

STAR THE PATH TO TOMORROW WARS

By Jack Freeman

(Bale Andros - 826)

“Target inbound,” Zehsaa Hysh’s voice crackled over the comm.

“Copy that, *Trueshot*, wait for us to engage, then let loose,” responded Bale Andros as he pressed his back to the nearest wall. “You be careful out there.”

He peered around the wall into the deserted streets of Eos City. His eyes followed the road to the overpass ahead then climbed to the black plumes of smoke slithering above the cityscape. *What a mess*, he thought. The Collective had taken them by surprise, and Bale reckoned the Brotherhood had been ill-prepared for a ground assault. Their arrogance knew no bounds, and now, as it was always the case when leaders thought themselves invincible, it was the little people that paid the price. He pulled back into cover then took a deep breath as he double-checked his gear and readied his good old DLT-19 heavy blaster. Beside him, the rest of his team were completing their own pre-fight rituals. He signaled to the massive Twi’lek shock trooper crouching in the shadows of an alleyway across the street, who answered with a nod of his massive white dome. Bale puffed out his cheeks. It always irritated him how *pfassking* calm Zentru’la appeared before a battle. Meanwhile, here he was, right and ready to soil his breaches.

The silence in the streets persisted a while longer, punctured only by the sound of distant thunder like the footsteps of a rampaging giant: the sound of detonations. Then the rumble of advancing boots came from down the street. It was at that ill-advised moment that a group of civilians spilled out of a nearby building, scrambling with luggage and kids in tow, their voices wrought with panic.

“Boss?” asked one of the nearby troopers, but Bale was already motioning at the misguided fools, trying to get their attention. One of the civilians, a scrawny Bothan, saw Bale, but the terror in his eyes was telling. Despite his best efforts, the foolish creature ignored Bale and hurried his group away down the overpass and straight towards the invaders.

“*Shiess!*” Bale hissed.

“Let them go. Mission first,” Zentru’la said through the comms. Bale glared at him from across the way. It didn’t surprise him. The brick-chinned Twi’lek was a soldier first and always.

“There are kids in there,” Bale found himself responding. *This* surprised him. He knew Zentru’la was right, but he’d done a whole lot he wasn’t proud of in his lifetime. He wasn’t looking to add abandoned children to that list.

The civilians were halfway across the overpass when the Collective opened fire. The Bothan was the first to be cut down, then his nearest companions. Chaos erupted over the bridge as civilians made a desperate break for their lives, but there was no cover to be found. Bale didn’t realize that he had been running until

he threw his arms around the nearest kids and hauled them off their feet. Zentru'la's voice was booming through the comms but Bale was running on instincts at this point. All he heard was noise. He ran through the chaos as his team burst out of cover into the streets, guns blazing, trying to buy him some time. Zentru'la's massive white frame came into view, his grenade launcher belching fire on the enemy. Zehsaa rained hell from her perch. Battle Team Tavros gave it their all to keep their reckless leader alive.

No dice.

Before he could fully grasp the implications of his actions, a painful jolt to the shoulder sent Bale lurching forward. He yowled when a second blaster bolt hit him square in the lower back, shattering the protective plates. The impact threw him completely off balance. He never let go of the kids. He *wouldn't* let go of the kids, not even when a thermal detonator blasted him clear from the overpass. His head hit something and he blacked out long before he hit the ground below.

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"*He's alive?*" Kaela Val gasped, her voice equal parts shock and disbelief, "What are you talking about, Idris?"

Her childhood friend sat beside her, his blood-red Mandalorian helmet pressed between one hand and his lap. There was little of his usual swagger and none of that infallible charm that normally radiated from his every pore. He did try to keep up the appearances but she knew him well enough to call his fake smiles even after all these years apart. It didn't matter to her who he was now, be it the Voice of the Brotherhood or some two-bit merc, he was the same boy she'd known in her youth. It did make one difference: the procession of aides and royal guards now spread out around the room watching them.

"He's alive." He flashed a sly smile, this one genuine before he continued, "Hardy *sleemo*, your old man. Assassins, acid pits, bombs. Cost him a leg, but he came out on top somehow no matter what Elinicia Rei threw at him. Ironic, really. She's the one who bit the dirt in the end. "

Kaela sank back against the bench and puffed out her cheeks. She sat there for a moment, stunned, winded even, like she'd been kicked in the stomach. Two whole years. That's how long it had been since she last spoke to her father and all this time she had thought him dead, killed in some filth-ridden hole in the back end of the galaxy doing Elinicia Rei's dirty business. And as if that wasn't enough, it

turned out that it was the dead empress, her former master, who had orchestrated his murder? It was almost too much.

“Where is he?” was all she could think to ask.

“Latest information puts him here on Arx. More specifically, in Eos City. Clan Taldryan dispatched his team to defend the city against the Collective,” he revealed as he ran a hand through his hair. He paused for a moment, his brow furrowed as he seemed momentarily lost in thought. Finally, he turned to her, his dark brown eyes locked on hers. “Kaela, I need you to know something.”

She stared at him blankly for a moment before whispering, “What?”

“He wanted you to know. He wanted to reach out. He even tracked you down on Coruscant but, well, he was afraid.”

“Afraid?” she blurted out, incredulous. Her father was many things, but she’d never known him to be *afraid*. He was the kind of man who jumped head first, blast the consequences. She’d seen him stare down a pack of rabid gundarks on the planet Vanqor and live to tell the tale.

“He was hiding on Chyron, going by Cullen Berran. He worried that by revealing that he was alive, he would only draw you into his mess.” Idris chuckled and shot her one of those boyish winks she remembered well, “He had the right of it if you ask me. I wouldn’t put it past you to take on the whole of Scholae Palatinae by your lonesome.”

The humor was lost on her as her mind did somersaults trying to process all this information. Her father was alive. He was here, on Arx. He was *alive!* She was up on her feet as she repeated it in her mind. *Alive!* She took Idris’ hand. “You have to help me find him!”

The Idris she knew would have thrown his helmet over his head and jumped to action without a second thought. Instead, he sat there with a sour look on his face like he’d sucked on some overripe jogan fruit. *Of course*, she thought. He was the Voice of the Brotherhood now. Through the Force, she could sense the conflict in him. He wanted to help, that old spark was still there, but none of that mattered in the end. The Voice didn’t go running around war-torn battlefields trying to reunite fathers and daughters. He squeezed her hand, then let go. He stayed silent for a moment longer, then let out a long-drawn sigh before motioning for one of his aides to approach. A regally-dressed lad obeyed immediately.

“Have a shuttle prepped. See that she is escorted to Eos City. Protect her with your life,” he commanded. The lad bowed but Idris had already turned his attention back to Kaela. “I can get you as far as the city. Then you’re on your own.”

His tone was harder than she expected. He was angry. Angry with himself, angry with the Brotherhood, angry with her for asking of him what she should have known he couldn't give. She knew how much she and her father meant to him and she had put him in a position where he would feel like he was abandoning them. She hoped that the kiss she pressed to his cheek—like the ones she used to give him when they were young—would be a balm for his wounded heart. Then she turned and walked away, following the Voice's assistant.

"Be safe, Kaela Val," Idris called after her. "And may the Force be with you."

* * *

Drip. Drip. Drip. At first, there was only a sound, a soft tapping outside the bounds of his consciousness. Then there was pain, a dull kind like the one he used to feel in the morning after a bout in the arena. He'd experienced worse, but then it grew into a stabbing kind of pain. The sound of his moans echoed from afar as if they were somebody else's. Finally, it was fire, whole and righteous. He woke up screaming, startling the two children nearby and causing them to scamper away like womp rats. He pushed himself up and immediately regretted doing so as searing pain shot through his lower back. He fell back with a pitiful wail. This time he stayed down, sucking in ragged breaths through his clenched teeth as the sky spun around and around above him. This is when he grew aware of the wet warmth streaming down his face, dripping onto the concrete floor. His brow was busted above the left eye.

He moved his fingers, then his feet. The cybernetic limb that replaced his right leg made a pathetic whirr and Bale knew right away that there was something wrong with it. He tried to sit back up again, slowly this time, but the pain was biting. One of the children, a blue-skinned Twi'lek, appeared by his side and with his help, the Zabrak rolled onto his side. He whimpered again as he reached around his back and pressed his trembling hand where the bolt had hit him. The shot had punctured and burned through the armor plating, fusing metal and skin. He kicked and thrashed about when his fingers grazed carbonized flesh. The boy calmly motioned for Bale to wait then tried to unclasp his armor, but his little hands were too weak. The second child, a Mirialan girl, approached, watching her friend struggle with the armor. Her eyes lit up when she spotted the vibrodagger strapped to Bale's breastplate. She pointed and the Twi'lek obliged. The knife made short work of the straps and it wasn't long before Bale was freed from his metal husk. They helped him roll onto his stomach, then peeled the molten plate

from around the wound. It felt as if they were flaying the skin from his bones. The Twi'lek hissed.

"What?" Bale growled.

"Looks bad, mister," he responded.

"Very, very bad," the Mirialan added.

Bale smirked through the agony. He was about to tell them he'd had worse when an explosion sent debris and stone raining from above. Bale grew acutely aware of the sound of raging battle coming from atop the looming overpass and what had seemed like a faint memory all came rushing back to him. He didn't know if it was the sudden jolt of adrenaline or the sheer direness of their situation that carried him up but Bale shot to his feet, hissing through his teeth as molten lava ran down his spine and the weight of the world seemed to press down on his ribcage, making it hard to breathe.

"Unbelievable!" the Twi'lek squealed as he staggered back, shocked by the Zabrak's momentary vigor. "Are you ok, mister?"

