

Atolli
Selen
41 ABY

Gentle sunlight kissed her tanned skin, the ocean breeze ruffling long white locks finally let loose from their restrictive military bun. Expanses of pristine coral sand stretched from azure shore to azure shore, pointed ears twitching at the sound of ruffling palm trees. Somewhere distant, an exotic bird began its mating call, a colorful tune no doubt only slightly less outrageous than its courting plumage.

Lying on a sunbed on one of Atolli's exclusive island resorts, life should have been nothing but relaxation, stress melting away like butter and her only concern being to apply more lotion to her mocha skin. Yet, Laira Savic was far from relaxed.

The dark-skinned Sephi chafed in her one-piece swimsuit and it wasn't for a lack of fit. The battle to preserve Selen had been harrowing and her unit had taken heavy losses in the defense of Fort Blindshot. Headquarters had, in no uncertain terms, ordered some rest and relaxation, but though this should have been the pinnacle of serene bliss she could not make it work for her.

Something was always just a bit awry. One foot over the other, switch, switch again, on the sunbed, off it, back to the start. Beads of sweat pearled on her sun kissed skin like pearls, yet it crawled like insects in her mind, a million unseen feet marching along her extremities, just out of sight. Her breathing remained shallow and strained, senses wound and alert. Around her there was utter tranquility, but within she was awash with roiling rip currents.

"Care for a refresh, madam?" a smartly dressed waiter inquired, pointing at her stale drink topped by a float of molten ice.

"No, thank you. I think for today this is enough—enough." Her ear twitched. Had there been an echo or was that her own voice? The waiter smiled as pleasantly as ever, a faux smile that was as fake as his interest in her well-being. He was paid to pretend, not care.

Pushing herself off the sunbed, toned muscle shifting under scarred mocha skin, Laira draped a thin cloth around her waist for a skirt and headed back to her room to change. Two hours of torturing herself on the beach was plenty for the week.

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Soft leather boots rustled among the undergrowth, deft digits pushing aside thick verdant canopies while a singing blade cut down the thickets that would not yield. The air was humid and heavy with a petrichor scent, drowning out the ocean with musky tones of roots and soil. Spears of sunlight filtered in here and there, the sounds of the jungle echoing in circulating patterns around her, making navigation nigh-on impossible. No wonder these islands hid so many ruins.

But unlike most explorers, she had the Force to guide her and it had yet to lead her astray. Deftly stepping over knurled roots and rotting trunks, her beige robes melting her form

amidst the jungle's vivid greens and earthly browns, Laira made her way towards her destination.

Already she could breathe freer, the motion of her limbs calming her more than tranquility ever could. Her senses expanded, lazily monitoring her surroundings yet perfectly at ease as she flowed through the Force as it flowed through her, confident in its unerring compass. Sweat pearled on her skin and beneath her robes, where the black outline of a ribbed body glove peeked whenever she vaulted a particularly sizable trunk. Even so encumbered, she felt far more at ease, the years spent in the Iron Navy's stormtrooper corps having left their mark on her in good and in bad. Some stripes were indeed hard to shake.

The thickets cleared before the blade of her heirloom sword, a weapon that had once served a Force user now long gone, and led her to a sudden clearing. Though obscured by the reaching canopies of lush tropical trees so as to make it hard to spot from above, at ground level the ruined temple and its surroundings appeared like a dramatic twist in a holonovela—sudden and yet expected.

This was what she was here for.

Vines and moss had claimed the structure over centuries, its angular faces veiled by creeping flora that survived but did not thrive against the midnight obsidian. An aura of foreboding emanated from the structure, like the radiant heat of a blaster recently fired but in reverse, chilling her spine. The closer she got, the better she could see the rot and decay around it, heaps of mulch from dead and withered vines piled up high at the ziggurat's base, the tree canopy avoiding it like a force field bubble was protecting it.

Laira's ears folded, caution swelling within her, primal and raw. She knew when she was treading on treacherous ground and this was certainly it. The path laid out before her by the Living Force, a clear and radiant stream she'd only needed to follow, had vanished from astral sight and bereft of her most potent ally she suddenly felt alone and exposed.

Yet she had faced the Dark before, even fought alongside it. It was no stranger to her and though each new form she encountered was more insidious than the last, she had long since learned how to handle such uncomfortable emotions.

Serenity in purpose. Clarity in action. Endurance in detachment.

Her eyes shifted as the warmask descended, drowning out the qualms and hesitations of her psyche, smothering the self into a blissful silence. Her pulse calmed, the grip on her sword relaxed, then tightened anew with purpose. She was ready to face the challenge. Somewhere in the distance, a colorful bird sang a lonesome mating call.

