

Important Note:

This piece reuses dialogue from two pieces of Odan-Urr clan fiction:

- [Resistance: Choices](#), dialogue by Turel Sorenn (13830) and/or Orse Olo (6463), December 2016.
- [Breaking Point: Part 2](#), dialogue by me, February 2019.

Text taken from these pieces is in [blue](#). Although the fiction comes to 7,048 words, 1,431 have already been counted for CIs by the original authors. **The awardable word count for this fiction, excluding this note and the reused text, is 5,617.**

Gundark's Gullet Cantina**Freelonn****Ord Mantell****34 ABY**

Ord Mantell was dingy as a general rule, and the diner was no exception. I hurried to finish rubbing the lotion into my hands when I saw her walk through the door. She scowled slightly as her eyes adjusted to the relative darkness. I waved discretely to catch her attention.

I had spoken to Blade Ta'var several times but this was our first physical meeting. I don't meet with assets often—it's a good way to get someone killed—but the Zeltron was exceptionally effective and we needed to keep her on the line. She wouldn't take credits and we had little in the way of leverage on her.

Ta'var had an athletic build, an impish head of blue hair, and a girlish face that lit up when she spotted me, as if I were some old friend she hadn't seen in a while. She was dressed in a relatively nondescript outfit for a Zeltron, with navy blue tones and cloak that made it easy to conceal her hands and the lightsaber she was almost certainly carrying. If she brought that archaic sword along, I have no idea where she hid it.

We exchanged pleasantries, though only for a moment. As expected, the Zeltron was fixated on our mutual purpose. Blade Ta'var was the Quaestor of Excidium, theoretically my equal—or equal to what I would have been if Pravus hadn't declared us anathema and unleashed the entire might of the Iron Legion on us—but she had a peculiar fixation. Blade was some sort of Jedi idealist. Not a Jedi herself, certainly not bound by their more tiresome moral restrictions. But she understood that Odan-Urr was

not only in the right, but the only thing standing between the cannibalistic savagery of the Sith and the rest of the galaxy.

Blade was, fortunately for us, a Sith whose passion was killing other Sith. And I had been putting that passion to very good use for several months now.

She shifted in her chair. “So, not to be rude, Director, but I can't imagine you wanted to meet face-to-face just for a social call.”

“Please, call me Alethia,” I said. She had done enough hit jobs for me to justify being on a first-name basis. “And you're quite right.” I pulled a datapad out of my purse and slid it across the table. “I have a fresh batch for you here.”

The Zeltron thumbed through the records, frowning her brow and frowning slightly as she skimmed the summaries. Our arrangement was unusual. I didn't task her, exactly, rather I provided a set of dossiers. Each contained identifying information for various Sith and enough details on their location and movements for a skilled agent with access to Brotherhood networks to find them. I personally curated the details on why we wanted each of them dead to provoke moral outrage, although really we were more concerned with disrupting the Clans' operations and protecting our own. Blade chose who she would kill.

The Questor nodded. “This is good,” she said, slipping the pad into a pocket in her robes. “I have a few trips outside Cocytus coming up. I'll see what I can do.”

“Of course,” I said. “We appreciate it, which is why I wanted to meet in person.” I pulled another object from my purse, this one much smaller and curiously warm to the touch.

“We understand you're taking a serious—and potentially fatal—risk working for us.” I held up my free hand as Blade started to protest. “And I know you won't take credits for it. But I want you to understand how much the Council appreciates what you do to keep us safe.”

I held out my hand and pressed the rock into her palm. Brilliant blue eyes widened in disbelief as she looked down at the glimmering crystal. Supposedly Force-sensitives can feel them, and I have to admit I feel a connection to mine.

“A kyber crystal?” Blade said, her voice almost a whisper.

“We have our own supply now.” I smiled. “The advantage of being 25,000 years old is that the Jedi Order has lost more resources than most organizations will ever have. We’ve managed to reconnect with an old temple. Thank you, Blade.”

Blade blinked away tears. “Aurora,” she said. “My name is Aurora.”

Council of Urr Chambers
Pharos
Outskirts of the Kiast System

40 ABY

Alethia did her best to look bright and attentive, despite being the only real person in the room. As the Jedi had reasserted themselves in Odanite politics over the last few years, most of the Council shifted to doing business from the Praxeum or the field. Alethia herself was rarely in-system anymore, which suited her and the rest of the Council just fine, but she seemed to be the only one who still used the Pharos conference room at all.