"We need to get out of here," said Bale, ignoring the kid's question. Battle Team Tavros was never meant to end the war at the overpass. They were there to delay the Collective, no more, no less, and they would pull out sooner or later. When they did, the enemy would have the run of the place. He reckoned he'd been enough of a pain in their *collective* backside to guarantee they would come looking if only to make sure the mighty Bale Andros was dead.

He took a step forward and nearly fell as his cybernetic leg's hydraulics engaged and disengaged abruptly causing the device to wobble beneath his weight. Again it whirred and buzzed. He realized the device was bent out of shape slightly, clearly having struck something during his fall, which he now realized he was lucky to have survived. He looked up again at the six stories of winding bridges and whistled. *Lucky* didn't begin to describe it. In fact, he didn't understand how he was alive though it sure explained why he felt he'd been flattened like a Kowokian monkey-lizard rolled over by a sleeping Hutt. As if to drive the point home, his ribs screamed as he sucked air into his lungs.

He tried another step and again the mechanical limb wobbled, but stabilized itself as he put more weight on it. A few more attempts and he settled into an awkward limp that shot fire up his back with every step. He could fix this but it would have to wait. The din of battle above was reminder enough that they had to get going. He retrieved his rifle from where it had fallen then shot one last look back at his armor. Some of his gear could still prove useful. He knelt by it and retrieved the utility belt, which he fastened around his waist. He unclipped the

explosives from the bandolier. There was a laser trip mine which he slipped into one of the empty pouches on his jumpsuit. The thermal detonator and the thermal imploder he clipped directly onto the belt. Then with the use of his vibrodagger, he pried the right bracer off, slipped it onto his wrist, and after flexing his hand a couple times, he adjusted the bindings. *Good enough.* The MM9 rocket launcher mounted on it was well worth his time. One of the kids held his helmet up for him. It had a massive dent above the visor.

“Leave it,” he said with a dismissive wave of his hand, another motion he regretted when another shockwave shot through his back. The kid dropped the helmet with a hollow *thunk*. Bale reminded himself that this was no time for sentimentality but he couldn’t help but feel a tinge of regret when he turned his gaze away. Then the pain came roaring back with a vengeance and his Clone Wars era armor was forgotten. He shouldered his rifle and led the kids into the shadows of the overpass. “Let’s go.”

They moved at a lumbering pace through the city’s narrow, winding alleys, the whirring of Bale’s mechanical limb a constant companion. Several times, he had to catch himself on a wall as the shoddy limb threatened to give away beneath his weight. He was sweating something fierce too, causing his wounds to flare up. He set his gun down against the wall and stopped long enough to strip his jumpsuit down to his waist. The white tank top underneath was soaked through and stained with blood, but at least the breeze against his skin was cool and refreshing. The kids watched and followed him without question as he led them from one alley to the next amidst the chaos of war. They were a tough pair. He could tell they had some smarts about them, what with their alert gaze and the way they listened to and carried out his instructions. They moved without a word until he felt compelled to speak.

“What are your names?” Seemed like a good place to begin.

The Twi’lek kid beamed up at him, an odd sight considering their situation. He answered with tough-guy gusto only a prepubescent child could muster, “I’m Juko. She’s Saryssa. I call her Ryssa. What’s your name, mister?”

“Bale.”

“Bale,” squeaked the girl, Ryssa, sounding out the word. Then she blushed as she said, “Thank you for saving us, mister Bale!”

He frowned at her words. They couldn’t see his face from behind him, which was just as well. He wasn’t so sure he’d saved them. Delayed the inevitable, more like. Sure, he’d broken their fall and saved them from the Collective’s blasters, but they weren’t safe. Not yet. From the way things were going, maybe not ever. He

asked them other questions as they walked. Where were they from? Who were their parents? How long they'd been on Arx. He figured it would keep their minds from this precarious sitch they found themselves in, and if he were being completely honest, so long as he was talking he wasn't thinking about his own pain. It turned out they were both orphans. The Bothan back on the bridge had been their caretaker. *Mighty fine job he did.* The thought dripped with sarcasm but he wasn't about to tell the kids that. They had enough to worry about as it was.

An hour later, they came out in the lower district of Eos City. The stench immediately hit them like a hammer across the face. Ryssa and Juko both threw their hands over their noses while Bale tried to play the stoic guardian, keeping his hands squarely on his blaster and acting like nothing was wrong. It didn't do much to stave off the stench and soon his eyes were watering something fierce. Grinding his teeth was all he could do to stop himself from retching. The lower city's decrepitude was apparent in every aspect. The architecture matched that of the rest of the city but stood unfinished, already sinking into disrepair. Open-sky sewer canals lined the filth and debris ridden streets, emanating the vicious, sulfuric stench now assaulting their nostrils. Everything was the clear product of the cost-cutting and elitism only a career politician could muster. You had to be hard down on your luck to end up in a place like this.

"Someone's coming," said the Mirialan girl.

Bale looked around. There were still some helpless souls wandering the streets, oblivious to the Collective war machine going around, killing indiscriminately, but none of these poor saps paid them any mind. Ryssa was staring daggers down the alley behind them.

"Huh, I don't see anything," said Juko.

Bale scrutinized every nook and cranny, every shadow. There was nothing. But the more they waited, the more aggravated the girl grew until she was visibly shaking. Then she was backing away, her green skin going pale.

Bale knelt beside her, placed a hand on her shoulder and motioned to Juko. He said, "You take Ryssa and find a place to hide. Don't talk to anyone. Don't make a blasted sound, you hear? You find yourself a hole and you *hide*. No brave stuff ok, kid? You stay put and old Bale will come find you."

The boy nodded and took the girl's hand. They made it not ten steps before the sound of clattering of boots rose from inside the alley. Bale didn't need to look over his shoulder to know they'd been found.

"Run!" he hissed.

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Frenzy had gripped the streets of Eos City. Everywhere, Collective and Brotherhood forces clashed, leaving rubble in their wake and civilians scrambling for their lives. Streaks of blaster fire lit the skyline. Explosions punctuated the chaos. Countless starships tried to escape the city but few made it to the stratosphere. Most were shot down, their burning wreckage raining down like meteors. From aboard her shuttle, Kaela Val couldn't count the plumes of black smoke rising above the buildings.

"Fly low," ordered the Voice's assistant whose name Kaela never got.

The pilot did as asked, taking the ship on a quick descent until it flew between the taller structures. With some luck they would avoid detection long enough to reach Battle Team Tavros' last known location.

"How far are we?" Kaela asked as she turned away from the window.

"Only a few more clicks," the man answered.

Kaela sat back, her mind reeling a mile a minute as she thought of what she'd say when she found her father. The truth was she didn't know how to feel. On the one hand, she was elated to know that he was alive as if a part of herself had been reborn. On the other, she was furious with him. Furious that he had abandoned her, furious that he hid like a coward. After all they had been through, the countless years flying from one end of the galaxy to the other, her mother's death, their troubles in Scholae Palatinae, the psychological gauntlet Elinicia Rei had put them through. After all that, he had disappeared, left her to her own device, thinking he was dead. That part of her wanted to kick him in the *choobies* when she did find him.

There was a flash of red off the starboard side, then another just ahead off the bow. The pilot banked the ship hard to avoid the enemy artillery, throwing everyone around inside the craft.

"Pull up!" squealed the assistant, but the pilot did the opposite, diving closer to the rooftops as more shots sizzled past them.

"Missile inbound," announced the co-pilot.

"Pull up!" repeated the assistant. He was red in the face, spittle flying as he screamed. They ignored him.

Kaela pushed her face against the window trying to spot the missile against the backdrop of war. It took a moment but she finally spotted it. She closed her eyes, pictured it then projected her mind through the Force. The missile drew dangerously close but a swipe of her hand diverted its flight into a nearby tower.

She turned to the assistant and said, “We need to land, now!”

“It’s too hot!” shouted the pilot. “We have to turn back!”

“I need to get down there,” she argued.

“Then you better *doshin’* jump, lady!” the co-pilot snapped at her.

The assistant, for his part, was pale and looked like he was about to hurl. He’d be of no help even if he got the pilots to listen to him. When the pilot started bringing the ship around, she knew she had to make a choice.

“Take me down there!” she insisted, giving them one last chance.

“Not a blasted chance!” was the answer.

So be it.

She reached out with the Force. She could sense their fear as she infiltrated their minds, felt it as if it were her own, but this was her opening, the window through which she could weave her web. With their concentration already subverted by their survival instincts, it took little effort to ensnare them. Soon, they were hers.

“Take me down there,” she repeated but this time it was a command.

They snapped to action at her command without a word. No arguments. No dissension. The ship began its descent, the two pilots handling the craft with an expert touch despite the artillery shots battering the air around them. The assistant, having regained his composure, rose from his seat and joined the pilots. As they neared their destination he pointed over their shoulders towards a winding, multi-tiered overpass.

“There,” said the assistant.

Scores of black-clad soldiers were swarming over the bridge trading shots with unseen defenders. The encroaching shuttle didn’t go unnoticed and as they drew closer, part of the Collective forces diverted their fire towards them, adding onto the artillery. Again and again blaster bolts pelted the hull and alarms went off in response. The shrill sound did nothing to distract the pilots. When they did show signs of wavering, Kaela pressed them on in the Force, her mind exerting her dominion over their free will. She was so concentrated on controlling them, and they on piloting, that none of them saw the anti-air missile that tore through the shuttle’s stern. Kaela would have been sucked out if not for her quick reflexes. She clamped her hands down on the handrail as the assistant went hurtling past her out the hole. She tried to snare him with the Force but her hand slipped. He disappeared.