Rays of light pierced the darkness as Laira's sword hacked down withered vines that had solidified by age into a petrified mesh over the temple's entrance. A gaping maw yawned before her, but she felt no trepidation. She barely felt anything but a purpose to act. Scrambling over the knot of broken roots, she waded inside the temple and lit a stablight in her off hand to banish the shadows.

The temple walls were carved out of volcanic rock, their hard faces chiseled with primitive tools to massive blocks that slotted together tighter than they had any right to. No sunlight pierced the dark confines and age alone had done little to wear down the obsidian bulk of its construction.

As she moved, the stablight beam reflecting off the glassy surfaces in a pallid, lifeless hue, she narrowed her azure eyes and leaned closer, spying shallow engravings in the rough rock faces. Running the tip of her blade along the stone, she picked out lines and curves, carved into the material by sentient hands. Hands that had been bleeding.

The pale light uncovered dark smears, dripping from every rune she found. The stench of blood had long since passed, but the cloying memories of pain lingered. Pain of blood spilled, willingly and for a higher purpose.

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The last step was always the trickiest, her boot almost slipping off the trench ladder as she sprang forth from their line and charged the enemy. The air was smoke and sand and dust and screams of pain. She tasted it all on her lips. Felt it on her skin. Breathed it in her lungs.

Behind her, a score of faceless stormtroopers joined her advance, clambering from the trench line and firing their blasters. Red and green mingled, strobing and clashing. Bolts of plasma burst forth blossoms of glassed sand. Spraying soldiers in heated shrapnel.

She was the first to reach the enemy lines, carbine tucked under arm as she pulled a thermal detonator. The bolt came from the right, unseen behind her raised arm. Her world was heat and pain and shock. Her legs gave way as gravity took its own, the polished grenade slipping her fingers and rolling into the trench as she collapsed in front of it.

The ground was tremors and sand and blood and death. As her own life ebbed out, soaking the foreign sands, she watched through a haze as her brothers stormed the trench and raised the banner high. A banner she'd learned to love and would give her life to defend.

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Laira recoiled from the wall, heart racing in her chest. The memory had been so vivid, the stench of blood still lingered on her tongue. Her own blood. Violence was an old friend and it shouldn't have phased her, but somehow it had. A crack in the mask.

Deeper still she waded, undaunted though wary and alert as any predator is when stalking its prey. Her feet moving softly upon the harsh stone, azure eyes darting from shadow to shadow as the pale beam of her stablight cleared the way.

Twisting corridors gave way to crumbled rooms half-buried under collapsed stonework. Pieces of gilded symbols jutted out of the ruins while lumps of rotted tapestries festered in dark corners, all the fineries of the temple's past lost to time though the structure itself remained unyielding.

She passed altars and carved basins filled with murky waters, slick algae eking out an existence in the bowels of the corrupting construct, life somehow managing to find a way even in the darkest of places. As she approached one of the altars, this one preserved slightly better than most, she picked out worn outlines of people upon it, carvings of ancient beings bathing in that which had been spilled upon the sacrificial stone.

How many lives had been ended here? How many ghosts had joined the Force? Or had they?

Something flitted at the edge of her perception. A glimpse of a blueish hue caught in the halo of her stablight. Her warrior's senses were on alert in an instant, sensing out along the ripples of the Force for anyone or thing hiding out of sight.

She held at the ready, blade raised along her forearm in a high guard, but nothing manifested. She sensed nothing. Had it been just a figment of her imagination? No, that would imply nerves and the mask would not allow such mistakes, her control was pure and clean.

Her stance shifted, foot sliding along the slick floor until suddenly it found no more ground to stand on. The curved lip of the sacrificial basin swallowed her, gravity aiding in her demise as the murky waters raced towards her. Waters that writhed with the faces of the dead.

She should have vaulted clear when she had the purchase. She should have struck her sword to halt her slide. She should have done anything at all to stop it, but she did not. Instead she screamed and the mask cracked once more.

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Shallow graves stretched out before her. Mounds of alien dirt laid upon her brothers and sisters. She had been with them from the start. Trained with them. Bonded. Failed and faltered. Rallied. Prevailed. Fought tooth and nail for glory and for a family forged through blaster fire and ion storm.

And now she would bury them—just like the four families before.

No one would miss them. No one would remember their names. The Iron Navy would record their datums and file them away in an forgotten archive. Lives reduced to lines of numbers.

No one would miss them, but her. And only when no one was looking, not even herself.

As she rose from the grave and called out the command, a salvo of shots were loosed in their honor. An empty gesture to honor the traditions of the Navy than the memory of the lost. Behind each blaster was a fresh face, a fresh name, a fresh line of numbers. Her sixth family.

