Malgan Markets
Iziz, Onderon

40 ABY

To those who grew up and worked within the ancient market districts across Onderon, the siren calls and exotic smells were a welcome reverie from the purified and less exciting air that surrounded the residential zones. The Iziz Central Market, or the Malgan Markets, was an overflow of stimulation, with something for someone lined to either side of the battered stone streets., providing almost anything possible, whether it was to be sold or to be experienced, to those walking its stone streets. Arguably, Iziz was a city that had a rugged and, but very authentic beauty which attracted tourists who sought to immerse themselves in the old within the new. In other words, those fascinated by history, as well as by creating it, felt right at home immersing themselves in a romantic maze of activity. Vendors desperately competed for the attention of passersby; they cried the value of their wares and some showcased an impressive array of varied merchandise. Yet even their sonorous voices were sometimes drowned out by hovercrafts and departing space-faring vessels that passed above the commercial sector - and also knocked a few loose hat’s from the heads of market customers.

The beauty of Iziz was lost on some, however. On one of the main thoroughfares in the district, Raleien Sonavarret looked about in desperation as he tried to locate his current target.

*There.*

He saw them and reacted immediately. The older Pantoran soldier dashed through the central market. He used his height and bulk to edge through the crowd and maintain pursuit. He chased his target with an energy and fervor that contradicted his bulky and aged frame. He adeptly bounded over toppled chairs and tables, and expertly dodged innocent passers-by, keeping the human male in sight and hoping the chase would soon give way. For every fruit thrown in his direction or bystander roughly toppled during the chase, Raleien’s resolve to capture and kill his target increased. His steady breathing, deep but resolute, maintained his quick stride against the even larger prey. Though he had wanted to capture him before they hit the market, he understood now his best chance was to tire him out, and then corner the target. His Consul had put him up to this task, and though he wasn’t a bounty hunter, he had no qualms hunting down an enemy of his Clan.
Suddenly, the man bounded left between two rows of tall, uneven buildings that faced the Royal Palace, a massive and architecturally ambiguous stone construct near the centre of the city. The street was small enough that locals might have even considered it an alley. Either way, there was limited space, meaning it would be easier to track his target. However, it could just as easily be a dead end, or worse, a deathtrap. But Raleien was committed, and he slowed his pace and drew his hand blaster, rounding the corner and leveling the weapon to fire upon his target....

Raleien stood dumbfounded at the sight before him, his finger still on the trigger. The most beautiful woman he had ever seen stood before him, wiping her used, ruby-stained daggers on the plain black robes of his fallentarget. Of an age with Raleien, she was clearly Togrutan by her red complexion and flowing montrals and head tails, her eyes were a deep and intense blue he could only compare to the vast and clean oceans of Mon Calamari. She was tall, nearly as tall as he was, and very well built, with a body toned by years of combat and hunting. Her stance was strong and slightly arrogant, completely open to attack yet tense, as if waiting for Raleien to make a move and seemingly knowing she could be ready to face him. The very pride emanating from the small smirk on her face brought a slight purple tinge into his warm cheeks.

The Proconsul knew this gorgeous killer before him - had served with her and, more often, against her when the Empire fell as they bounced from mercenary company to security detail and back again. They had each bested each other twice over in battles, duels, and assassinations. She was one of the most dangerous individuals he knew in the wide galaxy, and a sworn enemy. But there was also a mutual recognition of respect and, though Raleien tried to ignore it, a sensual tension between the two.

“Seems like I got here first” she said, her melodious voice reminding him of gentle summer rainfalls on Pantora. “You’re getting slow in your age, Raleien.”

He chuckled and used the motion to subtly shift the muzzle of his blaster to her centre of mass. She clocked the movement and frowned slightly, but said nothing.

He should have been angry with the fact his target had just been taken from him and the fact she was still speaking, and he immediately should have shot her dead and taken the human’s body back to his shuttle for safe transport.

But he didn’t. And that’s when she smiled dangerously.

She took advantage of his hesitation and threw one of her daggers with target precision at his chest. Though he rolled in time to avoid being impaled by the blade, the weapon still found flesh., He felt the searing tear of flesh as the dagger madea deep incision on his left arm before it lodged itself in a wall behind him, the dagger vibrating with the impact.. In the moment, the pain of the wound had led him to drop his hand blaster. He wanted to retrieve it, but the Togrutan bore down on him with her remaining weapon. There was no time.

They began their deadly martial dance. Raleien backed away slowly and made for the open street where his bulk wouldn’t be as restricting. He focused inwards and remembered his training. Raleien had trained in the Mandalorian fighting style, which itself learned from many others before it. Drawing on his adaptable style, he opted to take a defensive posture and take advantage of his enemy’s momentum due to his arm wound. The blue blood that seeped from it concerned him - if he didn’t stop the bleeding soon, he would start to feel some of its effects beyond the pain. ,

“Come now, Cephra. Is an old man like me too much to handle?” Raleien taunted.