The shuttle spun out of control, the cityscape a streaking blur around them. The ground came up so fast there was nothing to be done. Kaela took one breath,

then released her grip. She slid down the durasteel floor and just before falling out, kicked the floor hard. She shot out of the shuttle like a cannonball, spinning through the air until her feet found leverage. The Force coursed through her veins, fueling her, amplifying her reflexes, guiding her every motion. She bounced off one rooftop, slid down another, pushed her feet and barreled through the air, her momentum carrying her across the Eos skyline. Her hands gripped a cable, she spun around it, then launched into a somersault that finally landed her unscathed atop a low building, right next to the sharpshooter Zehsaa Hysh.

“Hi,” she said with a huge grin on her face even as her old friend panicked and trained her gun on her. She threw her hands up in mock defense. Their attention was momentarily diverted when the shuttle crashed down on the bridge and turned into a giant ball of fire that swallowed countless Collective soldiers. Tavros forces spilled from the adjacent buildings

“Kaela?” the Togruta squealed when she turned back to Kaela and recognized her. “What? Who? When?”

It was a reasonable response considering they hadn’t seen each other since Kaela had fled Palatinaen space and disappeared in the Coruscant Underworld. And now she had literally fallen out of the sky on top of her. For her part, Kaela was only partly surprised to find the Togruta here. Zehsaa and Kaela’s father had long had this *will they won't they* thing going, so it stood to reason she’d followed him to Chyron or wherever. What really got her mynocks in a twist was that Zehsaa was yet another person who could have reached out and instead chose to leave her in the dark concerning her father’s fate.

“Where is *he*?” she said with more snap than she meant. The question caused Zehsaa to flinch. She knew who she meant alright. “Zehsaa, I know he’s alive. Don’t you dare lie to me.”

“I... I wouldn’t,” Zehsaa said. There was something in her eyes. It wasn’t fear. Worry? “He fell.”

“He fell? What do you mean he fell?” Kaela didn’t realize she had grabbed Zehsaa by the collar. She only half-realized she was shaking her, “Answer me!”

“There was an explosion. He went over the bridge,” the Togruta explained, pointing down at the overpass. There were hundreds of scorch marks covering the structure by now. “Some of the Collective rappelled down after him.”

Kaela was already climbing over the edge and down the wall. She heard Zehsaa call after her but she didn’t listen. What if she was too late? What if she had come all this way for nothing? What if after all this, her father truly was dead?

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The DLT-19 heavy blaster rifle spat fire down the alleyway, mowing down the first Collective soldiers to come into view and forcing their comrades into cover. The black-armored Hive Mind marines were terrifying enemies under normal circumstances, but no amount of Technocratic wizardry could save them from a good old-fashioned bottleneck. Bale pressed his advantage, unleashing the full power of his modified rifle. It bucked in his hands, spitting crimson bolts at a rate where it nearly looked like one continuous stream of plasma. It made short work of their Purge armor. They tried to return fire but the moment they popped out of cover, the Zabrak redirected the flow. Blaster fire rained sparks from the walls and spewed fire until it partly obscured his vision.

The enemy caught on faster than he would have liked and stayed in cover, waiting for a window of opportunity. In the distance, he saw black shapes like stalking predators disappear down an intersection between the buildings. *Of course*, he thought. It made sense that they would try to flank him. He just wished it would have taken them longer to come up with a counter-attack.

The moment his rifle wheezed and overheated, they burst out of cover, blasters hot. Bale brought his right arm up and let the MM9 wrist rocket loose. The diminutive missile shrieked down the corridor past a first and second soldier before catching the third square in the chest. The blast leveled the frontmost soldiers to their stomachs while their companion disappeared in a booming fireball. The Zabrak unholstered his heavy blaster pistol and ended the two downed soldiers with ruthless precision.

Then it all went sideways spectacularly fast.

A blaster bolt screamed through the darkness and the smoke and grazed Bale's stomach. It may not have been a direct hit but it scorched skin and tore a blood-curdling howl from his lips as he dropped the DLT-19 rifle. His mechanical leg slipped from underneath him as he jerked away. He fell to his one good knee. He brought his pistol to a bear and fired blindly down the alleyway. Then he caught a black shape from the corner of his eye. *Yep, flanked*. He threw himself at his assailant without thinking. It was a miracle the blaster bolts missed him as he charged low, his shoulder a sledgehammer into the soldier's gut. They went down together, Bale on top. The Zabrak brought one massive fist down on the helmet, once, twice, a third time and there was a resounding crack. His hand shot to a nearby rock but before he could swing it down on the shattered helmet, two more soldiers burst out into the streets and rushed him. Likely fearing that they could hit

their downed comrade, they attacked at close range and Bale found himself dodging punches and kicks. They were faster than he was. Ten seconds. That's how long it took for them to overwhelm him. A right hook to the temple stunned him, a boot to the mechanical limb sent him back to his knees. He caught the oncoming kick with both hands and wrenched a second soldier to his back. The third delivered a brain-tossing cross to his face. The first soldier, the one Bale had tackled to the ground, had recovered and though his movements were sluggish, the Zabrak never saw him as he pulled a vibrodagger from his boot and plunged it into his back.

"*Pfassk*," Bale roared, drawing out the word into two syllables. Driven by sheer survival instincts and an overdose of adrenaline, he kicked to his feet as one of his attackers reared on him, caught the oncoming punch, and spun the attacker into his stabby friend. Then he brought his boot down on his armored spine with crushing force.

At that moment, more Hive Mind soldiers came out from between the buildings firing their blasters as they closed on him. Bale ripped the thermal imploder from his belt and tossed it in their path as he broke into a run with all the grace of a stunted bantha. He didn't stop. The device went off behind him, the blast creating a vacuum and superheating the air in a wide radius. He could feel the heat at his back. Then the first shockwave collapsed on itself. The ensuing explosion tore through the enemy ranks before they could react.

Bale ran as long as his legs could carry him, which wasn't all that far. Then he limped and staggered and lumbered his way forward through the slums. The nearby skirmish had driven the last few civilians off the streets into hiding. He thought of the kids as he pushed forward, wondered how in all the blazes he was supposed to find them in this mess.

It turned out he didn't have to. They found his sorry hide lying face-down in the muck. He was only peripherally aware as they tried to drag him off the street without avail. Then a splash of lukewarm sewage water brought him growling and spitting back to his senses.

"We need to go," implored Juko. Behind him little Ryssa bounced on her feet looking down the street in the direction Bale had come from. She could sense something that he couldn't but it was enough to scare the blue milk out of him.

He forced himself to his feet with a moan. The sun was getting low and long shadows were drawn over the street. Trying to sneak through the city in darkness would be a great way to get themselves killed. He pointed towards a nearby building. It looked like some sort of warehouse all stained up with soot and muck.

The adobe walls had begun to crack. The main blast door should have been closed but it looked like the mechanism had become stuck and so it hung a foot or so above the ground. He didn't have to tell them his plan. Juko ran ahead, disappearing under the door as Ryssa took Bale's hand as if she meant to guide him. He let her go in first then lowered himself painstakingly. It was a tight fit but he managed through it, at least most of the way. He had not realized the soldier's vibroblade was still stuck in his back until it clanged against the door and ripped the wound open and bit into bone.

For the third time that day, he blacked out.

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Kaela rappelled down the side of Zehsaa's perch and reached the bottom of the overpass in record time. It was an easy climb, the Force guiding her way as she jumped from one tier of the overpass to the next until she landed low, hands on the ground in the dried-out storm canal below. The shuttle crash distracting the Collective and Tavros forces meant there was no one to intercept her.

It was a good sign that she did not immediately spot her father splayed out against the concrete in a pool of his own blood, and quite the relief, too. She'd tried not to think about it, and she was grateful not to have to bear witness to such a scene. Not yet, anyway. She puffed out her cheeks as she surveyed the area, looking for any hint that her father had been there. That's when she spotted a mainstay of her childhood: the massive helmet that had scared her to death, representing a side of her father she had loathed, not because of what he did, but what she stood to lose every time he put it on. The blood drained from her cheeks when she saw the great big dent in the forehead. She broke into a run, the shock threatening to take her legs from underneath her. Hunting him down was turning out to be quite the emotional rollercoaster.

She found the rest of his armor lying in a discarded heap. Another good sign, another wave of relief washing over her. She dropped to her knees next to the helmet and swept it up in one arm. With her free hand she traced her fingers over the massive dent. That had been one nasty fall. It dawned on her that perhaps he may well be dead. Her eyes shot back to the armor. It had clearly been stripped for parts. Scavengers? Had they taken his body too?

Kaela closed her eyes and took a deep breath, then called upon the Force once again. This time, she directed her consciousness into the helmet, concentrating on her father's essence, his signature in the Force. It was a moment before she could

quell her swirling emotions and muster the concentration she needed, but when she did, she saw civilians running across the bridge, watched as the Collective gunned them down without discrimination. She saw her father—he was *alive!*—running through fire and hell, saw him throw his arms around two kids, taking several hits as he shielded them. The scene terrified her and filled her with pride at once. He had changed. Then there was an explosion that threw him clear from the overpass. Helpless, she watched him fall, his forehead catching a parapet on the way down, witnessed his hulking frame flailing through the air like a ragdoll. He smashed against a second level below before free-falling towards the ground at the bottom. He never let go of the children. She yelped and nearly dropped the helmet when his body stopped abruptly. It took her a moment to understand what she was seeing. He hadn't hit the ground. His body was levitating a short ways above the surface, held in place only long enough to break the fall. Then he fell the rest of the way with a soundless thump. *Zehsaa*. It had to have been *Zehsaa*.