The chamber was expansive but spartan. The only decorations were the Council of Urr’s own symbol on the floor in inlaid false aurodium and the extended viewport on one wall. Outside, the Palioxis Cloud nebula expanded out for lightyears in nearly every direction. The other chairs in the room were occupied by ghostly blue holograms of the Odanite summit and the handful of permanent Council members who had bothered to show up.

High Councillor Revak Kur glanced down at his datapad. “That’s the end of the agenda. I need Aura and Alethia to stay behind. Everyone else is free to go.”

Archenksova almost started at the sound of her name. The last time anyone had directed anything other than small talk at her was probably eight months prior.

Revak waited for a moment as the other figures trickled out, some standing from their seats and walking out of the Praxeum’s Council Chamber while others simply blinked out of existence as they switched their remote projectors off.

The Zabrak muttered something into a comlink before turning his attention back to the two women remaining on the call. “So this is sensitive... and a bit weird,” he said.

Aura's expression changed first. The Zeltron turned her head. Based on her position, Alethia guessed that she was likely physically in the room with Revak on Kiast itself and that someone had entered the room. Alethia followed her gaze to one of the other seats, where another hologram flickered to life.

The figure was a humanoid female. Attractive, probably late twenties or early thirties. Pantoran, Alethia suspected, based on the faint outline of facial tattoos. Well dressed, in keeping with current Core fashion, in a long dress with extensive embroidery and apparently useless buttons. High, stiff collar with a sweeping cutout, showing the throat down to mid-sternum. Tasteful jewelry. Alethia respected it.

"Delighted to meet you," the woman said, her voice chipper and with enough of an accent to confirm Alethia's suspicion.

"Grand Inquisitor Maru," Revak said, his voice deliberately calm, "has a favor to ask us."

By long habit, Alethia kept her face in a mask of polite curiosity to cover her outrage. Yes, the war between Odan-Urr and the Iron Throne had been over for years, and she had been the one to end it. She had even worked with the Inquisitorius on multiple occasions since. But bringing a grand inquisitor into the Council's meeting room in the middle of the Praxeum? Was Revak out of his karking *mind*?

Archenksova's thoughts turned involuntarily to the last inquisitor to breach the Cloud and come to Kiast. She had seen to that problem herself. The last anyone saw Grand Inquisitor Ishanta, she was screaming in fury as her escape pod plummeted down to the charred, airless surface of New Tython, with neither Odan-Urr nor the Brotherhood particularly sorry to see her go.

It was a good memory.

"Please, call Elianara." The inquisitor's smile was warm, open, utterly false. "I'm not going to make you stand on formalities when I'm the one asking a favor."

The inquisitor got straight to the point. Her tone was friendly and she was extraordinarily forthcoming with the details, but Alethia's emotions gradually turned from curiosity to surprise to a cold dread that settled at the pit of her stomach. The Grand Inquisitor walked the High Councillor and his two predecessors through a series of terrorist attacks, hitting everything from ACE shipments to Shroud Syndicate operations to the odd straggler from the Iron Legion. In every case, people had been

killed with a lightsaber. In every case, there was a message left behind. “Remember New Tython.”

“So,” Maru said at last, her tone a good bit friendlier than her implication. “You can see why we came to you.”

Revak looked to Aura and Alethia. “You see why I don’t want to go poking around on this one any more than I have to. But we can’t stand by and do nothing. Do we have any old partisans who would still be out there trying to take down the Sith?”

Aura looked thoughtful, then shook her head. “No, Alethia sent the stand-down order before I took command. As far as I know, everyone came home. Are you sure it’s not one of Arcona’s people? Or Taldryan’s?”

“It’s not.”

Three ghostly figures turned to stare at Alethia. It went against the Human’s every instinct to do this, but if she was correct, this was a problem of her own making and she would be damned if the Inquisitorius would solve it for her.

“I can’t be certain, of course,” she said, “but if our friends on Arx had any better leads, we wouldn’t be enjoying the Grand Inquisitor’s company.”

“We’d be happy for whatever assistance you can offer, Councillor,” the Pantoran cooed.

“I’m delighted to hear that,” Alethia replied with a sweetness just a half-step below cloying. “I’ll pick you up at the Praxeum and we’ll set out at your convenience.”

Elianara Maru’s smile faltered ever so slightly. “I wouldn’t want to trouble you. The information alone is more than sufficient.”

