

The Mind of the Enemy

Lucine Vasano studied the pile of scrolls and relics in the center of the storeroom and nodded in satisfaction. All of the objects were small enough to be carried easily, and many of them exuded a strong connection to the Force. There was little doubt that the new Headmistress, Ciara Tearnan Rothwell Tarentae would be pleased to have the items rescued before the Collective could destroy them.

“These will do nicely,” she said to the tall Human that stood next to her. Sergeant Clive Thor was tall, broad and muscular, more like a brick wall than a man. “Be a dear and order the rest of the men to start loading them up, won’t you? I am going to see if there is anything else I can find.”

Thor grimaced as he stared at the sizeable pile of priceless artifacts. “Out of curiosity, ma’am. What good will any of this stuff do against those Collective jerks?”

Lucine was already starting to walk away, her eyes drawn to a rather enticing holocron on a shelf a few feet away. She picked it up to study it more closely as she replied, “It is hard to say, darling. But many of those items appeared on a list the new Headmistress made, of items she specifically wanted to be recovered. I believe it is in our best interest to try to make friends within the Dark Council. Would you not agree?”

“I guess,” Thor replied doubtfully as he gestured for the other soldiers to start gathering up the materials. He picked up a scroll and stared at it doubtfully, before shoving it into his pack.

“I am so thrilled that you agree with me,” Lucine purred. “Now, I am going to see if there is anything else of interest within the stacks. I want you and the rest of the men to be ready in five minutes. We do not want to dally here much longer.”

She did not bother to wait for a reply. Instead, she turned and strode in between two tall shelves, laden with crates, boxes and scrolls. Storeroom 3a was a massive, climate-controlled room filled with carefully labeled shelves that contained a wide variety of literature and artifacts. It was a staging area, where items intended for the Shadow Academy were scrutinized and cataloged before being brought to the Academy itself.

Lucine wished she had more time to linger. She could sense the power that rested within many of the items on the shelves and would have liked nothing better than to examine each artifact in turn. But time was not on their side. The Collective forces were rapidly overrunning the Nesolat platform, killing every member of the Brotherhood that they encountered. The Administration platform would be detaching to descend to Arx soon. As it was, the only reason it had remained this line was to allow as many survivors and research materials to be rescued as possible.

The redhead was standing on her tip-toes to retrieve a strange, faintly-glowing glass sphere when she heard a faint scuffle of shoes from an intersection to her right. She turned to see a tall, impeccably-dressed Chiss round the corner, with a reproachful look upon his angular face. She sighed and picked up the sphere. "Ah, Tabriss. Judging by your scowl, I suspect that you are going to tell me again that I am behaving foolishly."

"Forgive me my lady, but it bears repeating since it appears that you did not hear me the first time," Tabriss replied stiffly. "Have you forgotten that you are a Consul? It is no longer necessary for you to act as a mere delivery girl. Not when you have an army at your disposal to do your bidding."

"Some things require a more personal touch," Lucine replied as she retrieved a few interesting-looking scrolls from a nearby shelf. "What if Sergeant Thor and his men forgot to retrieve some priceless holocron? Why, I would not be able to live with myself."

"Which would be a nonissue if we are captured by the Collective," Tabriss said flatly. "My lady, I fear that your overconfidence will be your downfall."

"Well, we shall simply have to make sure that does not happen," Lucine said sweetly. As if to punctuate her words, a shout could be heard coming from the direction of the Sergeant and his men, followed by blaster fire.

"That would be a marvelous idea," Tabriss dropped his voice to a sarcastic whisper as he crouched down. He turned in the direction of the disturbance, drawing a matched set of slug-throwers from his perfectly tailored coat.

Lucine sighed inwardly as she unclipped her lightsaber from her belt. "Not another word, darling. You go that way. Let us see if we can rescue Thor and his men before too many artifacts are destroyed in the crossfire."

Tabriss smirked and disappeared down one aisle, leaving the Sith alone. She turned and darted up another aisle, making her way slowly toward the sound of battle. From her vantage point, she could see Thor and a few of the other men, crouched into cover as they exchanged blaster fire with unseen assailants.

The Sith closed her eyes and stretched her senses in the direction that the soldiers were firing. Amid the chaotic energies, she could sense a small group of sentient beings crouched behind cover near the door. None of them appeared to have any connection to the Force, and the fact that they were firing upon her men made it clear who they were.

Abruptly, the firing stopped, leaving only a sudden silence interspersed with the groans of those who had been wounded in the sudden onslaught. Keeping low, Lucine leaned out from behind her cover to see a group of four pale humanoids spreading out from the doorway. Each was

pale and stocky, with faces that were identical to one another. Their steps were well-coordinated as if they were they were moving as one unit, rather than a group of four.

As she watched, they spread out from the doorway. While two of them kept their weapons raised in a ready position, the other two aimed at the three soldiers that lay wounded on the ground. They unceremoniously began to fire, sending bolts searing into the helpless men in a coup de grace.

Apparently, it was too much for Sergeant Thor. A few rows away, Lucine heard his anguished voice as he shouted the order to fire at will. The air was immediately filled with blood-red blaster bolts and the smell of ozone as the firefight resumed.