Her heart heaved as she pulled ragged breaths into her lungs, her lips trembling as she did so. *Alive. He's alive.* She didn't realize she was crying until after she set the helmet down. In her mind, she replayed the fall over and over again. The hits he'd taken before the fall and the merciless blow to the head had to have left him in bad shape. Wherever he was, she had to find him.

She made to move but froze when she heard the sound of charging blasters. The Hive Mind soldiers said nothing as they opened fire. Her lightsaber flew to her hands and spat twin purple blades in time to deflect the oncoming barrage. She spun it hand over hand but these were cunning enemies. She'd had first-hand experience fighting them on the *Nesolat*. They knew how to fight Jedi. They knew how to fight *her*. They simultaneously diverted their aim so that each one shot at different parts of her. The bolts lanced at her too fast for her weapon to block them all, forcing her to somersault sideways out of range. She too knew how to fight them. She varied her evasion, using somersaults and rolls and dives until it put her in melee distance. One last backward somersault landed right between the four of them. Plasma glanced off one's shoulder pad but bit through the breastplate of another even as she kicked a third. The fourth reacted immediately, crushing the butt of his rifle into her back. She screamed as she threw him off his feet with a sweep of her hand and a push of the Force. A tingling at the back of her neck warned her of an incoming attack and she ducked under the swing, spinning, bringing her lightstaff to bear in time to bisect the attacker and one of his comrades. The downed soldier took the opening, raised his blaster, and let off a

shot before Kaela could react. There was a blur and the bolt exploded against a distant wall. The gunman screamed as Zehsaa's lightsaber went through his gut.

"Thank you," Kaela said between breaths. "Looks like you've got a knack for saving my family."

Zehsaa laughed, a sound Kaela hadn't heard in a long time. It almost felt like a homecoming. *Almost*. "You know I've got your back."

"More will come. That's the thing with these bucketheads, they see what the other sees. The ones above all saw what happened down here as if they'd been here, and I reckon they'll hold a serious grudge. Before, you said some rappelled down after him?"

"So it seems. What now?"

"Now I go find my father. He's out there somewhere with these *skags* on his tail," she started walking in the direction her father had left but stopped when she noticed the Togruta wasn't following her. She was looking up at the overpass. "Zeh? You coming?"

"I need to let Zentru'la know what happened," Zehsaa said. "I will find you."

"Wait. Zentru'la is here too? Was there some reunion no one told me about?" There was a bite to Kaela's words and she very well meant it. The giant Twi'lek with stone for a heart got to find out her father was alive before she did? She'd been frustrated before. Now, she was about ready to chew someone's head off.

But it would have to wait.

First, she had to find her father.

* * *

Night had fallen over Eos City when he came to. The children were sitting back against some crates in the grimy, green light of a portable disk lamp eating rations, *his* rations. The boy, Juko, wore a smug smile on his face like he'd done a hard day's work while Ryssa stuffed dry foods into her mouth by the fistful, chewing loudly. Bale rose slowly, wincing and groaning as he propped himself up on his elbows. Everything hurt. Not just his back or his ribs. Every-*blasted*-thing.

"Mishter Bae! Youw awake!" said Ryssa. Her words were distorted by a mouthful of dried meat.

He brought one hand up over his shoulder to where the vibrodagger had been only to find it wasn't there anymore. Instead, his fingers touched the cloth of bandages. The fabric wasn't coarse like typical bandages and he realized only after he'd worked his way to his feet that the kids had cut parts of his jumpsuit up into

strips. *Not bad, Juko. Not bad at all.* But he couldn't tell the boy that. His head might not fit through the blast door on the way out. Bale found he was chuckling as he plopped down next to the girl and pressed his back to the cool metal of some abandoned crate.

"Anything left for me?" he asked, nodding towards the pile of wrappers and tubes lying nearby.

"Huh," Juko said, his smirk replaced by wide-eyed panic. Ryssa, for her part, offered the last remaining fistful oozing through her little fingers.

Bale chuckled, held his hand up and shook his head to politely decline her kind offer. Then he ruffled her bristling hair. She leaned against him, which really, really hurt, but he wasn't about to tell her. Juko grinned up at him.

"You did good, kids," he said as he leaned his head back. "Real good."

"We're even now!" Juko announced.

"That we are." Bale savored the peaceful moment. No amount of pain could take away from the fact that this reminded him of better times and, most importantly, of his daughter. The way Ryssa smiled up at him then only punctuated the notion. There were no two ways about it, he missed Kaela something fierce. They hadn't been apart this long since he'd left her to stay with Vaeden Adenn and his family a good decade past. Not a day went by since he woke up from that *pfassking* coma that he hadn't thought about hopping on a ship and finding her on Coruscant, to see her, to tell her he was alive, but even with that witch Elinia Rei dead, he couldn't do it. Not with the blasted Collective still out there threatening the existence of Force-wielders like her. It was best if she stayed hidden and lived her life on Coruscant. Sadly, that sentiment didn't make it any easier on him.

"*Shiess*," he hissed. The kids gasped.

"You said a no-no word!" Ryssa squealed and giggled.

"*Shiess!*" Juko puffed out his chest, trying to sound tough.

Bale laughed, a belly-deep laugh that turned into wheezing and coughing as his ribs threatened to erupt from his chest. He kicked his legs. To his surprise, and to the kids' great amusement, his mechanical leg came loose around the knee articulation. The part beneath the articulation, what made up the calf portion, clattered to the ground with a distressed whirr while the rest of the device was held up by the hydraulics. Bale starred at it dumbfounded while the kids howled with laughter to the point where tears were pouring down.

"Huh," Bale said flatly as the shock wore off. "Tell me you didn't eat my hydrospanner."

Ryssa made a face like she'd never do such a thing. Juko held Bale's utility belt up and tossed it over to him. The Zabrak caught it and fished the tool out from one of the pockets. He pulled his knee up and went to work on the cybernetic limb. It took some time to fix. The fake leg was in worse shape than he'd expected. It was a wonder he'd made it this far. One of the modulators was busted, but it wasn't all too hard to divert the power through one of the backup circuits. The leg would lose some of its responsiveness until he was able to replace the part, but he reckoned it was better than hopping about on one foot. For once, he sure was glad the scavengers who'd found him half-dead, his leg halfway decomposed by acid, had fitted him with one of the cheaper robotic models and not one of those fancier synth-flesh variants. They looked great and worked a whole lot better than this shoddy piece he'd been saddled with, but when it came time for repairs, they were harder to work with on the fly. The children watched with fascination as he pushed the dislodged parts back in place then screwed them in. A few more twirls of his hydrospanner and he had a working leg. He'd still have his limp, but at least he could get around well enough.

When he finally slipped the tool back on the belt, he felt lightheaded. The throbbing pain in his back had given way to a constant burn. The warmth trickling down his back told him he'd need a change of bandages soon but didn't like asking the kids to do it. Besides, they had fallen asleep watching him work and he wasn't about to wake them. It could wait a while longer. It wasn't like his tanktop could get any filthier. He leaned back against the crate and let loose a long, drawn-out yawn. Then he smacked his lips and closed his eyes. Maybe he could catch some shut-eye. Maybe he'd feel better after.

The distant thunder of battle reverberated through the night. It sounded louder, more chaotic than it had been during the day. He reckoned the odds were against them. He didn't rightly know how the Collective had made it through the planetary shield, but that feat alone told him the Brotherhood was in for a rough few nights. In fact, he couldn't help but wonder if there would be a Brotherhood left when the dust settled. He yawned again.

His eyes shot open when Ryssa bolted upright next to him. She was pale, her eyes wide with terror, and fully alert. She tapped her hand on Juko's head, who shifted and yawned.

"Is it morning alrea—" he began but her little hand silenced him.

A clattering of metal broke the silence on the far side of the warehouse. Bale was on his feet instantly, the sudden burst of adrenaline masking any pain he would have usually felt. He yanked the boy to his feet with one hand, then tapped

a finger over his pursed lips for the kids to follow without making a sound. He slipped the utility belt around his waist as he walked, his mechanical leg running almost smoothly and much quieter than it had been before. He stopped cold when he realized the blaster holster on his thigh was empty, but there was no going back for it. He didn't like the idea of facing whoever was coming without weapons. Any vagrant or refugee could see easy prey in two children and a lone, unarmed fellow, even one of his size. If it was the Collective, he reckoned he wouldn't last more than a few seconds even if he did have his blaster. He was leading them towards the back of the building away from the clattering when he spotted a gap in the floor between stacks of crates. A loose, vented durasteel tile sat nearby. Bale recognized it for what it was: a smuggler's stash. Moving with haste, he lowered the kids inside then followed. The plate was heavy, but he managed to pull it down over the hole with minimal scrapping and only an infinitesimal thud. The cache was pitch black and it wasn't long before their collective body heat made it really uncomfortable.

They waited in the darkness for a long time, to the point where Bale wondered if he'd imagined the sound, but the way Ryssa was shaking told him she too had heard it. Then he saw a flash of light through the vents in the stash's lid. Another one swept by then moved onto a distant wall. Flashlights, likely the kind mounted on a blaster. *Thump. Thump. Thump.* The footsteps were slow, careful, and dreadfully close. Ryssa whimpered softly. Bale immediately pulled them close to him and placed his hands over their mouths. He could feel them trembling against him. Some of it may have been him. At this point, he couldn't tell anymore. The footsteps came closer, closer still. Light shone through the vent, lighting streaks across Juko's blue face. His eyes were bulging with fear. Bale pulled the kid's head against his chest, careful not to let his hand slip from his mouth.