Archensova’s smile grew, if anything, more genuine. “I’m afraid that’s not possible, Elianara. I have the best chance of putting an end to this without further bloodshed. I don’t expect you to take my word for it, so you can either come along or try to stalk me.”

“Ah,” the Grand Inquisitor said, after a pause long enough for her to realize that the Jedi had no plans to overrule their colleague. “I suppose I should go freshen up and let Arx know we have a lead. If you’ll excuse me, Councillors.”

Revak nodded and the three Odanites watched the Sith exit in silence.

The door had barely hissed shut before Aura spoke up. “I’m coming, too.”

Alethia kept her expression stable despite the intense spike of annoyance. “Aurora, that won’t be necessary.”

“Maybe not,” Revak said. “But it’s a good idea.”

“You think I can’t handle this on my own?”

“No,” Aura said. “We think you shouldn’t have to.”

Council of Urr Chambers
MC80 Star Cruiser *Solari*
Kiast System

35 ABY

The High Councillor looked at his wife with mild surprise. “Vorsa. You have something to add?” Turel asked.

I didn’t need the Force to feel the stifling tension in the air. The Council of Urr’s meetings were borderline soporific affairs. The Jedi normally let the Sentinel Network and the military—recently rechristened the Odanite Expeditionary Force—handle most operations with minimal Jedi meddling and shared even less about their mystical activities. Edgar Drachen had almost dozed off twice so far, and the rest of us pretended to ignore the thumping sound of Arcia Cortel kicking his shin under the table to keep him awake.

I had expected the after-action report on the Beldarone operation to be typical, but General Vorsa apparently had a vibroaxe to grind.

“I do,” the Neti said. She stood up, slowly and deliberately, and ambled towards the observation port. I didn’t know Vorsa well but I never suspected the ancient Jedi had such a flair for the dramatic.

“Is it not true that you took the head off the Sith, Kerrhat, and paraded it for his apprentice to see?” Vorsa asked, her back still to the room. “Or have you failed to mention that in your report?”

‘Paraded’ was laying it on a bit thick, I thought, but the basic facts were true. I made it quite clear to Kerrhat’s apprentice what fate awaited the Sith. “As I said, Kerrhat was a dangerous and valuable target,” I answered. “To simply let him go would have been a bad decision.”

“Killing an armed enemy is one thing, Commander, but an unarmed and defeated foe?” Vorsa turned now, staring at me with unblinking golden eyes. “What purpose would this display of brutality possibly have? Was it not your plan all along to pressure this Vash woman into servitude by blackmailing her?”

I smiled. *Yes, you idiot.* Most of the Jedi had the good sense to understand that monastic reflection and magic tricks weren’t qualifications to challenge a career intelligence officer on her own operations. But Vorsa had been a general once upon a time, and apparently she was under the impression that the Clone Wars had gone much better for the Jedi than I remembered. I tried to keep my voice warm without veering into condescension but it was admittedly a struggle. “That is how intelligence collection works, yes. How were you planning to win this war? Pacifism and well-wishing? Yes, I’m using the enemy against itself. She is a valuable asset, and her cooperation will save innocent lives.”

I looked around the table as I continued, trying to gauge reactions. Cortel nodded, Drachen was actually paying attention now, and Daniel Stephens was already read into Beldarone. Mar Sûl met my gaze with his typical intensity, conveying, either through the Force or my own imagination, that he found no fault with me at all. Turel Sorenn, the only one whose opinion really mattered and the Neti’s own husband, seemed like he was trying to figure out what his wife was getting at. I decided to go on the offensive. “You might consider staying out of intelligence and focusing on leading the army, General. You don’t seem to understand the nature of this conflict.”

“Do not talk to me about war, little girl,” Vorsa snapped. I’d gotten under her skin, or whatever passed for it. “I have seen battles and fought enemies you would crumble against. I have seen the face of the enemy and it is without compassion, remorse or feeling for anyone but himself. The enemy does not care who you kill, they will just as easily replace their losses. You are turning into him more and more with every mistake you make,” Vorsa’s tone turned grim, “and this whole Council is following you into that abyss because it is more convenient to kill.” Having made her point, the ancient Neti turned back to me. “And that is not the least of your offenses.”

“I know very well that you don't agree with my methods,” I said. Unfortunately for Vorsal, most of the Council did. “Personally I couldn't care less. My teams are efficient and they do their job without fail. Everything I do is for the betterment of Odan-Urr—”

“Blade as well?” Vorsal cut in. I was livid—and not as in control of this debate as I'd thought. “Is the Scholae Empire another of your assets? Or are they allies?”

