

Sera didn't expect to find Zig in the garden.

Karran and her had gone looking in all of the normal spots on the *Voidbreaker II*. She had tried sensing her through the Force, but that had felt...dull, since what had happened. Like she'd chipped the blade of her mind, and hadn't remembered to sharpen it again. So, they did it the old fashion way, and checked the vents, the gunnery deck, the sauna. Lastly, they stopped in the engineering deck, every nook and cranny and hidden crack filled to the brim with junk that the Zygerrian had collected. Maybe...junk wasn't the right word. Odds and ends welded together into devices that neither of them had any name or use for, moving, abstract sculptures built from wire and blasted circuits, and a set of familiar statuettes. Two Zabraks, one tall and broad-shouldered, the other short and svelte. They clacked them together, groin to groin, for old time's sake...but it wasn't the same.

The old *Voidbreaker* was gone. The old crew was scattered. The old times had died. Ripped to pieces by the blast that sent their old vessel smashing into the earth. Burnt to ashes by the grenade that had taken Karran's arm, and his spirit, for so long. Pulled apart by the cruel, megalomaniac machinations of a madman, Rodrigue Tyris, who had sought to take everything from them, and leave nothing but blood and rust in his wake.

They all still lived, preserved by fate, like the shiny little statues in Ziggy's hidey hole. But, all those scars added up. They built, and they built, and they built, until it became hard to recognize who you were looking at anymore. It was hard to know if you would ever have "old times" again. If you would ever be...okay.

Sera left Karran at the *Voidbreaker II* with a kiss, and a promise to drop by before she left back to Fort Blindshot. At least that was a promise that she knew that she could keep. Strolling back to the Phantom Complex -the construction that Sera had borne witness to when she first came to Qel Droma long completed- she tried to wrack her brain for other places that Ziggy could be hiding. A holocall to Alaisy had produced little result. Zig wasn't there. Neither was she with Marick...though, it had been Atyiru who picked up the phone, and not Tyris. He was still working through his own...*thing*.

Scars. Matted over every inch of the flesh that made up the self, the petty, paltry matter of the psyche. She'd never realized just how they could *build*. Piling on top of each other, spilling into every moment, waking or unconscious.

Sera kept marching on, and told herself that she was fine. Ziggy was probably in the training room. They would talk, they would laugh, have a sweet little tilly. Just like old times. Just like the good times. When she knew it was going to be alright, all good, okay.

She didn't find her in the training room. Instead, the Zygerrian was sat, silent, earns unmoving, amidst the bountiful greenery of the Phantom Complex's hydroponic garden. A place that Sera loved...but, that she was fairly certain Zig had never even commented about, save for the fact that something about the design of the walkways threw off the structural integrity of the turbolift

shaft, something that she seemed oddly concerned about. As far as Sera knew, she hated the place. And yet, there she was. Quiet. Not...doing *anything*. Not fiddling with her tools. Not making something, like she was constantly, *incessantly* wont to do. Not sparring, or blogging, or ogling Alaisy's rear in her latex, or laughing, or smiling, or...anything.

Zig sat silently. And that wasn't okay.

What a way to start the New Year, huh?

--

Zabraki swore not to commit violence on Life Day.

It was one of their oldest, most time-honored traditions. The holiday hadn't taken long to worm its way into tribal culture. That shouldn't have been at-all strange. Life Day had a unique propensity for cultural adaptation; something about the annual celebration was undeniably appealing, whether one subscribed to the old faith that had inspired it, or not. But, among the Zabrak tribes, the key tenets of Life Day -peace, honor, love for one another, and joy on earth- were universally admired. It was a day of love, of sharing within one's family, and one's tribe. A day of joy, where duties were ignored, feasts were held, where groups came together to celebrate the simple pleasures of their life. And, it was a day of peace. No one killed on a day dedicated to life. No one struck another. Not over the most grievous offenses of honor. Even sparring was shunned...save for in the form of dance, of course.

Thankfully, it was only the day before Life Day. Those rules didn't apply. Not to say that Sera wasn't looking forward to the dancing of course. She was looking forward to a great deal. But, life has a way of disappointing us. Even on Life Day.