A black, armored boot clanked into view. The kids gave a start but he held them tightly against him. The Collective soldier stood over them for some time before finally moving on. *Not one word*, he thought. No orders, no confirmations, no checks, these Hive Mind soldiers didn't utter a single word as they scanned the warehouse. He thought of the disk lamp, the food wrappers, the bloodstains, the makeshift bandages, even his blaster, wherever it was. There were signs of their presence all over the warehouse, signs that would not go unnoticed. He just hoped the soldiers would reach the conclusion that they were gone. Another one passed over the cache, and a third followed not long after. The distant clacking of boots against frail metal told Bale some of them were searching the catwalks above. *Ice cold*, he thought, recalling an old treasure hunting game he used to play with his daughter when she was a child. When a fourth soldier stepped over them, he

thought, *burning hot*. Then the cache's lid creaked under the soldier's boot and he froze. They all froze. It seemed like an eternity went by before the soldier started moving again, but when his foot pressed down on the next tile and it did not creak, he doubled back, blaster pointed down at the cache. *Blast it*, Bale thought as he moved the children behind him. The soldier stomped down on the lid once, twice, the booming sound inside the compartment causing Ryssa to whimper. The soldier bent down carefully, hand out to raise the lid, but Bale burst out of the hole with a roar, slamming the loose tile upward into the soldier's helmet and sending the poor sap wheeling into a stack of crates. The Zabrak climbed out with all the speed his battered frame could muster and before the dazed soldier could react, brought his boot down on his armored head with a resounding crunch. The others reacted almost instantly, firing in his direction from around the warehouse and from their perch on the above catwalks, but Bale used the night as cover. Moving unseen through the darkness, he retrieved the fallen soldier's blaster carbine then readied himself.

Their flashlights were like miniature beacons in the darkness, perfect targets for the expert marksman. He shot, then moved. Shot, then moved. Again and again, as they tried to pinpoint his location, a difficult task even with their enhanced cognitive abilities. Shoot. Move. Shoot. Move. It wasn't long before the four soldiers perched above were dead. He had no way of knowing how many there were on the ground level. For fear of falling into a recognizable pattern or getting flanked, he switched out his approach. He stuck his head up behind crates, found the nearest light then stalked it. As he drew close, he launched over a crate, grabbed his target by the helm, and twisted. The sound of snapping bones echoed through the eerily quiet warehouse. Blaster fire converged on him, forcing him to roll out of the way and run. When he threw himself down behind a crate, he was panting, his entire body was burning, and he realized he'd become completely disoriented. Then a child screamed and he burst out of cover. He saw a soldier standing over the smuggler's stash and fired without thinking. The soldier went down before he could harm the kids, but it gave away his location. A thermal detonator clattered against the durasteel at his feet. He didn't think. He just threw himself over the nearest crates as the explosive detonated. He was thrown halfway across the room, ending his flight against more crates, right next to the disk lamp for the entire warehouse to see.

One of the Hive Mind soldiers stepped from behind a crate, trained his blaster on him. Bale threw his hands up in futile defense and flinched when the blaster went off. Then, the soldier dropped to his knees, then face-first into the ground,

the back of his helmet still smoking. Juko stood behind him, blaster carbine in hand. A shot exploded next to the boy, sending him skittering on all fours. A sudden flash of purple lit up the night. Then another. The sound of clattering armor filled the warehouse. The purple light disappeared and everything fell quiet.

Deathly quiet.

Someone stepped out from behind a crate. It wasn't a Collective soldier, nor was it the kids. A woman. His head was ringing so loud he couldn't quite focus. Green-haired, tattooed, a strip of red paint over her eyes. She seemed terribly familiar.

"Kaela?" he asked.

* * *

Kaela had seen her father in all kinds of dire states in her lifetime. Shot, bruised, cut up, it was all par for the course for a bounty hunter, but rarely all of these at once, and never to this degree. This had to be a new record. His tank top was a few shades of whites and pinks and reds, crusted around the shoulder and the back. His usually-regal mane of brown hair now hung in a matted mess half-glued to his face. His beard fared little better, covered with dried blood and spittle as contusions flared a bluish-black across his face, his arms, and probably a half dozen other places underneath that shirt. He was so banged up that, at first, she didn't even register the shoddy, twisted cybernetic limb that replaced his right leg. Seeing him lying there sprawled out on his side at an awkward angle, looking up at her with dazed eyes as if she were an illusion, it was almost too much for her.

She threw herself down on him, wrapping her arms around his massive frame as rivers crashed down her cheeks as if twin dams had burst in her eyes. At that moment, she was eight years old again. It didn't matter that she'd already struggled through the whole mourning thing over the past year. It didn't matter how angry she was that he had hidden his status from her. Here, now, she was just a child petrified at the thought of losing her one anchor in life. She clung to him, kissed his scraggly beard, and together, they wept. He groaned as he wrapped his big arms around her but she could tell he wasn't about to let pain stop him. She wondered how long it had been since she had hugged him. It had to have been years, far longer than she'd thought him dead. One of his giant hands caressed her head in the same way he used to when she was young. Even now, trembling and half-broken, as vulnerable as she'd ever seen him, he was playing protector.

Through the Force, she could sense the hurricane of emotions churning inside him: the agony, the fear, the joy... the unconditional love.

“Oh dad,” she whimpered as she held on tightly.

“Hey, Loth-cat,” he whispered. His voice was thick with emotion.

They clung to one another for some time longer before she finally pulled away to sit on her legs beside him. He sat up slowly, the climb laborious even with her help. He groaned the entire way up, then groaned some more.

“Are you going to be ok?” she asked.

“Your old man is a hardy *sleemo*,” he joked through blood-stained teeth.

“Funny. Idris said the same thing.”

“Ah. So that’s how you found out, heh?”

“You know he was never big on keeping secrets,” she teased.

“And those blasted fools in the Ascent made him Voice!” They laughed together, though Bale looked like he was agonizing more than he was amused. She placed a stabilizing hand on his shoulder when he wheezed and coughed.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” she asked. The question soured him up real quick.

“Would you accept any explanation?” he asked, his eyes breaking away from hers. “Fact is, I was a coward and I failed you. Everything that happened with that witch, the way you looked up to her, the way she—”

He stopped himself. It was true. No explanation would ever really justify hiding from her, and Kaela didn’t need the Force to tell he was still angry, too; angry with himself, but also angry with her for choosing Elinacia Rei over him. She could have lashed out then, she most certainly wanted to, but they had been through that song and dance before, and she couldn’t help but wonder if that had factored into his decision to keep her in the dark. It seemed likely. Instead, she placed her hand on his and forced a smile to her lips.

“You are alive. That’s what matters,” she said. She was surprised by her honesty.

He didn’t say anything. He just squeezed her hand, then brought it up to his lips and kissed the back of it.

“Huh, guys.” The words came from a blue Twi’lek boy and, for the first time, Kaela noticed him. He was holding a Mirialan girl against him, barely visible on the edge of the disk lamp’s radius. The green-skinned girl looked shaken, almost ill. Raw, unassailable terror emanated from her in the Force. Then she felt *them* in the Force.

“More are coming,” she said as she slung her father’s arm over her shoulder, “They really hate you, huh?”

Bale climbed to his feet with her help. He looked almost sheepish when he answered, “Can you blame them? Between Meridian, Caelus, and the way I blew half of Rose squadron up with a seismic charge, I don’t reckon they’ll let me slip between their fingers. Not this time.”

“Then we better get going.” She levitated a nearby crate through the Force and smirked at him. “Need me to *carry* you?”

Bale frowned at her display and said, “I can still walk, thank you.”

“Whatever you say, old man.” She let the crate drop, shrugging.

Bale took only a few moments to get ready. He retrieved a nearby disk lamp, snatched up a blaster carbine, then fished a small triangular device from his belt. He stopped by some crates as they made their way towards the back exit and stuck the metal triangle to one of them. With a flick of his fingers and a single *beep*, he switched it on. A small inconspicuous red light appeared dead center.

“What’s that?” the Twi’lek boy asked.

Bale served him his best wink. “A parting gift for our friends.”

The boy caught on pretty fast.

They slipped out of the building through a gaping hole in the back. Kaela sought the enemy out in the Force as they ran. She felt their presence as they filed into the warehouse. They were focus and determination in the Force, hunter stalking prey. She had just crossed the street, her companions rushing ahead of her, when Bale’s gift detonated inside the warehouse, the shockwave blowing out the structure’s few remaining windows. She felt their sudden shock and pain as three soldiers were vaporized.

Bale screeched to a halt and turned back towards the warehouse, the boy hard on his tail. They pumped their fists in the air, whooping and laughing as the Zabrak roared, “*E chu ta*, you blaster-brained, shebs-kissing slagchuckers!”

They both yelped and broke out running when more of the Collective soldiers poured out of the warehouse after them. Bale and the kids disappeared between buildings and Kaela rounded the corner after them.

“You just had to gloat!” she screamed after her father.

He let the kids by and fell in besides Kaela. “You can sense them right?”

“Huh?” She wasn’t sure where he was going with that.

“In the Force! You can tell where they are can’t you?”

The kids slipped through a gap in a metal fence ahead. A rather *small* gap.

“We’re not getting through that,” Kaela said. She meant it more for Bale. She could clear the fence with a jump. She was about to throw him over with the Force

when he grunted, kicked his legs, tucked his head in and barreled through the structure, sending metal flying.

Well, ok then!

He dug his heels in as she ran past him.

“What are you doing?” she asked.

“Tell me when,” he yelled.

“When what?”

“When they’re coming!”

“They’re coming,” she roared.