I hadn't told the Council about Blade. I didn't tell the Council about most of our assets, not in any detail. The fewer people knew about the source, the safer that source was. But Blade... Vorsal was demonstrating exactly why I was shielding her from the Council. “You don't know anything about that,” I said, though it was wishful thinking. “If it hadn't been for her we would've had plenty more enemies on our throats than we do now. Her cooperation is useful to our cause.”

“What do you mean, ‘Scholae?’” Turel asked, holding up one hand.

“The Commander has been in contact with a Palatinaean assassin for some time now,” the Neti said. The Ancient Jedi was livid in her understated way and the sentiment was contagious.

“I know not how long,” Vorsal continued, “nor does it matter. What matters is—”

“Alethia has been feeding her information on valuable targets,” Mar Sûl cut in. He spoke in his usual emotionless, almost monotonous tone, but I knew him well enough to tell that the Neti's grandstanding annoyed him as much as it did me. The Council's second-in-command often seemed to be the only one of the Force-users who appreciated that we were fighting a war for survival and I was much more forthcoming with him. That was proving to be a wise decision. “She would kill the targets and we would claim the victory. It's what she does, so Alethia played along. What does it matter, anyway? A Sith is a Sith.”

Various attendees were nodding assent by now, while others held the placid-yet-concerned expression that I sometimes think all Jedi must train in. Then Vorsal's fist slammed into the table, the noise and the uncharacteristic emotion snapping the focus back to her. “It matters!”

Sorenn reached for his gavel but didn't stop her. “She is an unstable and misguided individual,” Vorsal continued. “One that could become a true ally if handled with care and devotion. She is a person, not a tool to be used and discarded. Not

everything in this universe revolves around killing Sith, Mar Sûl the Zealous, or have you forgotten who we are?”

Turel finally tapped his gavel on the block. “I’m adjourning this meeting until cooler heads prevail.”

“I am not finished,” Vorssa said.

I tried not to smile. It was easy, given the tension in the room. Nothing seemed to make the Jedi more uncomfortable than one of their own having an outburst. She was rapidly losing the Council. “The path we are taking is a dangerous and self-destructive one. The Jedi Order made the same mistakes you are making, and they paid dearly for those mistakes. If this Council will refuse to see the error of that, than I will not be a part of it.”

“What’re you saying?” Turel stood up and gave his wife a concerned and mildly shocked look.

“My ship is already prepared to leave Kiast and find Blade. I aim to talk to her and help her if I can. Her target will be delivered here for questioning and incarceration. My team will make sure of that.” She straightened to her full height, pausing for only a moment. “But this Council will not see me again until such a time as you all decide to do the right thing.”

I pride myself on my foresight when it comes to people, but I did not expect this.

She gave every one of us a long stare. The Neti seemed more upset with her colleagues than with me, more hurt than angry now that her initial tirade was over. “If you decide to feign ignorance at these acts of unnecessary murder, you are no better than the enemy I swore to fight and you are following a course that opposes everything I stand for. I will fight every last one of you to preserve what I could not preserve last time. I saw my family die off once already because they decided to take a dark road. I will not do so a second time.”

She looked at me, gold eyes unblinking and inscrutable. And then she looked at Mar. “We will see each other again, as friends or enemies. The choice will be yours.” Then V’yr Vorssa, the pillar of Odan-Urr, abandoned us.

Hyperspace

40 ABY

“Zoe’s been asking about you.”

The statement jerked Alethia out of her reverie. She, Aura, and the Grand Inquisitor were in the lounge of the *Zoso Quinn*, one of the Council of Urr’s shuttles and, like too many other Odanite vessels, named in honor of a dead hero. Elianara had given up on the small talk after realizing that Alethia was impenetrable and Aura was exactly as she appeared and that her attempts to fuss out useful information was a dead end. The trio had been sitting in silence for several minutes.

“How is she?” Alethia responded. They’d been doing this dance for years now, with Aura trying to pretend that they were still friends. Normally, Alethia was dismissive. Normally, they weren’t being watched intently by a Sith. Archenksova resented the silent pressure from the Pantoran, but not enough to show obvious signs of division.

“I don’t get to see her much since she became a padawan,” Aura said. “I feel awful about it, since the other three get so much attention. But she loves Elyon and all the friends she’s made, so I can’t complain.”

