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## *A Path to Safety*

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A flash of cool air hit his face. The reclamation foundry buried deep in the heart of Ragnath's industrial district was like the sweltering depths of hell compared to the freshness of the cool breeze. Uncomfortable as it was, it provided a modicum of safety. The foundry had become a makeshift base of operations for the Sith. He learned quickly that making his way back to friendly lines was nigh impossible. He sinched down the straps on his breath mask, ensuring the seal was tight.

The enemy had no regards for the conventions of warfare as evidenced by their aerosolized conversion gas. The poor and downtrodden citizens of Caelestis city, already displaced by civil war, fell victim first. The gas had filled the tent camps in the earliest days of the invasion. Already rife with disease, it was no surprise that the camp was epicenter the first explosion of the mindless undead drones that now filled the city streets.

The Imperial Scholae Army had effectively established quarantine zones around the remnants of the once gleaming spire of Adironam Tower. The cordoned off checkpoints and makeshift barriers around the now broken spine of Scholae Palatinae's seat of Power served as the last line of defense from the approaching armies of the Children of Mortis. The Army was fighting valiantly, but each passing day the enemy lines continued to advance. The Factory district was far outside of the quarantine zone and he'd been trapped since the first days since "the rubies" showed up.

The "ruby walkers" were easy to deal with. Decapitation proved to be the most effective method for dealing with them. It was the reptilian horrors that stalked the alleys and cul-de-sacs which gave him the most fright. Flashes of horrors from a long-forgotten childhood nightmare were made flesh in their gnashing teeth and razor-sharp claws. He despised them. The creatures seemed to operate as a unit. Groups of five or six would stalk together. With a vast majority of the population of this sector of the city escaped, dead, or turned, the raptors were getting bolder. They were beginning to make forays into the factory district.

He pressed his back to a slab of duracrete that had fallen from one of the damaged buildings. Remaining in the open was dangerous. The raptors were far from the worst thing stalking the city streets. Covered in soot and nearing dangerously thin, the Sith looked out to the bodies in the street. The crystalline monsters set traps for their prey as well. The soulless beasts appealed to the natural desire most beings had to help those in need. They would stack up the wounded, groaning and clinging to the last bits of life. When hapless would-be saviors came to their aid, the beast would leap from their concealed places and tear their quarry to pieces.

His sharp green eyes watched for movement. There was none. The bodies hadn't been stacked, but had appeared to have fallen in situ. Their crimson armor was that of the elite Imperial Praetorian. Had Kamjin set aside their differences and sent a rescue party? That seemed unlikely. He didn't have time to figure out their mission. The Sith shook off the

thought and slung his carbine over his shoulder. He scarpereed over to the bodies, kneeling beside them to gather powerpacks from their belts. Each soldier had four pouches for additional ammunition and there were four soldiers. This could be a good haul. Only two contained powerpacks. He tucked them into his pocket and moved along.

Like pieces on a dejarik board, he moved in calculated and deliberate moves between cover. Progress was slow, but this level of caution had proved a necessity. He'd already ransacked most of the storehouses close to his bivouac in the foundry. Just as the crystal horrors were growing more desperate, so too was the Sith. This was the furthest afield he'd traveled in weeks.

It was two hours past midday. He paused to get his bearings. His finger traced over a datapad map of the city. He was only twenty-seven blocks from the walls of Adironam Tower. He could make it there just after nightfall, but he would need to increase his pace. A whirlwind of hopefulness sent his head spinning. He'd stab his closest friend in the face with a hydrosponder for a warm bed, fresh namana fruit, and an uninterrupted hour in the refresher. He decided in that moment that this would be the move. He'd tried in the past, but was met by a large enemy force. It appeared the fighting had moved off the eastern side of the Tower to the north.

Just then, he heard the unmistakable resonant bark of a scouting raptor. The call echoed through the canyons of the desolate city. He pulled back the charging handle on his E-11D. The light hum of the energy was his signal and he started moving forward.