He pressed a button down on the metal ball. It lit up red and she immediately recognized it as a thermal detonator. He sent it rolling through the gap as the first soldiers were coming through. The explosion sent bodies flying. She kept running until she realized her father wasn’t following. She saw him over her shoulder, blaster carbine belching fire into the hole. Say one thing about Bale Andros, say he loved a good bottleneck.

And so did she.

She wheeled back around, purple plasma spitting to life in her hands as she rocketed past her father. She exploded through the fence, lightstaff singing, her movements a blur driven by the Force. Plasma bit through armor and four soldiers fell bisected before the Hive Mind could even register what was happening. She dashed towards her next victim and launched into the air as blaster fire whizzed past her. She came crashing down feet-first on the fifth soldier and flipped backward off his chest as she sent him careening into his comrades. She split her conversion hilt in half as she landed, staff becoming dual lightsabers, and flung them down the alley. Arms out wide, palms out, she lashed onto the blades with the Force and propelled them down the alley, twin fans of death and destruction, raining fireworks of sparks in their wake. When the weapons returned to her palm, a full squad lay dead. Long streaks of molten stone and metal glowed orange along the walls.

She turned back to find her father grinning at her. A big, toothy grin like the one that used to light up his face whenever she did something that impressed him as a child. She couldn’t help but grin back.

I missed you, you giant brute.

Then an explosion blasted him out of sight.

“No!” she shrieked.

A wrist rocket whizzed past her head as she burst out of the alley and ended its course against a nearby wall. This time, there were no acrobatics as she charged

them, no finesse. She was a rampaging rancor, all rage as she swung her lightsaber down like an ax. There were dozens of them, and not just Hive Mind marines anymore. More and more Collective infantry spilled into the area, swarming the streets to meet her. She wailed as she hacked through them again and again and again, roared as she yanked them forward with the Force, filling their guts with purple plasma before tossing them aside like ragdolls. She moved so fast they couldn't get a pin on her. She moved so erratically that not even the Hive Mind could calculate where she would be next. She was fury. She was darkness. She was *death*.

* * *

Something was pulling frantically on his collar. A smudge of blue against the swerving skyline. It pulled and pulled and pulled, every tug a torrent of lava coursing through his body. He wanted to scream, but he couldn't. He wanted to swat them away, but he couldn't. Someone was screaming but the words were indecipherable, hollow and distant as if he was underwater. The blur grabbed one of his arms and yanked on his hand. He realized there was no sensation, only the omnipresent pain. He tried to move his feet. Nothing.

Kaela.

She was out there, alone.

He saw her again in his mind as a child, frail, stricken by sickness, saw her smile despite the fever, her laughter echoing at the edge of his consciousness. She was a fighter. Together, they had scoured the galaxy, searching for a cure. No one knew what befell the girl. It was a mystery countless physicians had tried and failed to solve, every last one of them, until Elinia Rei. He'd played the witch's games, jumped through her countless hoops, fought countless battles in her name as she strung him along with the promise of healing Kaela. She did save her in the end, but it had been for her own gain. The witch had discovered the girl possessed an aberrant but powerful connection to the Force, which strained her mortal body. Seeking to make Kaela her apprentice, Rei had taught her to harness her powers even as she sunk her claws into her. The witch had manipulated her, twisted her into a killer, until he tried to put an end to it. It wasn't long after that she had tried to have him killed. An obstacle, that's what he'd been. The attack had cost him a leg and plunged him in a coma, but it was nothing compared to the years he had lost with his daughter. And now, as he lay dying, he realized that his sacrifices had all been for naught. After all this time fearing that he would draw the eyes of the

Collective and the Brotherhood upon her, Kaela stood right smack dab in the middle of all this *shiess* and he couldn't so much as lift a hand to protect her. A tear welled up at the corner of his eye before beading down the side of his face.

What a pathetic, ignominious ending.

He fought with everything that he had, poured every ounce of strength into moving his limbs but he couldn't budge. Not even a muscle.

He could feel his life force draining away as the sky unfurled above him. It was as if the entire world passed him by as he slipped into nothingness. The blue smudge disappeared, replaced sometime later by a sweeping shadow. A building? Strange. It took Bale a moment longer to realize that he was moving, or rather, being moved, and he could not quite comprehend how this was possible.

What was happening?

Another blur appeared at the edge of his vision, this one green. He wondered if he was dreaming. One last vision before the void took him, perhaps. Yet, something wasn't quite right. It niggled at the back of his mind. That's when he recognized the diminutive green silhouette as Ryssa, hand outstretched before her, floating closer to him. Or was it the other way around?

"Wh-what are you doing? By the Twi'lek Goddess!" A muffled voice, which he recognized as Juko's, echoed outside the periphery of his consciousness, full of surprise and wonder. The blue Twi'lek appeared by the girl's side, bouncing from one foot to the next.

Bale fell suddenly. It wasn't a long drop, but he might as well have fallen off another overpass. He howled, the sound reverberating from across a distance as if it did not come from him. Her hand appeared on his shoulder as she knelt beside him. He ground his teeth as another torrent of pain washed over him. He concentrated on her face, the blur slowly taking shape, revealing her innocent, childish features, her soft features, her large violet eyes, her deep green, pointed hair. She closed her eyes.

Without warning, something snapped into place inside him with a crunch of bones, a feeling that reminded him of an energy cell sliding inside a blaster and clipping into place. He felt terribly warm all of a sudden and found that he was sweating profusely. A whimper escaped from his lips as pressure mounted against his shoulder. There was a merciless, resounding crack, and then it felt as if the girl was tugging flaps of dangling flesh together as if she meant to sew them together like two pieces of cured leather. Only, he was intricately aware that she hadn't moved a muscle.

What was happening to him?

“H-how are you doing this, Ryssa?” Juko stuttered as he looked on from over her shoulder, staring wide-eyed at her hand.

“I... I don’t know,” she whispered.

One moment, he felt nothing. Then, there was a pinprick at the end of one finger. It grew to a tingle, spread from one finger to the next until, little by little, sensation returned to his hands and feet. Bale let out a half-snort, half-moan that should have been laughter as he wiggled his toes. He did not know what it was she was doing, or how, but Bale knew there and then that she was saving his life. And though he did not understand it, he could feel the connection they now shared, he could feel her exert herself as she pieced him back together, and whatever it was that she was doing, it was taking a toll on her. He wanted to tell her to stop, he begged the stars that she would let him go before she hurt herself, but she remained steadfast. He whimpered once more when her hand slipped from his shoulder. He watched in terror as she slumped to the floor.

“Ryssa!” Juko fell to his knees, catching her before she hit her head.

Bale exhorted her to get up, but she didn’t move. His hand snaked its way to hers. Tears poured freely when he felt her squeeze.

He grew keenly aware that the ground was vibrating underneath him, but he couldn't quite tell what it was until the sound of running footsteps filled his ears. He craned his neck in time to see black figures rounding a nearby corner, blasters up at the ready.

“R-Run,” he cried.

But instead of running, Juko raised a blaster carbine and began firing. Bale wanted the boy to abandon him. He wanted him to take Ryssa and run, begged him to, but all that he could muster was a jumbled, panicked moan. The brave boy stood his ground despite their desperate odds, even as plasma shrieked past him. He kept on firing, over and over, never letting go of the trigger, but the blaster’s recoil was too much for him. Shots went everywhere. He got in a few hits but the weapon overheated in his hands, and with that, their last glimmer of hope died. Or so Bale thought. Everything happened at once. There was a great whooshing hiss like the roar of repulsor engines, a dozen or so bursts of light followed by a clattering of armor, and then, nothing. Complete silence.

No. A single pair of boots was approaching.

“Easy, kid. I’m a friend.” The man’s voice was strangely familiar.

The boots drew closer still until a red shadow swept over Bale.

“Still alive, old man?”

* * *

Twin purple blades hacking and slashing, Kaela Val was rage incarnate as she waded through the enemy's ranks shrieking like a madman. There was no room in her mind for thoughts, no room for tactics. Only vengeance. Over and over again she saw his proud grin only to bear witness as he was blasted to smithereens. The memory goaded her, fueled her hatred, drove her to murder, but she wasn't without her limits. The rage could only carry her so far and it wasn't long before her footing faltered. Then, her strikes waned. Deflecting shots demanded more concentration than she could muster, and soon she was fighting in retreat. The precariousness of her situation hit her like a TIE Fighter hit an asteroid. What was she doing? She had to get out of there, *fast*, but the enemy was ready to capitalize on her moment of weakness. They moved as one, the Hive Mind formulating and executing a flawless counter-attack. Fury gave way to fear, and survival instincts took over. She pushed back against the tide, fought tooth and nail, but for every soldier she felled, there were two waiting to take their place on the battlefield.

It was hopeless.

She sensed the next shot hurtling towards her in the Force and spun one of her lightsabers to deflect it, but the motion required was too great in too short a time. The blade swept past its destination a split-second too late to prevent the blaster bolt from grazing her thigh. She yelped as her leg went out under her and nearly dropped her lightsabers as she fell to one knee. She barely had time to react as a soldier broke rank and charged her. All she could do was lance forward, running him though before sending him wheeling head over feet at his comrades. She seized the opportunity and lashed out with the Force, tearing a nearby window from its casing with a resounding crash, then dove through the opening in time to evade their next volley.

She slid back through the crumbling dust, pressing up against the wall beneath the window. She winced and hissed through gritting teeth as she pulled her knee back on her wounded leg. She sat there a moment, panting, begging the Force to give her strength, all this time expecting a thermal detonator to come flying through the window after her. What she did not expect was the massive explosion that rocked the building to its foundation and blew the rest of the windows out, showering the floor around her with transparisteel. She was screaming, or at least she thought she was, but the ringing in her ears permeated all other sounds. Her head swam as the ring subsided and the din of battle took its place. The thunder of

blaster fire echoed against the apartment's walls. New detonations shook the streets, each one unleashing a chorus of shrieks and wails. If she had had any sense, she would have used this distraction to save her sorry hide. She should have run. She should have gone and looked for the children, to finish what her father had started, but the embers of rage still burned in her heart. She couldn't run. Not now. She had to see this through, one way or another.