The Sith narrowed her eyes at the callous display she had just witnessed. Clearly, these pale Collective soldiers were skilled in the art of cold-blooded murder. Why not make use of that? She drew upon the Force and focused upon the mind of the marine nearest to her.

She had recently discovered a new technique that allowed her to infiltrate the mind of a victim and dominate it, allowing her to use them like a puppet. And now, she finally had the opportunity to test it in the field. She closed her eyes as she extended her will toward the pale soldier, sensing his thoughts as tendrils of dark energy infiltrated his mind.

Her immediate first impression was that there was something *wrong* with his mind. There was no personality, no sense of self or purpose. It was as if the man had no personality at all. There were no feelings, no passions, no hopes or dreams. It was if he was simply a puppet or a doll that moved at the behest of a greater consciousness.

Lucine frowned in confusion at what she found. Something was not right. She pushed deeper as she searched for something that she could use to directly control him. Buried deep within his mind was a fragmented series of memories. Terror, loneliness and loss brought about by Force-users. A sense of purpose, a driving need to rid the galaxy of a threat. A sterile, brightly-lit laboratory, staffed with cybernetically-augmented medics. Scalpels. Needles. Endless treatments. Pain. But always, the certainty of purpose remained. All other memories, all other emotions were gradually stripped away, until only that certainty remained.

She grit her teeth as she was accosted by the obscene memories and pushed, determined to gain control of the man. She delved deeper and deeper still. Her breath caught in her throat as she finally reached what should have been his subconscious, that dark space within a person's brain, where she could seize a foothold and gain control of the marine's body. But instead of finding the dark space of his mind, she found something *more*.

It was a strange, artificial intelligence that connected the marine's mind with the others. Alien and overpowering, dominated by logic and a series of simple, overriding directives: to obey, and to destroy the Brotherhood.

Lucine's eyes widened as she recoiled from the alien intelligence, giving a cry of terror as she tore the dark tendrils from the marine's mind. But it was too late. The Intelligence had discovered her, and as one, the four marines turned toward her location, their weapons raised.

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Tabriss cursed inwardly as he heard the Shadow Lady's shriek, and saw the pale marines turn toward the source of the cry. He took off in a run toward the quartet of Collective marines, firing wildly with his slugthrowers. The plasma-encased projectiles tore through the pale flesh of the one nearest to the Shadow Lady, tearing checks of pale flesh from the marine's leg, back and shoulder. Finally, a slug tore through the back of the creature's neck and it collapsed to the ground. It did not scream as it fell, it simply crumpled lifelessly to the ground before being consumed in a conflagration of orange fire.

But it took too long, and far too many bullets. The remaining three marines ignored him as they moved as one, raising their weapons in Lucine's direction and opening fire. The bolts tore through the shelves, causing their contents to go flying in a rain of fiery debris.

It looked hopeless. There was no doubt that the lady was dead, brought down by the barrage of energy bolts. But Tabriss would not be deterred. He snatched a cylindrical object from his belt and lobbed it toward the three pale marines. The fragmentation grenade spun, end over end, before clattering between the three creatures. The resulting explosion knocked the marines from their feet and sent razor-sharp shards of metal tearing through them. Moments later, their bodies detonated as well, causing the deck to rumble as the fire consumed their bodies.

Tabriss paid them no heed. He ran past the burning remains of the marines to the shattered remnants of the shelves where Lucine had hidden. He tore through the shattered remnants of the artifacts, heedless of the broken glass and burning paper.

He finally found her huddled beneath a pile of debris. She was curled into a fetal position, her arms shielding her head. Parts of her armor were torn and singed, and he could see where blaster bolts had torn through her leg and shoulder.

"My lady," Tabriss said hesitantly as he reached down to check to see if she was still alive. But before he could touch her, she gave a quiet wiper and a shudder tore through her body. She took her hands from her face, and he could see that her face was pale and her eyes were wide with terror.

"I... they... I saw..." Lucine muttered in a tremulous voice. She shuddered again as the memory of what she saw in the marine's mind returned, unbidden.

Tabriss studied her for a long moment, as he pushed his own fear and anger aside. He was a butler first and foremost, which meant seeing to his lady's health and reputation was his top priority. He lashed out with his hand, slapping Lucine sternly on the cheek.

The redhead gasped out loud as the sudden pain brought her back to her senses. She stared at the Chiss in shock.

"My lady, I suggest you get yourself together! We must return to the Administration platform quickly," Tabriss said sharply. "It would not do for the others to see you in such a state."

Slowly, Lucine raised her hand to touch her cheek where Tabriss had struck her. With the pain brought clarity. She took a deep breath, forcing herself to push through the terror, to force it away. "You... you are right, darling," she said as she pulled herself into a sitting position. She took a few deep breaths, trying to regain control.

With Tabriss's help, she got slowly to her feet. Her injuries made every movement an agony. But she focused on the pain and used it to overcome the icy fear that threatened to overwhelm her at the charred sight of the remains of the four marines. Later, there would be time to consider what she had seen and to work through it.

"Oh, and I look forward to resuming our conversation about your overall confidence level and choice in tactics," Tabriss said as they made their way slowly out of the storeroom.

Lucine stifled a grimace. The last thing she needed was to hear Tabriss tell her 'I told you so'. Really, the man was insufferable when he was right. "Duly noted," she snapped. "For now, let us just go. I do not want to run into any more of those marines."