

Beautiful and Terrible as the Dawn

Len Iode, 1066 words

Alethia Archenksova, 1119 words

Turel Sorenn, 1099 words

The hum of repulsorlifts drowned out the sounds of the Myrkrian forest. Alethia Archenksova, Len Iode, and Turel Sorenn watched as the T-5 shuttle lifted off the surface, kicking up some leaves and stirring the vegetation near their landing site. The shuttle turned, its thrusters firing propelling it up to the great pink sky of sunset.

Turel lingered a moment on the sky. “We need to move. Len, which way?”

Len checked his datapad for a moment before pointing off in a northeastern direction. “That way, about two kilometers.”

“Forward march, troops,” Alethia said half-jokingly.

As they made their way from the clearing, the trio of Odanites found themselves going deeper and deeper into the forest. The plant life expanded across their path. Len and Turel drew their cutting implements of choice, one a vibroblade the other a crackling purple lightsaber blade.

As they went, the three were oddly quiet. They had been on many missions before together in various groupings and this quiet weighed on the Chiss' mind.

It must be the mission, he thought as he made another swipe at the vines before him with his blade. *We really can't afford to lose this one.*

The mission was a daring one: reach the temple of the so-called ‘Desired One’ and extract it. A stone artifact from the earliest times of the Jedi and Sith Orders, the Desired One could, according to those same legends, grant a wish to someone.

Naturally, the Jedi of the Praxum wanted to study this object and unlock the secrets of the past Jedi who allegedly took part in its manufacture. However, when the Odanties arrived they found that Plaguian Forces were on the ground searching for this same artifact. Somewhat predictably, the arriving forces had traded shots and now there was a full shooting war on Myrkr.

Police action, Len thought as he smirked, cutting through a particularly tough branch.

The Odanite scientists and archeologists believed they had deciphered the location of the Temple of the Desired One, but there was a catch. It was roughly five kilometers inside the Plagueian lines, but as luck would have it it was a relatively undefended section. Selected by the Council, the trio had been ordered to drop behind the lines and as quickly as possible reach the target, return to the infiltration site and escape with their prize.

Turel and Len both had pushed back saying that the mission was extremely risky. Using the same ingress and egress point was potentially lethal, but they did admit it was faster that way than picking a new site that could easily be ten kilometers or more away. Clearings were not common on Myrkr.

“I hope we don’t run into any old friends,” Turel punctuated his sentence by altering his appearance through the Force to look like Selika Roh Di Plagia. He struck a seductive pose against a nearby tree.

Alethia rolled her eyes and kept marching forward. She had worked with the Jedi long enough to know not to react to his flimsy attempts at humor. *Can’t Sorenn just enjoy a pleasant silence without chattering?* she pondered as she passed by him.

Len was similarly unamused. “Can we focus on the mission please?”

Turel broke the impromptu illusion with a wave of his hand before returning to his position. He would never say out loud that he was nervous and afraid. Trying to get a rise out of his companions was a distraction from his mind racing with all the possibilities of how this mission could go wrong before they even got to the Desired One. The Sentinel took a deep breath and reached his consciousness through the currents of the Force. The life of the forest echoed all around him but the Jedi could not sense the presence of any sentients nearby beyond his companions.

The trio continued their trek through the Myrkr forest without encountering any resistance save some particularly troublesome mosquitoes. Turel found himself impressed by Len’s ability to travel for so long on high alert. Surely pointing a blaster at every critter who rustled the bushes would get tiring after a while. Alethia moved silently and skillfully, as any agent should.

Suddenly a wave of power rushed over Turel, forcing him to lean against a rock to keep his balance. It was like nothing he had ever felt through the Force. It was neither light nor dark. As the Jedi struggled to keep his focus on the physical world he could feel a presence in the back of his mind beckoning him to move in a particular direction.

“We need to change course,” Turel stated, still leaning against the mossy rock. “The temple is that way.” He pointed.

“How do you know?” Len inquired.

Alethia looked in the direction Turel had indicated, “the Force.”

“Can you feel it too?” Turel asked, genuinely confused.