She leapt at him and slashed at his throat, but Raleien managed to jump backwards and, thankfully, made it out of the alley. Bystanders scattered at the sight of the bleeding Pantoran man and the Togrutan woman. The loyalist ignored the screams and shouts, his golden eyes locked on his new target. She executed feint where she moved left and struck again, this time looking to pierce his chest. In a movement which contradicted his bulk, he side-stepped and allowed her strike to pierce open air. He flowed from the hips and pivoted, maintaining his centre of gravity as he delivered one, two, then three quick blows to her rib cage, chest, and right armpit. The strikes ruined her balance and led her to drop her remaining dagger. Now they were both unarmed, and she took a moment to recover herself. Raleien did not continue the assault, opting to back away and take a firm stance, fists raised, elbows tucked, ready to counter her next movement.

She regained her balance and the fight continued, unimpeded by the few remaining passersby and no nearby security. The two were equally matched, and they exchanged a few blows. He couldn’t help but notice her own expertise, in what form he couldn’t recognize, coming to bear against his own technique. The duo circled one another and continued to engage in brief bouts before returning to their slow, graceful steps of death. There was an unspoken mutual respect between the two rivals, and Raleien was sure of an unspoken attraction, as well, They sought to test and understand one another. To connect in the only way either truly understood: through combat.

Her immaculate eyes held pain and anger, and the way she held her stance in combat had an aggressive - no, an innate sense of desperation, drawing on all of her strength to win this battle. The punches kept coming, and he utilized her body weight to throw her off guard and to the ground. He had the upper hand as he stood over her - yet in a moment of understanding that came too late, Raleien saw that she retrieved the fallen dagger.

Raleien stepped forward and she pinned the dagger right where his left foot was about to land with a loud cry. He took three steps back and took another, basic stance, hands held at the ready and his body at a slight angle, presenting hisframe at its smallest possible angle.

“Why are we doing this? Why do we fight?” he asked her, trying to convey the truth of his comment.

Expecting her to stop and react to the comment, he found himself on the defensive as she carried out a series of powerful strikes. He knocked aside one blow to his face and another to his groin. A third nearly found his chest before he jumped back. She rushed at him still, looking to slash at his wounded arm. . He instinctively knew it was a feint, designed to have him protect that which was injured so he would forget to protect his more sensitive body parts. And he fell for it. While the dagger didn’t find its mark, her first did. She struck at his kidney. The impact of the blow caused him to cry and reel in pain. She followed with an expertly executed grapple that brought him to the ground. Cephra had pinned him and she held the dagger at his throat.

She sat there for a moment, her face close to his even as her powerful grip pressed down. Her breath, somehow, smelled of the rare roses he had seen on Coruscant - or perhaps it was her perfume.

“You really are quite handsome. The datapads just do not give you credit,” she whispered in his ear, her voice sending shivers down his spine even as he feared his life could be cut in a single flourish along his jugular.

Honesty was the best course of action here. “You were so beautiful I hesitated. I never hesitate.”

“Deadly and gorgeous is my business, darling,” a finger released its grip on the dagger still at his throat, touching the faded battle scars on his cheeks and jawline. “These add a rugged look about you. I almost couldn’t take this job, you know. You were too perfect.”

Raleien laughed, dumbfounded. He knew he wasn’t conventionally unattractive, but he did look at himself in the mirror every morning. Perfect? In that case, perfection certainly was a subjective thing.

“So what’s it to be, Cephra? Going to kill me?”

A silence overcame the two as they thought through their options. Raleien had two, both of which were less than ideal. One was to die at her hands, his blood spilling onto the pavement as she walked away with ten thousand credits and her own life. The other, and the more optimistic option, had him either talk his way out or somehow use what body weight advantage he had over her to knock her off balance, escape her vice grip and possibly escape for his life or, if she followed, begin the battle anew.

She let go of his arm, though he didn’t move as the dagger was still held at his throat. She bent down further, her face nearly touching the pavement. Her eyes poured into his own. Her smile was soft and, somehow, genuine in her moment of triumph. He found his heart racing, knowing she could feel his chest pounding under the pressure of her own body keeping him in place.

“If you’re going to do it, Cephra, then just -” -”

The dagger dropped and her slender finger touched his lips gently, causing him to stop in mid-sentence, stunned by the act.

“Darling, you passed the test with flying colors. You will find a datapad near your docking pad in a small container detailing a job that is double the price of this one. It’s not everyday one can land a hit on me,” she flashed a grin, proving at once her arrogance, and her passion for her chosen trade of mercenary work and bounty hunting.

“You will also find -” she hesitated, unsure as to whether she should say it, going out of her comfort zone.

“Your - what?”

“You’ll find my method of contact, should you so desire.”

“Are you asking me out on a date?” Raleien scoffed, disbelieving.

She laughed and replied, “Only if you ask. And I do expect you to ask.Until then, sweet dreams, handsome.”

His eyes began to flutter closed. Fatigue now rocked his body, and he fought with every ounce of his being to remain conscious. He had fallen for her again, this time a serum that would knock him unconscious had likely been on her fingers. Raleien barely noticed as Cephra stood,retrieved her other weapon and sheathed herdaggers with her, folded her cloak over her shoulders and ran from the scene. . She left Raleien alone, and the old Pantoran man managed to drag himself back into the nearby alley before falling still.