She and Motraraka had a familiar, morning rhythm. She would wake up, complete her run, eat her breakfast, and find him in training room, whether it in the padded walls at Blindshot, the dojo-style layout in Karran's compound, or the luxurious setting provided at the Citadel. It had been option number three, then. She would stride through the door, ready for the spar. It would insult her, and she would greet them back. Then, they would start.

The old B1 didn't insult her when she walked in, this time. It simply...stood there, at the center of the mat, unblinking ocular units staring emptyly. When she stepped forward, closer to the droid, she had started to get the feeling. Something was...very, very wrong.

*"S-s-sorry, k-kid. It-it isn't k-karkininin me, I s-swear."*

She wasn't sure where it had gotten the vibroblade, but in a moment, the bot lashed out. The Force saved her, of course, a supernatural shriek piercing her mind, forcing her to jolt back instinctually. The whirring blade passed within a centimeter of her throat. A single twitch forward would have spilled her lifeblood onto the mat...for what?

Motrarak maintained the forward press, throwing a metallic shoulder into her chest in a simulacrum of a move that she had often used against it during their spars. Over the course of their training, the bot had mapped her movements, her patterns, every one of her strategies. It gave her the rare opportunity to fight an opponent that could mirror her, forcing her to find new tactics. But, normally, her trainer was only insulting her, not trying to slit her throat.

Sera reached for her hip...and found nothing. No saber. No dagger, even. She'd left them at the door, while she went to spar.

A metal foot caught her retreat, and the Zabrak fell backwards. One hand shot out, grasping at air as the dagger came down...

Her hand closed...and as it did, an invisible grip closed around the droid's thorax. Metal buckled, and sparked, and whirred. Held in place, the B1 slowly, surely, crushed in on itself like an empty can, electronics scrambling. Motraraka stumbled, and then fell into Sera's arms as she moved to catch it. Slowly, the droid's voice whirred to life, slurring as it's processor croaked it's last.

*"So-rry. K-k-kid. T-hank y-you. Kn-knew...I w-was good. F-f-for. For something."*

Sera watched as her droid's eyes blinked into darkness, and died for the last time. She felt an icy chill creep over her hearts, looking at it. Ziggy had helped her repair the bot a dozen times, as the Zabrak had a knack for breaking the poor thing during training...but this wasn't something that she could repair. Something hit her, then. A low, clawing sensation of loss...and that something was wrong. Something was so *terribly* wrong.

Her holopad vibrated. A new message received...from the Consul. A video. Sera's finger tapped play.

She was up and running before it even made it halfway through.

--

"Ziggy?" Sera questioned, her voice soft, wavering. She could have snuck up through the garden, as silent as she wanted to be. But, she couldn't just...*sneak up* on Ziggy. Not now. Not after what had happened.

The Zygerrian's left ear twitched, but she gave no reply. Slowly, Sera stepped to her side, gazing down at her friend. Zig was dressed as she normally was, though no strains or traces of oil marked her jumpsuit, or smeared down her cheeks. Large, golden eyes stared forward, her lips pursed tightly. Slowly, she looked up, and gaze the Zabrak what might have passed for a smile.

"Oh. Hey, Serry."

“Hey, Ziggy.”

Things hadn't been the same since they had returned from the headquarters of the Empty Eye's. Sure, Rodrigue was captured, suppressed, bound and imprisoned. Sure, his faction had been dismantled, his droid scrapped, his power and dynasty and chance of a lineage ripped away from him. Sure, he was broken, defeated. They *had* won. Together, they *had* won. But, what he had done lingered after him. Scars, left over.

Dozens dead in Estle. Massacred by an onslaught of droids, before the Arconanas had swept them away. Or, killed in “accidents” as Rodrigue's hack brought down speeders, shorted out life support in the hospital, sparked gas fires in Capac Ring.

PHIL, dead. Motraraka, dead. Some circuits just couldn't be recovered, or repaired.

And, the scars. Marick just seemed...dead to the world. The lights were on, the door was open, but she couldn't tell if anyone was really home. He was getting better, slowly, under Atyiru's care. But, even she couldn't heal everything. You could wipe a scar out from the flesh, but you couldn't pull it from the mind.