The silver-haired woman paused, looking down at the verdant floor for a moment. “I... honestly don’t know. Just a gut feeling is telling me you’re right.”

Len pulled out a datapad in a huff, checking the map. “Well, your gut is taking us closer to an enemy position than I’d like.”

“Trust me,” Turel said with none of his usual sarcasm. He was dead serious and that frightened the Chiss more than anything else.

After wandering seemingly into nowhere for half an hour the trio came to a large hill with a barely visible entrance to a small cave.

“Watch out for traps,” Len chided as the team approached the cave.

Turel cautiously crossed the threshold reaching out through the Force to search for threats. Suddenly the sentinel felt dizzy, overwhelmed, like the flowing rivers of the living Force instantly transmuted into a tidal wave. He stumbled forward, using a stone pillar to keep his balance. His vision blurred then refocused into something different, something brighter. He was in the courtyard of the Praxieum on Kiast. Turel started to question how he was here, but a calming sensation washed over him, reassuring the confused Jedi that everything was as it should be.

Vorsa approached. “It’s time.” The Neti extended her hand to guide her partner and former student toward his big day.

Time for what?

Turel looked down and his utilitarian mission attire was gone and in its place was a set of earthen colored Jedi robes. The robes of a **Master**. He looked ahead and saw the entire Odan-Urr council in front of him. No awkwardness, no apprehension, no disdain for his past decisions, only pride and respect.

Corazon ran up, the bright Pantaron throwing a massive hug around his mentor. "You finally did it, you're a real Jedi Master."

Dark clouds began to roll in and block out an otherwise perfect sunny day.

I'm not a Master. I haven't earned this. There's still so much anger inside... I can feel it.

Thunder clapped in the distance. Vorsa and Cora stopped and looked upon Turel with concern asking in unison, "What's wrong?"

"This, all of this, this isn't real..."

Turel stumbled back waving his hands in a defensive gesture. His mind falling back on years of training. But this was no simple illusion. The more he struggled the darker the clouds became. The almost frantic Jedi recognized his daughter as she walked up and took her place beside Vorsa.

"What's the matter, daddy? Isn't this what you wanted?" the Togruta girl inquired.

More than anything.

"It is," Turel spit out slowly almost in a whisper, "but my journey is not complete. There are no shortcuts on the Jedi path."

It took every ounce of discipline and willpower for the sentinel to focus his mind but eventually he was able to push back the tide. At least for a moment. Thunder clapped loudly and the wind picked up. When Turel opened his eyes again after regaining clarity his family and friends were gone and a hauntingly familiar figure stood before him.

"Maybe you never wanted peace in the first place, son."

Anger roared inside Turel's heart like a caged dragon. "You don't get to call me that, my father is dead."

The middle-aged human standing before the Jedi grinned. "He lives in you. In the deep dark places you don't talk about at parties. You know all of this," the man gestured around at the Praxeum, "is a lie. You can't deny who and what you are forever."

Turel smiled, "perhaps but neither can you...Desired One."

The visage of the older man sighed and his expression grew blank. "I am but a reflection of you, the real you, an echo of your wake in the Force."

"I don't know what or who you are," Turel stated with conviction, "but I know that you lie. You tempt with promises of power and the heart's deepest desires. Well, not today. I'm going to find where you lie and take you somewhere no one will ever find you again."

The Jedi threw his arms to his sides, calling upon the light to help break the spell. Lightning struck the ground in front of the image of the first man he ever killed.

"You are not the only soul in this place..."

Turel collapsed onto the floor from the effort, back inside the temple of the Desired One.

As Len crossed the threshold, just as Turel had moments before, he found himself instantly seated in the first row of a theater or lecture hall. Iode glanced back, but the threshold was gone. The stunned Chiss turned back around, on the stage before him stood four figures. Their faces blurry, he blinked. It was then that Len realized his gear was gone. He was in his lieutenant's uniform. The seats of the hall were suddenly filled with people who seemed to be a million kilometers away. A hint of applause in the background, clearly muffled by design, Iode thought. His legs carried him up from his seat towards the center of the stage. As he climbed the last step, four familiar faces greeted him with smiles and one that he barely remembered. This whole scenario was so familiar, but why? As the faces became clearer he knew exactly why.