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Laira breached the surface of the putrid pond with a gasp, her white hair matted against her neck as she hungrily gasped for air. The water was thick like ichor, clinging to her body and

pulling her down like the hands of drowned men. She fought them off, specters of the past left behind as she threw herself at the basin's lip and clawed her way out, nails digging for purchase.

Heaving, soaked, exhausted, every fiber of her being screaming with effort, she pulled herself out of the mire, trailing long black tendrils of foul slime that latched onto her robes like tar. Even as she rolled onto the lip she felt the tendrils contract, tugging at her to return to their embrace. Acting on instinct, she cut the belt around her waist and wiggled loose of her robes, the slime finding little purchase on the bodyglove beneath.

She watched in disgust and shock as her robes slowly sank beneath the mire, forever lost within the depths. A small price to pay for her soul. Barely had she formed the sentiment when it appeared again, a pale blue apparition flitting just beyond view. This time she knew she'd seen it. She knew for sure. And so she rose to her feet, sword in hand and stablight in the other, and followed.

The elusive prey led her on a wild chase through the labyrinthine temple, always just beyond reach yet constantly at the edge of her perception. This time, though, her senses were keen and the hazards of the ancient ruin would not best her. With nimble feet and unyielding endurance, she closed in the distance within the dark ruins, her exhaustion turning into fresh energy as she drank deep of the Force to let it imbue her body with its strength.

She would catch it soon. Whatever it was. She would catch it, and corner it—and kill it. And she would enjoy it. She did not know her quarry, but she could already taste victory on her lips. The satisfaction of sinking her blade into its form and drawing out its last breath was just beyond the next corner. Just beyond the next. The next.

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Her blade sang through the air like a song, high and clear. Guided by the Force it bit through, the strength of her arm an extension of its will. Gaps too small for mortal skill bled with arterial red, armor parting under her strength and skill. She was an instrument and flowed with the breath of life, even as she reaped a harvest of the same.

More. More.

The foe retreated, falling back before them. They had to push them now, push to victory. Her forces were weary, but her arms were not. They could rest once the harvest was done and so she ordered. On and on, they charged and killed. More and more, blood and life was spilled.

More. More.

She gluttoned on the violence. Felt it around her. The feeble foe driven to its last legs. Harder still she pushed, ever onward, all the way to the breaking point. The final foe remained, sinking to its knees. She cut the weapon from its arms and swung her blade around. All around her only corpses—friend and foe. The singing blade reached a crescendo as the man looked up with her brother's eyes.

The sword shattered like glass.

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Laira opened her eyes to a sound she had not expected; the clear chirping song of an exotic bird. Its blue plumage shone in hues of purple and azure in the pale starlight beam, its eyes locked with hers and her blade like a wall of steel between them both. A blade frozen in time.

The bird cocked its head to the side, inquisitive and lively. Sitting perched atop the shoulders of a ruined statue of a Nautaloan entity, it beheld her with curiosity and perhaps amusement.

“Have I been chasing you—you?” She winced. That had been no echo. Not this time. How had it slipped her like that? She’d lived years without the accent.

The bird chirped, a melodic, chipper tune. It seemed utterly out of place within the oppressive atmosphere of the ruined temple. Abashed, Laira pulled back her sword, still held perfectly still before the bird and slid it back in its sheath. The bird, for its part, fluttered into the air and landed on her shoulder. It weighed almost nothing, and yet she lurched under its magnitude.

“For a bird, you sure are curious.” This time she caught herself, wincing as she swallowed the word. The bird cocked its head inspecting her briefly, before letting out its mating call once more—though stopping one tune short.

“Curious,” Laira gasped, enthralled by the bizarre creature. The bird chirped and took off, this time fluttering well within view. She knew a guide when she saw one.

The pair emerged back into the clearing by the time the sun was setting, its long rays dying the heavens a melange of orange and reds. The tiny bird fluttered freely around her, its coat resplendent in a beam of light that managed to slip past the canopy. It was the shade of juniper berries.

“I think you can understand me,” Laira stated as she finally felt the connection of the Force once more, pure and serene around her.

The bird landed on a nearby branch and inspected her, one eye at a time.

“You came in to find me, didn’t you?”

The bird remained silent, but she knew the answer.

“Thank you, for guiding me out. Perhaps it’s time I walk a different path—path,” she stated and offered out her arm.

The bird fluttered over, sinking its talons into her skin. There was pain, but she did not flinch.

“There will be pain, I accept this. And I will call you Juniper, for every guide needs a name,” she said with a gentle smile.

Bowing its head, Juniper cooed.