Ziggy was quiet, and she just got quieter. Things would be alright, for a few hours. They would talk and laugh and spar, just like normal, just like things were okay. Then, something would change. Seeing her beskar set it off. Seeing her vambraces, too. A quiet voice, a particular laugh. Then, things would go wrong. The light behind Ziggy's eyes would fade to something feral, something hurt. They would lose track of her, only to find that she'd popped up somewhere completely different, hours later, pretending nothing had happened. Like everything was fine.

She and Alaisy were dealing with it in their own way, Sera was sure. The Sith...she had only seemed to come out of the whole ordeal stronger. Darker. Angrier. But Ziggy? She...she was starting to remind Sera of how Karran had been. How he'd lost himself, falling deeper and deeper into a pit that he couldn't even see. Like chains, dragging them down, that wound tighter and tighter and tighter when they tried to fight, tried to claw back up. She wouldn't ask for help. She actively avoided it, just like Karran had. She ignored that anything was wrong. Said she was fine, just as Karran had. That was okay.

There were differences, of course. Those terrified Sera. Karran's problem had been...existential. Faceless, formless. The fear of his own weakness, the hatred of the confines of his own flesh. Ironically, that made it easier for Sera to confront, in her own way. Take something nameless, and counter it with something solid. A promise. An old oath, of family, of kin, of love.

Zig's spectre was anything but nameless. Anything but faceless. Rodrigue Tyrus still lived, and while he did, so did the demon in her heart, a chink in her armor that she just couldn't patch. Even crushed and broken, he held a modicum of power over her...and that was something that could never be healed. That would never be okay.

Ancestors, she wanted to kill him. Just thinking of the man set something burning inside of the Zabrak. His name was a match tossed onto fuel, igniting pure, poisonous hatred. Sera *hated him*. For what he'd done to her friends. And, she hated him for how he made *her* feel. Powerless. Powerless to protect Ziggy. Powerless to help her, even now that he was beaten.

It would have been so easy. So easy.

--

The interrogation room was quiet, now. The voices that had filled it moments before, angry and hot and fearful, had settled. They had taken all that they needed from poor, poor Rodrigue. Kirra had been located, secured, and brought back to her parents. The last few scraps of info on his criminal organization were all that they needed, and this time, they had torn them from him without much effort. In all his visits to the room, they hadn't even needed to torture him.

Well. Not *physically*, at least. Atyiru had objected to that.

So. The Miraluka worked alongside Alaisy to pry what they could from his brain, while Sera stood at their side. For long hours, the Sith had filled Rodrigue's brain with terrors, horrors, bringing forth his greatest fears, the worst sensations. It was a waking nightmare...confined within his head. Nothing too damaging, of course. The Miraluka made sure of that. Atyiru stepped in often, forcing Alaisy to take a break...something that she was never exactly happy about. Sera could feel her bristling, darkness boiling within her whenever the blind woman stepped in, held her back, made her pause her ministrations. There was an anger there, building slowly. Hatred and mistrust.

When Atyiru stepped back, the nightmares stopped, and the words began. She brought healing, kindness, hopelessly forgiving words. The first few times, Rodrigue had spit at her. Laughed at her. Then, Alaisy's treatment had grown worse and worse, and Atyiru had grown more and more preferable. By the end, he was clinging to her every word, while she pulled what information they needed from his mind, or from his mouth. Sera's job, while Atyiru was focused on questioning, was to monitor his mind. Keep her senses open, watchful, noting truth and lie and every beat of fear.

Hours. Hours spent looking into Rodrigue's mind.

He told them how he'd taken Ziggy down. Distracted her with droids, then allowed her to start slicing into the mainframe. While her attention was pulled away, the ambush came. Doors shut, psychoactive gas flooding the room, sonic emitters battering at her senses. She was almost fully paralyzed by the time he made his way to her, her mind weakened, promised for Force domination. She remained aware, while he was in control. Aware of what he was making her do. Aware of what he did to her, forcing her mind to retreat in the face of torture. Shockprods, endless sonic bombardment...and vids of what he was doing to Marick.

The Hapan withstood the torture. The prods, the hooks, the electricity that fried his flesh and cooked his nerves. He never even flinched under that treatment. So, Rodrigue had given him more of the gas. A formula that he'd cooked up for exactly this purpose. Wildly hallucinogenic, it played on the mind's guilt complexes. Forced it to play and replay it's worst moments. Its regrets, and its sins. Endlessly. Endlessly.