"Aisha, Edgar, Turel, Xantros, and... General Sol?" Iode froze. "My promotion."

Time seemed to slip forward to Turel and Edgar applying his new rank.

The whisper to Len's right ear from his mentor happened. "This was the happiest moment of your life."

Iode recoiled. That was not what Drachen was supposed to say. The room was suddenly empty save Xantros, Aiesha, Edgar, Turel, and the General. However the General seemed different now. In the uniform and trappings of the KUDF Chief of Staff was Kenneth Iode.

“Are you the Desired One?” Len posed to the duplicate of Edgar before him.

“Yes and no,” he replied with a smile.

Gresee approached the Chiss. “We all are.”

His adoptive father spoke. “Don’t be afraid, son. We each represent an aspect of the Desired One.”

Xantros grinned. “This moment was the happiest of your life. Yet you now run from what it means to be.”

Turel spoke disappointedly. “You swore to defend New Tython.” The sky turned blood red and the building around them was completely shattered. Screams

“Which while in a different form, you have chosen not to lead in combat.”

“That’s true, but only because the deaths weigh too heavy on me. A person can only take so much!”

“That is true.” Grease nodded “People can only take so much emotional stress before they become...”

“Damaged or insane,” Turel finished. “Maybe your wish for peace is understandable.”

“Except that you willingly did this to yourself. You knew the risks did you not? You chose this life freely?” Xantros said, twisted joy coming from the question.

“He did,” Ken replied flatly. “But war changes a man. You now see what a life is worth, you see its fragility.”

The world around them flashed into various battlefields Len had been to. Killed on. Their corpses before him in a giant pile, two meters tall and wide. It grew wider now, holding KUDF and OEF uniformed bodies.

Len became sick to his stomach. These people talking to him, the images. It was all too much for him. Doubled over, the Chiss started to scream.

“No. NO!”

“We or I can offer you peace.” Gresee said comfortingly.

“You can go back to this moment and walk away.” Turel said gesturing to a phantom image of Len taking his original oath. Which dissolved into a scene of Len sitting on a balcony reading a book, a small workshop and many trophies regaling his trickshot skills.

“Who knows what will change,” Ken said mournfully, disappearing leaving only the uniform on the ground.

“But at least their blood won’t be on your hands,” Xantros said grinning evilly.

The feeling of hot embers down his back was nipping at Iode’s skin. The pain and sick feeling doubling in strength, Len spat out.

“I...will...not change...anything.”

“Then perish.”

There was no flash, no blinding white light—Alethia stepped through the doorway and was simply there. For a moment, she almost recognized it as the High Councillor’s office on Pharos, not as it was now, but as she had originally designed it. But the colors were wrong, with rich crimson replacing the deep blues she had favored. And the viewport, as well. Pharos looked out into the depths of space, the vast blackness punctuated by the planets of Kias and stars seen through the eerie shimmer of the Palioxis Cloud. But looking through the transparisteel, Alethia’s eyes saw a vast cityscape in the afternoon sun.

That afternoon.

This was a memory then, a vision of the past, but not her memory. She remembered that day, always would, but when the Separatists’ droid armies rained down across Coruscant, she had watched from her family’s balcony. Her eyes darted across the window, looking for

landmarks, trying to orient herself based on the looming Senate Tower. Alethia frowned slightly as it dawned on her that she was looking out from within the Senate building itself.

Movement. Behind the desk opposite her, the throne-like chair turned and she saw him. It was a face she had never seen in the flesh—still hadn't, she rationalized—but one that seemed to be there every time she closed her eyes.

"It's a pleasure to see you, Councillor, though I must admit you're here a bit sooner than expected." Sheev Palpatine smiled at her. Palpatine, the humble Republic patriot risen from a quaint backwater to save his people from insurrection and corporate abuse. The ruin of the galaxy, though they didn't know it yet.