She had to see the Collective *dead*.

Her leg flared up as pushed to her knees and poked her head through the gap. Particles of smoke wafted up into her face as she did so, burning her eyes and clouding her vision, forcing her back inside, coughing and retching. She ventured another glance, carefully this time, and after wiping the tears from her eyes, she saw several Collective soldiers lying in a haphazard circle around a smoking crater at the base of the building. Another explosion tore through the black-clad soldiers as they poured onto the streets from around the nearby buildings. That's when she spotted the massive Twi'lek standing across the street from her on a rooftop, grenade launcher in hand, his beskar armor a golden beacon of hope in the rising sun, a stalwart sight against the backdrop of war. True to her words, Zehsaa Hysh appeared by his side, sniper rifle spitting round upon round into the enemy masses, covering Zentru'la as he jumped down from his perch with a ground shattering boom. His battle roar rippled through the battlefield as he charged into the fray, grenade launcher pumping explosives into the Collective's frontline, the rest of Battle Team Tavros at his side.

Kaela slipped back into cover, her heart thumping against her chest, and tears welling up at the corner of her eyes. Her hands were trembling as she balled them up into fists. Where were they when her father needed them? If they had come a moment sooner... She took a deep breath, chased the thought from her mind.

A distant stomp caught her attention.

She strained her ear and peered out the window again. The sound repeated itself over and over, a rhythmic, booming thump followed by... the hiss of hydraulics? *Thump. Hiss. Thump. Hiss.* It gained in volume with each repetition until two gigantic walkers burst onto the streets with a roar of their rotary chaingun, halting Tavros' advance and forcing them to fight on their heels. Zentru'la pumped one explosive after another. They arced through the air until they hit one of the walkers across the bow but the staccato of detonations barely jerked the vehicle sideways, leaving only a pitiful black smear across its reinforced hull. To her dismay, the two-legged monstrosity pushed forward unimpeded. Then it responded in kind. A missile spat from one of its great shoulders straight for the

Twilek. Kaela was sure he was done for until Zehsaa appeared out of nowhere, yanking his hulking frame through the air with the Force as the projectile hissed past the place where he had been standing mere moments before. Zentru'la switched the grenade launcher out for his repeater cannon and together the two of them focused fire on the walker. It was futile. The bolts bounced off the armored plates without leaving so much as a scratch.

Another burst of missiles shot through the air, this time from the second walker. Kaela followed their trajectory as they shot high above the battle and grazed past an oncoming shuttle. She gasped as it turned a second one following closely behind into a fireball. She watched in awe as the burning wreckage came down onto the battlefield, killing indiscriminately. Now she knew who to blame her own rough landing earlier that day. More shuttles cut low over them, raining fire down on the Collective forces. She recognized the seal of the Dark Brotherhood painted across their bow and whooped when they came back around for another pass. The walkers fired again, turning another shuttle into a short-lived star.

She had to do something.

She *could* do something.

She pushed to her feet, her wounded leg stiff beneath her as she made her way through what appeared to be an apartment building, the thunder of war egging her on as she pulled herself up a stairwell and emerged on the rooftops where she perched atop the parapet. Then, feet locked in place, she held one hand out in front of her, took a deep breath and closed her eyes. Projecting her consciousness onto the battlefield, she sought out her target in the Force. She scoured the chaos until she found him, a single fleck in a sea of dancing lights. He never realized that she was there, skulking in the depths of his being, a Dathomir spider weaving her dark web in his mind. One moment, he was his own person, his hatred for the Brotherhood brimming as he murdered the Force sympathizers. The next, he was hers. When she directed him to adjust his grip on the walker's controls and turned him against his own people, the pilot could only do as she asked. He felt no emotion when she drove him to open fire on the second walker. That walker was thrown sideways, its gyro stabilizer and shock absorbers scrambling to maintain the vehicle upright as confusion spread through the Collective ranks, replaced only by sheer terror when Kaela forced the pilot to unleash a barrage of missiles. The projectiles tore through the second walker, the blast leveling the nearby troops and sending debris, smoke and fire plummeting into the throngs of soldiers.

Good old brute force, she thought, a wicked grin splitting her face.

She truly was her father's daughter. And she wasn't done.

The pilot slammed the throttle at her bidding. Without a shred of mercy, the walker stomped down on an unsuspecting Collective soldier, then another, without stopping. When his fingers crunched down on the triggers, pandemonium broke out. The infantry scattered out from under the walker even as its chaingun ripped through their comrades. There was some momentary confusion amongst the Tavros forces, who were stumped as to what was happening, until Zentru'la barked orders, sending them back into the fray.

What began with one man risking his neck to protect a bunch of kids was quickly taking on monumental proportions. As open war engulfed the district, it seemed like all of Eos City was converging on this one decisive battle. While Tavros were a force to be reckoned with, they were a strike team of elite operatives, not an army and they would need all the help they could get. When the Brotherhood shuttles used the distraction caused by the treasonous walker to drop down a battalion of Iron Legion soldiers and members of the Inquisitorius, it seemed like the tide was finally turning. More Brotherhood forces poured onto the streets from around the buildings, small disorganized groups, likely survivors from various units looking for some payback.

As concentrated as she was on the pilot, Kaela never saw it coming. A hand clutched her shoulder, yanked her off the parapet and slammed her down back-first with a ruthless crunch. The air exploded from her lungs on impact as she screamed, the sound somewhere between a gasp and a squeal as it escaped her lips. She did not have time to react before a black, armored boot crunched down on her head. The Arx sky swiveled overhead as stars went supernova before her eyes. She could barely see the dark, battered silhouette of the Hive Mind soldier when it yanked a vibrodagger free from its sheath and threw himself down on her. It was sheer survival instinct that called the Force to her defense. She was lightning as she rolled clear from under the blade. It came down against the roof and snapped in half as she kicked the air and landed on her feet. Her hand shot for her lightsaber. The *snap-hiss* cut over the sound of battle as she brought it to bear but the soldier kicked it free from her grasp. The blade died as the hilt went over the side of the building. She tried to snare it with the Force but couldn't quite focus, her head still ringing from the blow. His hand clamped down around her neck. She gasped, her hands clawing his armor. Soon, she was dangling above the ground. He was a terrifying sight, his black armor half-melted off. One of Zentru'la's victims, no doubt. She could see part of his face through the shattered helmet. His one visible eye was pure hatred and he squeezed.

He said nothing as he carried her over to the edge of the roof. She kicked at him, scratched at his gloved fingers, tried to yank them free, but her strength was waning as her lungs were deprived of oxygen. She reached out with the Force. It was all she could do. She sensed his emotions, sensed the terrifying neural network that linked him to his comrades below. The sight of her choking brought him unspeakable pleasure. She pushed her mind past him. Someone else was approaching but she could not spare the thought. When she found what she thought, she tightened her mental grasp around it, then brought the broken blade lancing through the back of his broken helmet. His eye went wide. She felt his shock, then nothing. He lurched forward over the edge.

She fell screaming.

Six stories.

Her father's daughter, indeed.

A single tear slipped away as she hit the ground.

"Gotcha," said a familiar voice.

The roar of rockets filled her ears as she felt the inertia of her fall reversed. Was she going up? Her eyes darted as her mind struggled to process what was happening. They finally locked on a red Mandalorian helmet, its golden highlights and contrasting blacks strangely familiar.

"Nice of you to drop by!" said the Voice of the Dark Brotherhood.

"I-Idris?" she stuttered. She squirmed in his arms. How had she gotten there?

Propelled by his jetpack, they shot up past the rooftop then landed together with a resounding thump. She didn't realize until he set her down that she had been clinging to him. Somebody took her in their arms, but she only had eyes for her old friend.

"You got her?" Idris asked.

The answer came in the form of a grunt from over her shoulder, but it seemed to satisfy the Mandalorian.

"Good. Time to single-handedly win the day!"

He gave a single nod then ran towards the edge, cloak snapping in the wind as he shot high into the sky above the battlefield. He was a blood-red meteor as he hurtled down into the fray, twin WESTAR-37 blasters raining deaths on the Collective. Twin streams of cleansing fire leapt from the Mandalorian's vambraces, a cascade of lava crashing down upon the throngs of black-clad soldiers. Kaela realized she was grinning. It wasn't long after that the Collective broke rank and started running.

Now, *that* was the Idris she knew. That same old impetuous boy always looking for a good fight, blast the consequences.

“Blasted Mandos. *Always* showing off.” The voice was a rumble in her ears, a rumble that reminded her of her younger years, back when she and her dad would kick back on the ship and watch one of those trite serials on the Holonet. Her mind snapped to the present at the thought. She suddenly recognized the big, muscular arms around her. She was trembling when she craned her neck and found *him*, or at least, a tattered, grimy, slightly singed, bloodied mess that resembled her father. He was smiling down at her with that big, goofy grin of his. Battered beyond recognition, his right eye a heart-stopping, bulbous mess, swollen shut and crusted with blood, but smiling like she’d just learned how to ride her first speeder.

“H-how?” she asked.

How didn’t matter. He was alive. They were alive. That’s what mattered. She knew it, he knew it, and he never did answer. Instead, he placed one of his giant hands at the back of her neck and pressed his forehead to hers as he had often done in her youth. He’d always watched over her and here he was, half-dead, in the middle of all-out war with one thought on his mind: protecting his daughter.

