

Ria'd Stesca

A submission for the fiction competition: **A Chaotic Opening**

Dandoran

39ABY

Ria'd was tired. He was dirty, and he was hungry. The Zabrak's hands lingered over the injured child's wound, a rip in the small boy's knee that was bleeding out onto the table he lay on. Explosions in the distance rocked the foundations of the building each time they neared. The lights flickered in the room as the sick, hurt, and lost waited for their turn. The wound miraculously began to knit back together like time reversed the damage done to it. Ria'd was no doctor, but he was a proficient healer and was determined to put his skills to good use.

"There, all done. That wasn't so bad, was it?" the Jedi warmly said as he smiled at the boy, who shook his head and wiped the tears out of his eyes. The boy's mother picked him up off the table and mouthed a 'thank you' to Ria'd, confirming what he believed all along. Good could be found in times of war, even if he had to be the one to do it. The people of Dandoran didn't deserve this. The room was packed with not only those waiting for medical attention, but those waiting for news on the whereabouts of their loved ones. Some rejoiced when they were reunited with their families, bringing sparks of hope to an otherwise bleak set of circumstances. That hope was then crushed when the wailing of those that discovered their loved ones were dead filled the room. No matter where the Jedi went across Tipool City, the situation was always the same. The rooms may have had different layouts, but there were always those that were hurt, tired, hungry, and grieving that needed the Zabrak's help.

The Defender took particular notice of the two men in the room that watched his every move like hawk-bats. They were a constant reminder of what Ria'd was. A prisoner of Scholae Palatinae, a man with a leash around his neck so tight he could practically feel them choking him with their stares. Ria'd was a dead man. He, a Jedi, had wandered into Clan Scholae Palatinae territory, fought with their Proconsul and was sentenced to death. The only reason he wasn't already dead was that his skills as a healer were particularly useful in times like this. They said if he did a good job that he could be granted a fair trial. The Jedi might have been a caring soul with a heart of gold, but he wasn't stupid. He knew he was living on borrowed time. So, he decreed to himself that in whatever moments he had left, he would spend it helping those who needed it most, because that was just the kind of guy Ria'd was.

The Zabrak wiped sweat from his forehead, ignored the rumbling of his stomach, and took a deep breath before he cleaned the table he worked at with the cleanest cloth he could find. It was still filthy, but it was better than nothing, and many weren't fans of sitting in someone else's blood.

"Next, please!" Ria'd called out, but no-one stepped up. Instead, the room fell silent as the two men watching the Jedi suddenly marched toward him with a third in tow, giving this new individual the right of way. She was a Zygerrian woman that stood a little taller than most females of her species. Her immaculately maintained attire, tinged a natural red, shone brightly compared to the drab beige of the Tidpool City architecture. Besides missing the tip of her left ear, she somehow maintained a perfectly feline and feminine face amidst all the chaos and carnage that occurred outside. The Zabrak forced himself to swallow the lump in his throat as the trio approached, his heart dropping into his gut.

"This is him," declared the first Scholae Palatinae member. He was a blonde-haired, formally dressed Son of Palpatine, Thran Occasus-Palpatine.

"The Jedi is under our custody, Zyft. Just erm... Please remember that, ok? I don't want to be the one explaining to my Clan's higher-ups that something happened to our prisoner," spoke the second, Xendar Thendaris. Another Human male, only younger and taller. He had an athletic build, bronze coloured skin and jet black hair. His face, upon closer inspection, was exotic, likely due to his mixed ancestry.

"I will keep that in mind," Zyft spoke, her voice gentle, soothing, and laced with an aristocratic lilt. Her bright, golden eyes looked the Jedi up and down, making Ria'd nervous in the process. "You are a Jedi healer, correct?"

Ria'd was so wracked with nerves he almost didn't answer. Nonetheless, with a gathering of citizens and Expansionists watching, the Jedi gave his answer.

"I am," Ria'd stated bluntly, keeping his words short and sweet.

"And you know who I am?" the Zygerrian questioned.