He told them how he'd gotten to Kirra. How his agents had pulled away Lucine and Aiden and the others, distracting them with a firefight in the throne room. How they had slaughtered the infants young attendants, and taken her, covered in blood, to a safehouse in the mountains. What he had planned to do with her. Training her as a weapon, as a successor, a tool to bring his sons into line, to maintain his lineage.

He told them everything, eventually. Sweating, nearly unconscious, Rodrigue rocked back in his chair, murmuring low under his breath. A portion of his face was paralyzed by whatever Atyiru and Wyn had done to cut him off from the Force, drooping numbly.

They had left her alone with him. Taking the intelligence to the Consul, probably...and going to feed Kirra, of course.

Sera blinked, looking at him. Looking at the sallow intelligence that his behind his eyes. The face, once cruel, now so weak. So pathetic.

Motraraka and PHIL.

Marick, silent, broken.

Ziggy. Ziggy and her scars.

Sera pulled her dagger from its sheath, and stepped forward.. It would be so *easy*, so *simple*, to prevent it from ever happening again. To get retribution for all that had happened. To end it, end *him*. She could feel it. She could see it.

The blade pierced easily through the soft flesh of the nose. The skin would part easily before the sharpened tip, bone grinding against the blade as she forced it through with the palm of her hand. Through the skull, into the brain, blood pouring down his face, onto her hands. Then, again, through the left eye. And the throat. And the right eye. Over, and over, and over again, she brought the blade down, smashed it through, until the blood coated her, her hands, her body, her soul.

Sera blinked.

She stood before Rodrigue, her dagger in her hand. He didn't even look at her, staring into the middle distance, mumbling. Ancestors...she had never, *never* felt that before. Never been on the

verge of losing *control*. The anger, hate, building like a storm within her. Glorious and horrible, beautiful and terrible, a pulsing, black flame, waiting to be let free.

Sera stepped back from Rodrigue, trembling. She could feel it still, burning in her chest. So real. So alive.

She had held Ziggy. Told her that she was better than him. That she didn't *need* Rodrigue, because she was stronger than he was. Better than he was.

Sera didn't know if she could say the same.

--

Sera wanted to say something. Anything. It had worked for Karran, hadn't it? Words, promises, love and friendship given freely. It was what she had, and it *worked*. She couldn't just fix him, of course. That had been the problem in the first place; he needed to fix himself, heal himself. What Sera had needed to do was get him to see that he *could*, that he was worth fixing in the first place.

Now, she didn't know. Her words failed her. All she wanted...was to know that Ziggy would be alright. To help her heal. To help her...be okay.

But she couldn't. It wasn't something that she could force. Something that she could fix with a smile, or a hug, or a kiss. Sera didn't have the tools that she had to help Karran. The culture that they shared, the blood and ink that she could promise him, the perfect words to bring him along. None of that would work, this time. Killing Rodrigue wouldn't work, either, as much as she thought it would. The better portion of her knew that.

So, Sera said nothing, for a long moment. Instead, she folded her legs, and sat down in the soil, her shoulder brushing against Zig's. They sat in silence, watching the water pour down into the pools below, plantlife blowing in the garden's artificial breeze. Sera could feel the life around them, pulsing, growing. Innocent and free. She could feel the life in Ziggy, too. Pained...but bright, still.

Sera looked to her friend. Gently, slowly, she lay her head on Ziggy's shoulder, blue eyes blinking closed.

"It's okay...to not be okay."

Ziggy said nothing. Slowly...Sera felt her relax, leaning into the Zabrak. A little bit of tension melted away, like fog before sunlight.

She didn't have the connection that Alaisy had to her friend, the bond that tied them together. She didn't have Rodrigue's power over others, to control, to kill. She didn't have Atyiru's power to heal, or her ability to forgive so effortlessly. Her anger still burned.

There was only one thing that she could do. *Trust Zig*. Be there for her...and let her heal on her own, in her own way, while Sera healed in hers.

Love her, as her friend. And trust.

Trust that things were going to be okay.