It wasn’t long before the Brotherhood forces finally broke through the Collective’s stranglehold on the district. The Iron Legion, the Inquisitorius, Tavros, together formed the three points of a trident. With Idris driving the machine of war, they skewered the invaders without mercy. Their last walker felled by Zehsaa’s lightsaber, the Collective forces were routed, forced to fall back through the streets. The Twi’lek Zentru’la led the chase, and Kaela couldn’t think of a more terrifying man to have on your tail.

Her father had his eye closed. The sound of his breathing a crackling wheeze.

“Are you going to be okay?” she asked.

He just smiled again. She rolled her eyes at him but he didn’t see. She almost wanted to shake him, she wanted to tell him, *you’re allowed to feel pain, you know? Almost*. She wouldn’t dare, for fear he would fall apart.

“I need a drink,” he said. Pushed to his feet with all the speed of a watering happabore, then helped her up. “First... we gotta find the kids.”

Kaela sighed at him but he was already making his way down the stairs into the apartment complex. She set out after him. “Let me guess. We *just* need to cross half the city, fight half a dozen more walkers, then sneak past a few battalions of Collective grunts?”

“Don’t you trust me?” he said over his shoulder.

* * *

The distant buzz was like a jolt of electricity, a sharp sound that shattered all pretenses of serenity and yanked Bale from his torpor. He groaned as he took a pull from his oxygen mask, then opened his eyes slowly, the gelatinous touch of bacta warm against his eyeballs. Through the haze and the magnifying distortion of the tank's glass, he saw red soldiers filling into the room. A medical droid moved to intercept them, but a sweep of a red glove silenced it.

What now, he thought as the hatch swished open atop the tank, drowning him in bright light. He pushed himself up through the viscous liquid then pulled himself free. He'd always had mixed feelings about bacta. It reminded him of that time back on Felucia when he had to slice open a rancor and muck around his innards to find some data disk that just so happened to be eaten along with its carrier, but he couldn't argue with the results. Plus, he had to admit that he felt delightfully light whenever he got out. It usually wasn't all that long before the throbbing and the aching returned, but this time the shock of coming face to face with a squad of red-clad warriors from the Grand Master's Royal Guard was enough to make him forget any residual pain.

"You know, old man, we have some *modern* technology you could use." Idris Adenn appeared from around the guards, all smiles as he tossed a towel at Bale, who caught it with a grunt. The Mandalorian's red and gold armor burned brightly in the white light of the medical bay, causing the Zabrak to squint.

"Don't reckon they make flexpoly suits large enough," he answered as he dabbed the bacta liquid from his refreshed skin. Truth was, he would rather float around in some tube like some lab specimen than wear one of those ridiculous bubble-suits. He moved the towel careful over his new scars, especially the one at the small of his back. The tissue was healing nicely, but it was still a tad raw. Satisfied he wasn't going to start sticking to surfaces, Bale threw the towel over his shoulder and pushed past the Mandalorian out of the med-bay as if the Voice's presence on *his* ship was a common occurrence, an event unworthy of his attention. He led them down the *Bulwark's* ill-lit corridors in silence, the sound of their boots clacking against the metal panels beneath them.

"I see you got your leg fixed," Idris said.

"Just needed to switch out the knee joint and replace the stabilizer, nothing fancy," Bale responded.

The Voice readjusted his helmet under his arm. "Still, we could get that switched out for you. That limp can't be fun."

“Pah, I’m used to it. It’s a good reminder not to stick my neck out.”

There was a moment of silence and he had the strange sensation that the Mandalorian lad was sizing him up. “Don’t think you learned those lessons too well.”

“They were kids,” was the only reason worth giving.

“Fair enough.”

They walked for some time until they finally reached the captain’s quarters. Bale stopped short of the door and looked over his shoulder, brow furrowed. “You’re welcome to share a drink, but the *bloodbuckets* stay outside.”

One wave of Idris’ hand and it was a done deal.

Kaela was waiting inside, lounging on a couch, eyes riveted on her datapad. It was a strange feeling to find her waiting for him after all these years apart. Just like the good old days. It felt like waking up from a nightmare and finding out that life wasn’t really on fire and there were no rampaging gundarks. He wasn’t sure he’d ever get used to seeing her all tattooed up, her hair dyed a vivid jade, but none of that mattered. His daughter was *there*.

She bolted upright when she noticed he wasn’t alone.

“What, you go for a swim and you come back with *that* snake?” she said as she pushed out of her seat, a wide smile plastered on her lips. She threw her arms around the Mandalorian’s neck, who was caught aback momentarily before returning the embrace. Bale reckoned the boy wasn’t getting all too many hugs in his big shiny office up in the Dark Ascent. Couldn’t rightly blame anyone for that.

“Remind me to have a talk with Onecup about letting filthy Councilors onto my ship without warning me,” Bale said.

He went into the bedroom while the others stayed behind. He moved quietly, careful not to wake up Juko and Ryssa, sound asleep on his bed. He threw on a pair of breaches then one of his hide vests. Idris was leaning on the doorway.

“What do you plan to do with the kids?” he wondered.

Bale stared at them for a moment before answering. “Don’t rightly know yet. Can’t send them back to some coward like their last caretaker. Plus...”

“We could take the girl from you, see that she is trai—”

“Get that *pfassking* thought out of your head, boy, or I’ll beat it out of you.”

Idris held his hands up to show he meant no offense. He didn’t press.

It was a good thing the Royal Guard had stayed outside. He reckoned they’d have skewered him just for threatening the Voice. The kids stirred in their sleep, and he immediately regretted raising his voice.

“Boy, how’d you get in this deep with *them*,” Bale hissed. He meant the Dark Brotherhood. He knew it. Idris knew it.

“What can I say? They needed a dash of charm. Couldn’t help but oblige!”

Bale snorted as he shouldered past him. He grabbed two glasses in one hand, swiped a bottle of Corellian whiskey off the counter and motioned for him to sit. The Voice did as asked while Bale poured their drinks. Kaela threw herself down in one of the chairs around the table and kicked her feet up. She waved her hand and a third glass flew off the shelf into her palm. Their eyes met. She had one of those grins on her face like the ones she used to have when she’d done mischief as a child. Bale rolled his eyes and poured her a drink.

“Her father’s daughter,” Idris mused.

Bale threw his head back and downed the contents of his glass in one gulp before slamming it down on the table and filling it back up. “Alright, kid, I’ll bite. Why are you here? Getting stuffy down there in a roomful of Dark Councillors?”

“Actually,” Idris began, flashing one of his sly smiles. He took a sip from his glass, grimaced, then said, “That’s just it. Gotta muck around the bottom, you know? Remember where I come from.”

“Oh-ho, you *slagchucker*,” Bale growled. It was all in good fun, and he couldn’t help but laugh. The kid had always had a quick wit. It’s what made him such a fun drinking companion.

“Seriously, Idris, why *are* you here?” Kaela asked.

“I am serious,” the Mandalorian insisted. “What? Are you going to make me say it? Fine, fine. I wanted to check in on the two of you.”

“Huh, you’d think the *Voice* would send delegates,” the Zabrak said to his daughter.

She shifted in her seat, gesturing sweetly and batting her eyelashes as she cooed, “Aw, papa. The Voice cares. He *really* does.”

“*Aliit ori’shya tal’din*,” said Idris.

Bale didn’t speak Mando’a, but he recognized the phrase.

Family is more than blood.

They drank in silence until Idris scoffed and tossed a datapad onto the table. Then he flicked it on and slid it over to Bale. The screen was bright in the darkness and it took a moment for Bale’s eyes to adjust. He scrubbed at his new ocular implant with the back of his hand as he tried to make sense of what he was seeing. It was a topographical map of Arx.

“What am I looking at?” he asked.

“The fruit of your recklessness,” the Voice answered. “The Collective is in disarray. You kicked the rot-wing’s nest with that stunt of yours.”

“I still don’t understand why they converged on us like that,” Kaela wondered.

“They *really* hate your old man,” Bale joked.

“It was all a lucky happenstance,” Idris explained. He took another sip before continuing. “The perfect chain reaction. It all came apart after Bale took down that hunting party in the warehouse. Then *you* went all *darjetii* on their last few survivors. The Hive Mind was drawn to the chaos like mynock to an open engine until larger squads were inadvertently pulled off mission and sent in to counter Tavros. The crack that brought their foundations crumbling down.”

Bale sat back, letting it all sink in as he thumbed his cybernetic eye. Idris and Kaela both watched him from over the brim of their cups.

“What?” he asked.

“Oh, nothing,” Kaela answered.

“Okay. My turn to bite. What’s going on with the eye and the squinting?” Idris did some kind of weird, winking motion with his own eye.

“What squint?” Bale didn’t know where he was going with this.

“By the stars! He doesn’t see it?” Idris burst out laughing.

“It’s sensitive to light, okay?” Bale downed his drink and filled it up again while the other two laughed.

Speaking through the tears and the laughter, Kaela said, “And that color! Why would you not get one that matched? You look like one of those newborn Loth-wolf pups with the diverging eye colors. ”

“It... was the only one they had.” Bale shifted, suddenly uncomfortable and uncharacteristically self-conscious. He held up his glass, swirled the drink around. There he was, frowning, his shoddy, colorless mechanical eye glaring back at him from across the reflection. It didn’t look so bad. A little rugged, sure, but then, there was nothing wrong with that. Then it twitched, A twisted half-wink.

“I’m going to need an eyepatch”, he grumbled as he buried his face in his glass to the sound of their laughter.

The End