"You are Zyft Yadar, leader of the Tenexir Revenants Expansionists, former right-hand woman of Rasha Hawee."

Ria'd noticed that he perhaps said too much when he observed a noticeable twitch in the Zygerrian's features. Clearly, there were still some sore spots from being declared a traitor before the fighting started. With Avitus now up and gone too, she needed to turn her attention to other ventures. Namely ending this war for their own sakes.

"Excellent. I require your assistance at another campsite," Zyft explained.

The Jedi gazed around the room at the various other medical professionals and Force healers that returned to their duties. Confused, the Zabrak asked the question that lurked at the forefront of his mind.

"Why me?"

"Because this is something only you can help me with," Zyft answered like it was the most obvious statement in the galaxy. It didn't appease the Zabrak one bit, and Ria'd had his

reservations that there was more to it than the Zygerrian was letting on. Yet, with the two Scholae Palatinae clansmen lurking by his sides, he was in no position to inquire any further.

Not that he wanted to. He hated confrontations anyways.

"Very well, I will go with you. On one condition," Ria'd responded.

"Bartering? You're hardly in any position to be doing that, Jedi!" Thran objected as he squared up to the Zabrak, only to be halted when Zyft placed a hand up, halting the Sith from his advance.

"I'm listening," the Tenexir Zygerrian stated.

"These two stay here."

Xendar suddenly burst into laughter, grabbing the attention of the group as he slapped the palm of his right hand against the table.

"Oh, wow! You are a bold one, aren't you? There's absolutely no way that we are ever going to agree to that!" Xendar declared with the utmost confidence.

"I accept."

All three men looked to Zyft, all shocked for one reason or another.

"You can't do this," Xendar replied.

"You have no right," Thran added.

"I have *every* right," Zyft retorted, giving both Palatinae a golden, steely-eyed glare. "I'm in charge of the Expansionists and those that seek to create a new life for themselves away from the shackles of the Principate, away from blood and revenge. If your Clan Summit has issues with my commands, then they can take it up with me after all this is said and done. Am I clear?"

Thran was about to object further before Xendar placed a hand on the Sith's shoulder. Thran looked to his fellow clansman before begrudgingly backing away.

"Good. In that case... Ria'd was it?" Zyft inquired, getting a nod from the Zabrak in return. "Excellent, follow me."

Amidst the glares from the two Scholae Palatinae members, Ria'd gladly followed the Zygerrian through the crowd of the hungry and hurt and into the archway of the building. His spirits lifted once they were out of view.

Out of sight and out of mind, I suppose. The Jedi mused to himself.

"I hope you have no illusions as to the intent of my actions, Jedi. I simply need your services. Nothing more, nothing less," Zyft spoke bluntly, not bothering to face the tall man.

"I understand," Ria'd answered. "However, I sense there's something you are not telling me. There are plenty of others you could have chosen for the task, after all."

Zyft stopped where she stood and spun on her heels, her feminine and feline features piercing into the Jedi's soul.

"Because, my dear, Jedi, if *they* fail, then there's very little I can do. They are notable members of Clans of the Brotherhood. Any transgression against any of them, especially after all their aid would be seen as an act of war. You, on the other hand, are an enigma. You have no Clan affiliation, you are simply a prisoner. A man sentenced to death living on borrowed time. No one will miss you if something bad happens to you," Zyft observed the Jedi as the weight of her words sunk into his consciousness. "Are you happy now?"

"Not... really?" Ria'd replied with an inflexion in his tone of voice, drawing out a sigh from Zyft in response.

"Look, I'm not a monster. Help me with this, and I'll see what I can do to lighten your sentence. Maybe get you life imprisonment or something like that. There are no promises, though. Understand that," the Expansionist leader offered a hand out to the Zabrak. Ria'd looked at it for a moment before clasping his hand with hers, giving it a firm shake.

"Understood."