Alethia nodded. The last time she’d seen Zoe Ta’var, the girl only really cared about crayons, cartoons, and food. It was difficult to imagine her wielding a lightsaber.

“How’s Ken?” the Zeltron asked. Alethia didn’t even need to look at her to recognize the expression on her face. Aura had been trying to fix her up with every biped in the system until one finally stuck. The former TIE pilot was supposed to be Archenksova’s minder in her early exile. Alethia liked to think that she had neatly upended that arrangement.

But it was beginning to dawn on her that the other woman had likely been more concerned with giving her male company than monitoring her activities in the first place.

Alethia smiled despite herself. “He’s well, though I haven’t gotten to see much of him lately, either. By the way, have I ever mentioned how much I like that you never say ‘I told you so?’”

Aura blinked, taking a moment to process that the other woman had not only kept up a conversation with her but actually made a joke, before she erupted into a wide grin. She looked over at Elianara, as though she weren't a Sith, and said, "You wouldn't believe how much work it took to get this one a boyfriend."

The Pantoran quirked an eyebrow, smiling like a nexu watching a tip yip do some unexpected trick. "I wouldn't have expected the Councillor to have any trouble in that department."

"I didn't," Alethia said, drowned out by her colleague. "It's because she hates fun."

"I do not hate fun!" Alethia protested.

"When was the last time you went out dancing?" The Human opened her mouth but Aura cut her off again. "That *wasn't* for some diplomatic function or to spy on somebody."

"I am *mission-driven*, Aurora," Alethia said. "That pretty boy husband of yours has been a bad influence."

"He has. Maybe if you're really good I'll let you borrow him sometime. Though come to think of it, aren't you still married to Satsi?"

"Tameike?" Maru perked up. Apparently the Inquisitorius couldn't keep up with who all the Arconans were married to, either.

"Yes, it's political, though she is less of a raging psychopath when you get to know her," Alethia said. "Well... a little less."

"Oh, you're one to talk," Aura said, turning towards the Inquisitor. "This one got me thrown out of a bar once. And I don't mean they asked me to leave, I mean *thrown*."

"You deserved it, though."

"What, because I was winning the bet?"

"Yes."

"Ugh," Aura groaned. "The lengths you went to get out of kissing your crush."

Krif, Alethia thought, doing her damndest to make sure the Inquisitor didn't notice her reaction. Aura could snipe about hating fun all she wanted, but the reality was that by letting her guard down, Alethia had let the small talk roam freely and the Force only knew what details their guest could pull out and weaponize. She turned to the inquisitor.

"You see what I've had to put up with," she said.

"A martyr for your cause, truly," Maru replied, matching Alethia's vocal tone and expression. It was a sociopath's habit and beginning to wear on the Human's nerves.

"Well," Alethia said, figuring that was enough of a pause to make a change of subject less conspicuous. "We're almost there now, so I suppose I should tell you what you're about to walk into."

Deputy Councillor's Temporary Office
Voraskel Palace
Kiast

35 ABY

It was soothing to watch the ink bleed out into the tiny crevasses within the paper, forming graceful, liling shapes as I wrote. Writing sets were extraordinarily archaic and thus rare throughout the galaxy, but this was one case where the Vatali's obsession with all things delicate and ornate aligned with my own tastes. Writing these letters had become something of a ritual over the last year. On those nights where I couldn't sleep—especially on the nights when nothing would await me but cold sweat and screams—the pen and paper and ink were always waiting. There was never a shortage of letters waiting to be written.

Dear Mr. and Mrs. Karandash,

Words cannot adequately express the deep sense of loss and sincere personal sympathy which we of the Odanite Expeditionary Forces share with you at the loss of your son.

"I thought you were going to bed early," a lightly scolding voice said, intruding into my thoughts.

I started. It was late; too late for anyone to be wandering into my office. ‘Oh dark thirty,’ Ensign Karandash might have called it. Normally, the only other people milling about at this hour were drowsy guards and officers of the watch bored nearly to tears. But Aurora Ta’var, as the reformed Sith assassin had taken to calling herself, never seemed particularly bound by what was normal.

“If I had told you that I would be up late working, you would have physically dragged me out to the club with you.”

“Oh no, I’m not going out alone with you anymore,” the Zeltron teased. “I learned my lesson. It’s either drunken meltdowns or trying to get me arrested.” Her voice grew sing-song as she sauntered in. “No, I think I’d make Mar drag you...”

