforting and quickly chased the thought from her mind.

Kereban appeared by her side and the two exchanged a long, meaningful look. His eyes were red from crying, but there was a determination in them that bolstered her spirits. He gave her a stiff, approving nod, then looked out at Arx's rising landscape. This ordeal had forged an unlikely bond between them. She owed her life to this strange Twi'lek. Whatever happened next, they were in it together. Her mind returned to Tahini, but she knew that taking her under her wing was impossible. Not now, maybe not ever.

Her path was now laid bare before her feet.

*I know you are watching*, she thought.

The Black Hand's laughter echoed in her mind.