As he advanced block by block, the barking calls of the crystal raptors grew in number and intensity. They were getting closer. If he didn't keep up the pace, he would surely fall victim to the creatures before the sun even set.

Moving between piles of rubble was not an easy task but the Sith continued to press forward. By his count he had only twenty-three more blocks to go. As he prepared to cross through an intersection a feeling deep brought him to pause. It was then that he saw the first of the raptors. It dashed quickly behind a smoldering repulsorcraft. If it weren't for the high afternoon sun, the glint of light that radiated off the crystalline structures on the beast may not have caught his eye.

Two weeks alone had trained his eyes to hone in on even the most minute of movements. The saurian predator remained low to the ground, obscuring the bulk of its body behind the wrecked speeder. The sharp crystal spines that ran down the length of its spine laid flat against its pallid grey skin. In the few interactions the Sith had with the raptors, he was able to establish their general tactics. The packs operated with distinct roles; scout, trappers, flankers, and drivers.

The scout would lead the pack, gathering the attention of the packs quarry. The dinosaurs showed signs of elevated intelligence and had quickly learned that the scout would assist the rest of the pack in driving their prey into a funnel between the flankers. Once within the funnel, the drivers would push their prey forward where the waiting trappers would corner the hunted. With their prey focused on the drivers behind and the trappers ahead, the flankers

could close in. At that point, the victim would be surrounded and torn to ribbons in mere seconds.

Thran analyzed the path in the city streets ahead of him. The scout was trying to draw him down this corridor to the east. He reasoned that the flankers would be lurking in the alleyways that ran parallel to this main avenue. If he could find a way to break out of their funnel, he could put one of the groups of hunters out of position.

The Sith noted a fire escape, clinging to the side of a building like a tangled web of iron ivy, across the street. If he could get himself to the roof, he could more easily traverse outside of the deadly channel the beasts had established for him. He could leap from rooftop to rooftop, until he had put enough distance between them to safely descend back to the city streets. He looked back over his shoulder to the place where the scout had last been seen lurking. It was gone.

He needed to move. The Sith gripped the pistol grip of his trusted carbine. He rose to one knee and sprinted through the open street to the ladder. As soon as he had crossed into the open, the chiming bark of the raptors echoed through the streets. They were on him now.

His legs propelled him upwards as quickly as they could. One rung after the other, he scaled the ladder. In the flash of an eye found himself on the first platform of the fire escape, looking down through the perforated grating at a pair of raptors below.

The Sith's blood ran cold as they started making their way towards the ladder. A flood of old stories told to disobedient children from his homeworld ran through his mind. The stories of those boogeymen still frightened him. On Bakura, a naughty child would be told that massive lizard men from the vast emptiness outside the far reaches of the galaxy would come. They had sharp teeth and massive claws. They would take children, steal their souls, and lock them in metal prisons. He swallowed hard.

Just then, one of the raptors leapt up from the street below. Its spindly arms wrapped around the railing. Its large taloned feet writhed, springing upward to plant on the catwalk floor. Thran raised his blaster to his hip, letting fly a trio of rapid-fire bolts. The crimson streaks of energy impacted the torso of the beast. It let out a horrible squealing roar and fell from the elevated platform.

The beast hit the duracrete, staying still for half a second before clamboring to its feet once again. In harmony, the two raptors let out a sharp call to the surrounding area. More raptors would soon join in the chase. Thran wasn't going to wait for them to show up. He sprung into action, climbing up the next ladder to the level above. Level after level he climbed, not pausing to look back at what was chasing him. When he reached the roof, he could see, for the first time in weeks, an unobstructed view of Adironam tower. Billowing pillars of smoke littered the whole of the city.

He oriented himself towards the tower and began his forward march to the hope of safety. He pushed his muscles beyond the ache and pain of malnourishment and injury. The Sith leapt over a power conduit and continued east.