Tipool City was about as much as one could expect from a planet controlled by one single Hutt. Pristine, lavish, and with enough wealth and credits being thrown around that it made a smuggler's head turn and froth at the mouth. Then on the other side, you have where that smuggler likely lived. Trodden, abused, neglected, and filled with enough scum and villainy to make Mos Eisley feel like Coruscant upper levels in comparison. It was a story of night and day as one took in the surroundings.

Not that it mattered now, especially in Tipool City. It didn't matter what quadrant you were in, destruction lay at every man, woman, and child's doorsteps. Magnificent structures lay in ruins. Towers toppled and streets rested in disarray, a shadow of their former selves. Most of the citizens with more sound judgement attempted to flee the sounds of blaster fire that roared in the distance like an active volcano. The more shady characters on the planet, the thieves, scoundrels, and opportunists among the population decided to take their chances robbing houses, shops, and anything else they could get their hands on. The most unfortunate of whom were buried underneath said buildings as they collapsed on top of them.

The sky above was stained a bloody red as the sun set in the distance. It was the perfect atmosphere for the dirt-filled stench that lingered in the air outside. Foulness squelched under their footsteps as Ria'd and Zyft traversed the inhospitable landscape. The Jedi, in

particular, had an uneasy feeling about the whole situation. A nauseous sensation came over him as the pair passed corpses that lay in the street without a burial. Men, women, and children that had families waiting for them, and would never get one last hug from their mom and dads or a kiss from their loved ones.

"We're here."

Ria'd was so lost in his thoughts that he had not realised that they had arrived. It looked like an old junkers shop, though part of the ceiling had caved in, obscuring parts of the building from access. Once inside, an unbelievably worse odour assaulted the Zabrak's nostrils. The Jedi covered his nose in disgust, and even the Expansionist leader winced at the smell which came from an assortment of burnt electronics and broken water pipes.

"Through here," Zyft instructed. They passed underneath a narrow entrance into a small, circular room. Part of the ceiling, once again collapsed, allowing beams of light to illuminate the small, hastily built table in the middle of the room. Upon it lay a female Togruta with a cybernetic left arm. Her left montral was scarred and missing the tip at the end. She lay there with gashes across her torso and blood leaking out of her open wounds.

"Isn't this?" Ria'd asked, stunned at the sight.

"It is," Zyft answered. "Rasha Hawee. Leader of the Retributionist faction of the Tenixir Revenants."

Then nothing. Ria'd remained silent as he reached out into the Force. He expected to sense the presence of many others, perhaps other Retributionists sworn on revenge clinging to their leader like she was a beacon of destruction powered by hate itself, but no, nothing. Rasha was alone, and she was weak and vulnerable.

"Wha... What happened? Where is everyone?" Ria'd continued to prod.

"Rasha tried to fight the new super soldiers that the Principate deployed. Naturally, she let her rage and bloodlust get the best of her and got everyone with her killed. They are all dead, except her. She's quite lucky."

"Clearly..." the Jedi retorted. "So this favour you asked of me... is..."

"To heal Rasha from her injuries," Zyft finished for the Zabrak, who now sported a confused face. "Don't look at me like that."

"Didn't she imprison you? Didn't she declare you a traitor?" Ria'd carried on. He was more than happy to heal her, he believed that once a spiral of negativity began, it would only lead to more pain, more hate, and more suffering. He thoroughly believed the universe would be a much better place with more understanding and forgiveness. Yet, everything he'd seen since he arrived on Dandora said that most people here thought very differently.

"You're right. She did, and believe me when I say I was tempted to put a blaster in between her eyes and use her corpse for my research, but..." Zyft clenched her fists as her shoulders

tensed, a visible scowl adorning her face. "I'd be lying if I said we could get out of this situation unscathed. The Tenexir Revenants were founded on the principles of freedom and creating a new life for ourselves."

"With a little bit of revenge against the Principate mixed in for good measure," Ria'd interjected.

"Well... The Principate did a lot of us wrong, Jedi. A lot of us wanted to get the kriff away from all of this and start anew. A lot of us wanted payback against those that imprisoned us. Is that so wrong?" Zyft asked rhetorically.

