

**Taldryan Tower**  
**Basement Level -2**  
**41 ABY**

"Subject number six-zero-four-seven. You are hereby scheduled for a mind flayer after attempting to tamper with information within the Taldryan archives, including deletion and copying of top secret files only accessible to the Taldryan Summit. Do you have anything you wish to say before we start the procedure?"

Zaesti was her name. She was Taldryan's head of investigation and interrogation. She was a young woman, and as far as Winch was concerned, hers was a fancy title reserved for those who specialised in the misery of others. She seemed far too eager to begin the procedure if the large, toothy grin on her face was anything to go by. It took a special kind of sadist to enjoy the pain of others under the pretence of an official position, but that was politics, nothing but an excuse to hide corruption and bigotry. Zaesti was a pawn in another's game of dejarik.

Winch would have felt sorry for her, if their meeting wasn't about to be completely erased from his memory.

The smell of the room was far too clean for Winch's liking. The whirring and buzzing of droids around the room gave him little comfort as he was restrained onto the table. The cuffs around his wrists and ankles clicked into place and latched down tight. He couldn't help trying to move. Winch knew it was a futile effort, but something was often better than nothing in most cases.

"The strong, silent type, eh?" Zaesti stroked a single, sharp nail down Winch's cheek. The sensation sent a powerful shiver down his spine.

At the far end of the room was a large black pane of glass. Winch didn't know for certain, but somehow, somehow, he knew they had to be watching. Winch was determined to be stubborn until the end.

Zaesti tutted at him. "You're no fun. Well, if you aren't going to talk, then there's no use in dragging this out any further. Don't worry you won't feel a thing."

She walked over to a machine beside the table. She inputted a few keys, the tip-tap of her fingers upon arubesh letters fast and as eager as she was to start the procedure. She gave him one more glance.

"Then again, you won't remember either way."

Zaesti made her way out of the room, though just before the door closed, Winch could hear her voice;

"Start the procedure!"

It started with a loud buzzing, then the sound of twin engines whirring by his ears. Winch couldn't stop himself from tensing. He clenched his hands, toes and mouth. He could practically feel the neurons in his brain reacting to the machine before it had even started. He closed his eyes, his heart pounding harder and harder the higher-pitched the machines by his ears became. He took quick, deep breaths, unable to keep himself calm.

Then, it stopped. Winch could recognise the distinct hum of a machine powering down from anywhere in the galaxy.

That wasn't it, was it? It couldn't be...

No. He could still remember everything as clearly as when it happened. The images came to the forefront of his mind, painting a clear picture of what had happened earlier. The procedure had stopped. The question was why?

The door to the room burst open, slamming against the wall. Zaesti stormed in, a deep, seething hatred burning from behind blue eyes. She grabbed Winch by the collar of his shirt and lowered her face to his until he could feel her breath on his skin.

"You got lucky," she said, her words barely louder than a whisper. "The Supreme Chancellor wants a word with you. You better hope he's come to save your sorry ass, because if not, I'm gonna..."

"That's enough, Zaesti. You may leave us to talk."

Winch saw Mandalorian armour of bright crimson red, sans helmet, standing in the doorway. It was a ghastly sight. It was far too ostentatious, but anything was better than being in a room with Zaesti for a few minutes longer.

The young woman shot Winch an evil glare as she left the room, forcefully shutting the door behind her.

"Does she have to be so dramatic?" Appius sighed heavily and shook his head.

*'You hired her...'*

Winch kept the thought to himself. The last thing he wanted was to prompt any reaction that would turn the mind flayer back on. The Taldryan Supreme Chancellor being here confirmed his suspicions that he was being watched.

"You look comfortable," Appius smirked and crossed his arms across his chest. There was a hint of smugness to his tone of voice that grated on Winch's nerves.

"You should try it."

Appius scoffed. "No thanks. I prefer standing."

"Rubbing salt into my wounds seems a little beneath you, *Supreme* Chancellor. There must be some immediate cause for you to consider interrupting proceedings like this..."

Appius raised a hand, and Winch braced himself for the worst. To his surprise, the shackles holding him down on the table released him from their grasp. Winch immediately pulled himself upright, tentatively rubbing his wrists.

"Better?" Appius asked.

"A lot," Winch eyed Appius with suspicion. "Though the reasoning behind the action is still unclear..."

"Are you asking why we aren't frying your brain?" Appius slightly tilted his head. "Because if you are, I'll let you know I've had a change of heart. Oh, don't look at me like that!"

Winch was taken aback. "Why? I hacked into your system, and saw what you had planned for my family..."

"Only if they ever turn against Taldryan. You can't tell me the *Crusaders* don't have plans in place in case Taldryan attacked them."

Winch carefully mused over his answer. "No."

"And that right there..." Appius clasped his hands together. "Is a load of kark, and you know it. You cannot sit there and tell me that there wasn't a plan in place. If there wasn't, then I'm giving you *and* them way too much credit."

Winch averted his gaze, but when he did Appius leaned against the table beside him and cleared his throat.

"I have a proposition for you. You are a man with a level of experience rarely seen in today's galaxy. You have a set of skills that are an asset to any squad you are a part of. I want to offer you a position in Taldryan's military."

Winch's eyes widened. "You can't be serious. A few minutes ago you were willing to erase my memories, destroy valuable neurons in my brain, and now you are offering me a position within the ranks of Taldryan's army... Why? So you can watch my every move? Why not just flayer my mind and get it over with if that is your intention..."

"Because I make mistakes, Winch!" Appius moved away from the table and turned to face Winch. "I was angry, and I felt betrayed. I was thinking with my heart instead of my head. I know you had... *good*... intentions, regardless of what you did. I'm not a monster, and if I deserved a second chance after everything was taken from me, then I like to think you do too. The Taldryan military... They are good people, Winch. They could use a guy like you..."

Appius held out his hand to Winch. "What do you say? Do we have a deal?"

Winch inspected the hand carefully. "I'm not leaving the *Crusaders*. They're my family..."

"And you won't have to. This benefits us both, and you can do more good."

Winch glanced at Appius' hand, then back to his face. He took the hand in his own, giving a strong, firm shake.

"Deal," Winch said. For the first time that evening, a small smile came to his face.

**=END=**