The skittering and barking of the raptors could be heard behind him. They were in full chase now. He reached the first gap between buildings. The gap was nearly twelve feet, but aided by the adrenaline of being chased and the driving power of fear, he traversed it with ease. He glanced back for a moment, counting eight raptors in pursuit. He didn't stop again.

He ran, leaping from roof to roof, towards the high pinnacle of Adironam Tower and the promise of salvation from the horrors outside its tall walls. With the raptors mere meters behind him, he could see the large arterial avenue that led directly to the gates of the tower ahead. He was only ten blocks away now. The gap between him and the next building was more than eighty meters. He couldn't make the jump across. He would have to go back to ground.

The Sith leapt, tumbling head over heels to the ground six stories below. He watched as the dull grey duracrete overtook the whole of his vision. He rolled, converting the downward momentum to forward motion. He came to a stop, eyes to the sky. The cold grey scales and vicious red crystals of the raptors filled the sky as they followed him through his bold leap.

His finger squeezed the trigger of this blaster carbine. He shot at the reptilian pursuers as quickly as he could. The bright red bolts impacted several of the beasts, diffusing into puffs of white grey smoke. The Sith shot and shot, draining every last ounce of energy from the blaster's powercell.

The weapon roared, spitting its hatred at the dinosaurs, bolt by bolt. The split mouthed compensator of the E-11D bore the rainbow marks of stressed heat tempering, ranging from a light-yellow straw near the mouth, to red, the violet, and a dark blue grey near the compensator's base. The Sith depressed the trigger again, but nothing happened. The powercell was empty.

Now, in front of him, arranged in a semi-circle, the raptors closed in on him. He dropped the carbine and raised his lightsaber. The flame-colored blade roared at the raptors with the same reptilian croak as it came to life. The Sith was on his heels, being backed against the wall of a shop behind him. Through the shattered transparisteel window, he could see a tattered sign. Buy one get one free honey almond macarons. The thought of the little desserts brought a sudden sadness to him. He would never again enjoy those little pleasures in life; this was the end.

There are many sounds in a warzone. Many are recognizable in an instant; the ringing report of a blaster rifle, the dull thud of a thermal imploder, the shriek of TIE Fighters above. The sound that filled Thran's ears was better than all of those combined. The whirl of gryos, the thud of large foot pads and the whistle of a barrage of concussion grenades paired to the beautiful snapping crack of ionized air made by chin-mounted MS-4 twin blaster cannons.

The AT-ST charged forward. The first blaster impact vaporized two of the raptors. The concussion grenades tore limbs from three others. The reptilian hunters immediately gave up on their prey, turning tail to flee. With indiscriminate prejudice, the six-and-a-half-meter tall walker subsequently mowed down two more raptors with its powerful cannons. The last remaining raptor tried to scurry away into an ally, but the white smoke trail of an anti-personnel missile closed the distance before the reptile could escape.

The AT-ST backed off, leveling itself and taking up a defensive stance in the wide avenue. The crew hatch slowly opened. An Imperial Scholae Army officer, junior ranked, peered out.

"Out for a walk, sir?" he said.

"Something like that..." Thran stammered.

"Need a ride back to HQ?" the man asked.

"That would...yes...please." the Sith said.

"I'll put down a rope, climb up." He said.

The officer cast a braided cord down to the Sith, he promptly scaled up to the top of the walker and disappeared inside the hatch. The junior officer looked back from the co-pilot's position.

"Welcome aboard, Sir." The junior officer said.

"Thank you, Leftenant." Thran said, expelling a deep breath.

"Our pleasure, sir. Fraggin' Raptors is what we do. Plus, we've been looking for you for weeks. Least we could do is drop some lizards for ya." He said.

"I see." Thran replied.

"Good news, Commander. Looks like we're gonna collect on that tontine too!" the junior officer said, patting his pilot on the shoulder.

The AT-ST rotated about, turning back towards the high tower at the center of Caelestis city. The Scout walker rushed off, closing the distance to the tower in nearly thirty seconds. Thran closed his eyes and took a deep breath. He was safe, for now, from the horrors the Children of Mortis had unleashed.