"Two wrongs don't make a right," the Zabrak answered.

"Says the man that has been sentenced to death. Would you say that's just or right?"

Ria'd fell silent.

"No, I thought not," Zyft continued. "Despite what she's done, she banded us all together when we needed it most. That's her gift, and it's what we need to survive. We can get through this if we band together once more not as Expansionists or Retributionists, but as the Tenexir Revenants. Pirates with a chip on our shoulders, desperate to live, united as one. That's the only way we will survive. She can do it, I can't."

Ria'd had heard enough. Not that he needed convincing to help. It was the right thing to do, and nothing would stop him from helping someone who needed it. The Jedi approached the table and inspected the damage upon her body. From directly above Rasha, her injuries seemed far more severe. Ria'd was drained, tired, fatigued, and his stomach growled, begging him for sustenance. This would likely be the last he could use the Force until he rested, and he was going to damn well make sure it counted.

The Defender placed his hands inches above the Togruta's body and closed his eyes, focusing his full attention on the Force, calling upon it to heal and soothe, and to stitch and mend. Zyft observed as seemingly nothing happened. The Zygerrian cocked her head to the side, contemplating if she made the right choice bringing the Jedi here. That was when Rasha's body began to squirm, the Togruta letting out a gasp as the pain began to subside in her body.

Zyft stood amazed, jaw loose and eyes wide. She'd heard the stories of Jedi abilities both on and off the battlefield, but being able to witness it without a blaster being fired next to her ear was an experience. The flesh knit back together, removing any visible scarring. The bleeding stopped as the Togruta's eyes snapped open, the last of her wounds healed. Ria'd collapsed down to the ground, exhausted, gasping for breath as sweat rolled down his face. He shifted his weight against the far wall, unable to summon the strength to do anything more. Rasha threw her legs over to the side of the table and slowly let her feet tap against the duracrete floor beneath them. Her eyes darted immediately to the Zygerrian, ignoring the fatigued Jedi for the moment.

"Zyft," Rasha spoke with a monotonous lilt to her voice. It was quiet and barely audible, but there seemed to be a lack of life in her eyes, like something was missing. The two women stood face to face with one another until a mischievous smirk graced the Revenant leader's face. "WHAT IN THE HELL TOOK YOU SO LONG, YOU KRIFFING IDIOT! I COULD HAVE DIED!"

The Jedi was speechless at the sudden outburst, and he was more surprised when Rasha grabbed hold of the Zygerrian and pulled her close into a tight embrace.

"I'm sorry," Rasha whispered into Zyft's ear. Under normal circumstances, this would have served as a sign of moving forward, bonding together after everything they'd been through both together and individually. That was thrown out of the window when the Togruta pressed her blaster to the side of Zyft's head and pulled the trigger.

A sickening blast ruptured into the Field Medic's skull as her body dropped to the ground before she realised what was going on. Zyft lay there lifeless, unmoving, her eyes rolling into the back of her head.

"NO!" Ria'd cried out, unable to do anything to stop the slaughter. He attempted to Force himself to move, but his fatigue and lack of energy kept him in place.

"I'm sorry, Zyft. I'm really, really sorry. But searching for help is a sign of weakness. A quality the Tenexir Revenants do not need in a leader, one that I don't need in my First Mate," Rasha spoke coldly, a weight sagging on her shoulders as she turned to face the Jedi that was slumped in the corner. "The Principate must be destroyed, even if it destroys us. I won't let anything get in my way. Not Zyft, not the Expansionists, and not you. You won't be telling anyone about this, Jedi."

Ria'd could do nothing but stare, heart pounding in his chest, eyes darting for some way out.

There was none.

"I appreciate what you did for me, so I'll make this quick," Rasha pointed her blaster to the Zabrak, the Jedi unable to do anything more than stare down the barrel.

"Goodbye."

Rasha pulled the trigger, executing the Defender like he was an injured animal. After taking a moment to collect her thoughts, the Togruta left the building, leaving both Ria'd and Zyft with charred marks on their heads.

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