"You're dead," Alethia said. "Broken and defeated, and no amount of Sith trickery will ever change that."

"Perhaps." She knew his smile, recognized it from a thousand propaganda images. Alethia had always thought of it as paternal. Now she knew it for what it was: patronizing. "But I think you exaggerate, my dear. After all, I live on in all sons and daughters of the Empire."

"A hated memory isn't much of an afterlife."

"Oh," his face twisted into an impression of concern. "My poor, deluded girl. Is that what you tell yourself? That you hate me?"

"Everything you are, everything you have ever been, is a lie."

"And yet you believe in me. Everything you do, everything you are, carries my will into the future."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Order? Centralization of power? Distrust of the Jedi? Everyone seemed to see it but you." Palpatine chuckled. "Oh, I'm afraid that the only difference between us is that you weren't quite clever enough to get away with it. And I had such high hopes for you."

Alethia said nothing. There was nothing she could say, nothing that he wouldn't twist against her

"Enough of this dreary talk. This is a joyous day. Out there, right now, this is the day you became *mine*."

Alethia looked past him, out the viewport and across Republic Plaza. Somewhere out there, her ten-year-old self was looking up at the battle raging across the sky. She had felt so helpless, so small. Palpatine was right. After that day, she gave herself over to the New Order that she might never feel weak or helpless again.

“Not anymore,” Archenksova whispered.

“I can feel the conflict within you, child,” Palpatine said. “But we both know how this ends.”

Alethia could feel him then, a dark, oily presence in her mind that threatened to overwhelm her. She could feel her face contorting into a smile against her will but fought against the words that came to her mind unbidden. The loyalty oath. The same one she’d sworn in SAGroup, at the Academy, in the ISB, the words almost on her lips. Her fingers wrapped around the hilt of her lightsaber, squeezing it and twisting the emitter up towards her torso.

“I would rather die than give you the satisfaction.”

The Emperor scowled. The lightsaber tore itself from Alethia’s grip, hurtling across the room to Palpatine’s outstretched hand. “Insolence. I raised you better than that, my child.” The words were cold, all pretense of warmth gone from the Chancellor’s face and voice. “If you won’t listen to reason...” He raised his hands before him, face twisting into a cruel smile. “...perhaps you will respond to Force.”

Alethia screamed. The biting tendrils of lightning arced from Palpatine’s outstretched hands and hit her with such violence that she slammed back into the wall and slumped to the ground.

“Such a waste,” Palpatine murmured.

The lightning arced across the room once more, but this time it crashed into Alethia’s outstretched hand. It crackled and sparked up and down her arm, but where there had been pain before there was only clarity now. She could submit, let the monster ravage her body and soul as he had done for her entire adult life. She could admit he was right about her, let the Sith—Palpatine, Pravus, Tavisæn—wallow in their unearned power. She could hope for the Jedi to save her and everyone else. Or she could make a choice.

She could refuse to be limited by an accident of birth. She could refuse to let others dictate her future and instead take destiny itself by the throat.

If Palpatine had taught her anything, it was this: Power is not shared. Power is taken.

Alethia stood up. Palpatine lashed out. This time, she was ready. She did not resist the onslaught of lightning but let it wash over her, suffuse her. And then, from the very depths of her being, she pulled.

Palpatine's expression morphed slowly from coldness to anger to terror. He tried to stop once he realized what was happening, but he had lost control.

Alethia pulled. Her Emperor meant to use the Force to overwhelm and destroy her, but she could not be overwhelmed. She wanted this power. She deserved it. And she would take all there was to take.

Palpatine screamed. He burned. And Archenksova ripped his power from him until there was nothing left but a smouldering pile of ash where there had once been a Sith Lord.

Alethia looked down at her hands, finding them cupped around a small stone. So innocuous, but she knew it immediately: the Desired One. She clutched it tightly in one hand, squeezed, felt it thrum with power and beat like a second heart. With the other hand, she reached out and her lightsaber obeyed her command, flying from the opposite side of the room to its mistress.

Alethia turned, clutching the Desired One, and walked out of the room and back to the depths of the temple.

They had so much work to do.