Aura trailed off, thank the Force. I was in no mood for yet another attempt to meddle in my love life. “What’s up?” the Zeltron asked.

“Trying to paperwork myself to sleep,” I said. “The nightmares have been keeping me up all week.” It was true, but I was mostly trying to divert her attention.

“Uh-uh. Not gonna work this time. What are you going to get into trouble for now?” A pink hand reached over a plucked one of the finished letters off the stack. Ta’var’s smile faded as her eyes took in elegantly written words describing Chief Petty Officer Eyrelia’s final moments of heroism.

“I was hoping for a compliment on my penmanship,” I said as I signed my name at the bottom of the page. I laid Ensign Karandash, the nineteen-year-old engineer, to rest in the pile with his comrades. “Paper is unusual, I know, but it seems right that the next of kin should have something tangible to hold on to. These men and women did their duty. I will do mine.”

“I had no idea,” Aura almost whispered. “Do the other Councillors write these? Should I be writing these?”

“Commander Iode used to help me with them on Daleem. Admiral Cortel stuck to holos, the last I heard. I prefer to keep this out of sight of the Council.”

“Why? You don’t need to make a martyr out of yourself.”

“I’ve been watching friends and enemies die beside me since I was a teenager,” I said. “This can be a trying task, to which I am uniquely well suited.”

“So... you don’t think we’re going to do it right?” Ta’var frowned.

I sighed. “All concerns about your handwriting aside, I have no doubts that everyone on the Council can be suitably sympathetic. That’s not the concern.”

“So what is?”

“How many duty officers did you walk past on your way here?”

“A half dozen, maybe?”

“What were their names?”

“I...” Aura hesitated for a moment, biting her lip slightly. “I don’t know.”

“You know I have my disagreements with the Jedi,” I said, “but we both have our roles to play. I don’t know every person in the OEF, but I try to know as many as I can. Every decision the Council makes, every decision that I or the JTF commanders make? Every last one of them ends up here,” I said, tapping the pile of condolence letters gently. “We need to understand the consequences of what we’re doing. These people are willing to die for us but we have a responsibility to make it count.

“But we also need the Jedi to be heroes, to be examples. Fixating on dead NCOs will just make you hesitate. We need you to be beyond doubt.”

“I thought becoming a Jedi would get me away from death,” Aura said quietly. I didn’t have to ask to know her thoughts had turned back to Judecca, to the world that Pravus had burned. That execrable rodent, Damon Nix, crowed that it was Scholae Palatinae’s righteous punishment for Aura’s refusal to kill her opponent in the arena on Arx and for defecting to us. I don’t know about Scholae, but Aura was probably the only Odanite who seemed to believe that story.

“There is no death, there is only the Force,” I said, mustering a smile. “I won’t pretend to understand how the Jedi can say that one with a straight face, but you really do need to let go of your guilt for that one. Nothing you could have done would have saved Judecca.”

Aura nodded halfheartedly. “Turel keeps telling me that, too.”

“Listen, Aura, I know Vorsa thinks I’m a monster. My background is... less than sterling. But every Odanite is here to make a difference. Most of us have regrets. But

we're going to make things better and we believe in you, no matter what happened before."

Aura nodded, letting the words sink in. She still didn't seem convinced, but she was at least distracted enough to turn towards the door and head off for bed. She took a few steps before pausing and turning back around.

"Alethia?"

"Yes?"

"Nobody thinks you're a monster," she said. "Anyway, goodnight. Don't stay up too long."

My smile faded as soon as she was out the door. She was probably right. Despite Vorsa's dramatic exit from the resistance, my reputation among the Odanites and Tythonians was sterling. But if nobody thought I was a monster, why did I feel like one?

1220 Stellan Gios Street
Barraza City
Eiram

40 ABY

For a place that was mostly known as the site of a major disaster, Barraza City was actually quite nice. The architecture was beautiful in its simplicity and every street corner seemed to have its own magnificent view of the sea.

"If I'd known we had a safe house here," Aura said, "I would have spent a lot more time laying low."

"I doubt we would have thought to look here," Elianara admitted. "There's an unspoken assumption that safehouses are never anywhere nice. Usually someplace with a strong criminal element."

Well, yes, Alethia thought. That's because you poached most of yours off Morgan's Syndicate friends. "We gave different people different lists for security purposes. Certain individuals had dedicated spaces that nobody else knew about."

“Nobody else?” Elianara said, smirking.

Alethia smirked back. “*Almost* nobody. Anyway, we’re here. 1220. The entrance is in this alley.”

Aura took the lead, giving the alley a good once over before approaching the door. She laid on hand on it, eyes falling half closed as she felt for impressions in the Force. Her eyes flashed open and she looked to Alethia in shock before catching herself and trying to reign the reaction in. “It’s been used recently,” she said, less blasé than she’d hoped.

“Someone’s been naughty, I see.” Maru smiled. Fortunately she seemed to assume that Aura’s reaction was to some taint of the Dark Side. “Should we be worried about traps?”

“As you’ve probably guessed, his asset was always a bit paranoid and over-eager to apply violence,” Alethia replied. “It’s entirely possible this is just a trap for us. Well, for *you* at least.”

“I’ll leave the burglary to you then, if you don’t mind,” Elianara said. “I’m more of a people person anyway.”

Alethia looked to the Jedi. “The roof might be the better bet. Think you can make it?”

Aura eyeballed the distance. “Definitely. Want me to throw you down a line? I’m not good at the technical stuff.”

“Sounds like a plan.”

Flooding her muscles with the Force, the Zeltron took a running leap into the wall of the opposite building, rebounding off of it and neatly catching the roof ledge of the safe house before pulling herself up. A few moments later, a rope came tumbling down the side of the building.

“That’s inconspicuous,” Maru said.

“Less so than a detonation, but feel free to try the front door,” Alethia shot back. She was thankful she opted for trousers and sensible footwear as she started pulling herself up. The inquisitor stayed put.

“So this is his place?” Aura grunted as she sawed through the roof access door with her lightsaber, squinting through the glare and sparks. “I always wondered where he stormed off to.”

The Human dusted her hands off as walked over. “I have the code for that, you know.”

Aura ignored her.

“I don’t actually *know* that he’s our terrorist,” Alethia said. “But as you said, almost everyone else is accounted for. And given where we left off... well, it wouldn’t exactly be out of character.”

Aura finished her cut and stepped back as a smoldering circle of door fell to the floor. “So we’re going to hand him over to the Brotherhood? That’s cold, even for you.” She reached one arm through the hole and tapped at the control panel on the inside. The door slid open. “Are there actually any traps in here?”

“I doubt it,” Alethia said, following the Zeltron in. “We have to stop the attacks. I’ll try to talk him down, assuming our new friend gives me the option.”

“What if she doesn’t?”

“You’ll just have to follow your conscience, Aurora, and let me follow mine.”

High Councillor’s Office
Pharos
Palioxis Cloud Nebula

36 ABY

I suppose I’m supposed to say that leading Odan-Urr was not only an honor and a privilege, but the highlight of my life.

I’d be lying.

That said, the situation I inherited as High Councillor was dire. The war against the Brotherhood was, in all likelihood, unwinnable. The emergence of the Collective should have made victory possible, but Oligard hated the Jedi as much as—if not more

than—the Sith, and he hated collaborators most of all. Kias't had erupted into civil war, in which Odan-Urr were cast as interlopers in a domestic dispute that had been churning for centuries.

So I confess that I felt no small amount of satisfaction as I sat in my office that morning, secure in the knowledge that I'd ended two wars in our favor, rereading the details on the operation that had successfully captured Grand Inquisitor Ishanta.

Aura walked in. She was upset. Tedious, but not unexpected. “Ah, Aurora,” I said, suspecting she wouldn't let me get far. I keep my eyes on the datapad. “I've had Ishanta transferred to—”

“You lied.”

It was going to be one of those conversations. She was right, of course. The recent uprising against the Vatali government had been coordinated with Ishanta, who—despite explicit orders to the contrary, it turns out—thought that driving us out of our adopted home would earn her the Grand Master's favor. But I had just made a bargain with Arx that would end the war with the Brotherhood. I needed the Vatali's support against the Collective and I certainly did *not* need Odanites to learn that the recent conflict was a Sith attack, rogue or not. So I provided the Vatali Empire with an alternative explanation for our mutual troubles.

Kias't was whole again. The Lotus War was at an end. And the cherry on top was that the Vatali Conclave had just declared war on the Collective, hopefully preventing any more of their excursions into our neighborhood.

“I take it you've seen the Empress' speech,” I said. “It seems to have made quite an impression on the Conclave.”

“You lied to them! You started a war. Don't act like this is some game!”

I finally shut the datapad off and set it down, meeting Aura's gaze. “What the Vatali do isn't my responsibility. As long as they don't boot us from the system, I don't care what the Conclave does.”

“Then why didn't you tell the Empress about Ishanta?” She really had no idea.

“Because I needed our people to hear it was the Collective. It needs to sink in if we want to get everyone excited for the ceasefire with the Brotherhood.”

“Are you insane?” Aura’s expression was pure shock, as though she hadn’t been sipping brandy with the Grand Master’s apprentice days earlier.

“We are fighting three wars, Aurora, and we are *losing*.”

“We just forced Capital Enterprises out of their own headquarters!”

“Yes, and we did it with the help of the entire Iron Legion. That’s the point, Aura. When we fight alone, all we do is delay the inevitable, try to limit the casualties. When we fight alongside the Sith, our enemies bleed.”

“You can’t honestly believe they’re really on our side.”

“I can believe that they hate the Collective more than they hate us. I can’t say that Oligard is that flexible. Believe me, we tried.”

“So then what? The Sith will turn on us the second we break the Collective.”

“Well, what do *you* want us to do? Sit here in Kiasit and take tea until Oligard and Telaris die of old age?” I snapped, finally losing my temper. I let the thought hang in the air for a moment before continuing. “No. We are going to have peace on *one* front, at least for a time. I’ve spent too much of the past three years watching things go from bad to worse.”

She didn’t back down. “I wasn’t here for New Tython but I’ve heard plenty of stories. Let me remind you of a few. Three hundred million natives were wiped out with help from the Dark Council and its allied clans. Two hundred and seventy thousand colonists were killed, to include Mon Calamari, Bothans, and Humans. That is what our blind trust got us—”

I cut her off there. She had a point but we were far past the time when bickering over New Tython was going to get us anywhere. “Do you know what I was doing while you were off prancing around the Meridian with your laser sword? I was in the hospitals, visiting the wounded and holding people’s hands while they died. I’ve had two planets shot out from under my feet. Don’t you dare lecture me about war.”

“I can’t let you do this... I can’t let you build our future on nothing but lies.” And this is where it all went wrong.

“Let me?” I laughed, incredulous. Vorsa may have brought her to us, but Ta’var had been my right hand almost since she’d arrived. I made her. “Are you threatening me, Master Jedi?”

Her expression turned hard. I didn’t appreciate it at the time, but she had never looked at me that way before and never has since. “The Council will decide your fate.”

“The Council will do what I tell it to,” I said. “Do you know why? Because I own SeNet and the OEF. I am what’s kept the men and women you’ve dragged into your pointless religious wars from murdering you all in your sleep and running to the Collective. The Council knows what *I* want it to know, and it decides what *I* want it to decide. And, if you have a problem with that, there is always room for you on the front lines.”

She pulled a hand from her pocket. An audio recording device gleamed in the palm of her hand. “I think they’re going to be a lot less cooperative when they hear this.”

I thought about my options but quickly realized that I had none.

“I see your compulsive need for the moral high ground has its limits.” I sighed. “What do you want, Aurora? If you ruin this deal, we will never have peace. You can’t possibly want war with the Sith that badly. What kind of world do you want your daughter to grow up in?”

“One where our values aren’t just empty words we throw away as soon as they get in the way,” she spat.

“We are going to arrange a ceasefire with the Brotherhood. I am not going to let you derail that process.”

“Fine,” there was a weary resignation to the Zeltron’s tone that had not been apparent before. “I’m not going to stop you from working for peace. But I’m not going to let you keep lying to the Council, to everyone. Odan-Urr deserves better than that.”

“You think it’s so easy,” I said. “Fine. We’ll see just how good you really are.”

I walked out of that office for the last time. By the day’s end, I was on a ship heading to Arx along with my ousted predecessor and the new minder Aurora had set on me.

I thought she would crumble. I thought they would beg to have me back. I even, a few years later, thought that I could force myself back into control. I was wrong on all counts.

I could forgive Aura for blackmailing me, for forcing me out. She had her reasons, and I've done worse things than that to my own friends. What I have never been able to forgive is how easily Odan-Urr moved on without me.

1220 Stellan Gios Street
Barraza City
Eiram

40 ABY

“How much do you think she can sense?” Alethia asked. The two women had made it down to the ground level, which showed some signs of occupation despite the spartan furnishings.