

# **THE BETRAYER**

FIRST DRAFT

WRITTEN BY MPK OF THE STAR WARS FANON WIKI

To all of the fellow dreamers with whom I have shared our little outpost, the Star Wars Fanon Wiki, but most of all to Jamie St. John, Sakaros, Savage, Karohalva, and Susan Donnam, this draft is humbly and gratefully dedicated.

## COMPLAINT OF THE AUTHOR

I have long despised the tradition among fan fiction writers of prefacing one's work with rambling, superfluous disclaimers and "author's notes" and the like. It is therefore fitting that I do the same thing myself.

Do I really need to say it? This story is a work of what they call "fan fiction," meaning it is the private creation of an anonymous dork who deludes himself that he has nothing better to do with his remaining time on planet Earth. Ergo it has no official status, nor its author any legitimate connection to the actual intellectual property owners of *Star Wars*<sup>®©™</sup> and *Knights of the Old Republic 2: The Sith Lords*<sup>®©™</sup>, whoever they be. Accordingly, in the unlikely event that any of those property owners drop out of the sky and declare that they have a problem with this work or with any of mine which borrow from the *Star Wars* universe<sup>®©™</sup>, then may the aforesaid works perish in fire irrevocably.

On some of the mainstream web sites such as Fanfiction.net and Kotorfanmedia (a plague on both their houses), the shorthand summary of this story would be "F!DS!Exile-Atton!Action!Romance!Angst!Baloney-Sandwich," or another such compound word that may or may not be the product of an epileptic seizure. At greater (but hopefully not too great) length, however, *The Betrayer* consists in a sort of retelling of the final act of *Knights of the Old Republic II: The Sith Lords*, from the gathering of the Jedi on Dantooine to the ending on Malachor V. For the most part, the focus is on the Exile and Atton Rand, but other members of the party such as Visas Marr and Mical get their moments as well. The main character, the Exile, retains her name of Meetra Surik from the official Legends continuity, and little else from it. Her character arc is my own take on the "dark side storyline," the idea being to show her as having undergone some kind of an intelligible journey from being a basically well-intentioned person to being the villainess we see at the end. This being a contrast to the dark side path in the game, where (depending on how one plays it) Miss Exile either is schizophrenic or else was inexplicably a villainess all along.

By this point I have given the reader enough for him or her to know whether the story's premise is his or her cup of tea. What else, then, might I have to say?

An esteemed colleague of mine, Jamie St. John, had this to say to me on one occasion: "First drafts are supposed to be messy, but I think most of us have a hard time allowing ourselves to suck." Accordingly, what I present in the following space is a first draft. It has undergone no peer review and minimal revision, editing, and error correction, so that I can guarantee that I allowed myself to suck on this one. This is so because my actual life is once again beckoning me. Still, I made up my mind that I would not leave yet another project on ice without even finishing one draft of it. This fact, inasmuch as it serves to explain the quality of the text, is of singular importance for the reader to bear in mind as he or she embarks.

As it currently stands, whatever its strengths, *The Betrayer* is lousy with errors, contradictions, misfires, and omissions. Moreover, I think it lacks a stable sense of self. I was somewhere before the halfway point when it occurred to me (again, with the help of my colleagues) that I was wasting quite a bit of time and words on describing and connecting various events of the plot, when the target audience (all four of them) already knows every jot and tittle of the plot from the game and does not need to be told why the characters go from one planet to the

next, and so on. The draft then began an imperfect and incomplete metamorphosis, and in hindsight it seems clear that if this story has a proper form at all (by which I mean the completed idea of it, which currently exists only in my mind) then it is supposed to be a character piece, not a standard, beginning-middle-and-end, plot-driven novel or novella, as I originally intended.

In lieu of even greater and more tedious detail, I offer a few closing notes. As implied above, I went on with this first draft of *The Betrayer* largely just out of principle, to finish what I had started. But from the beginning, it was meant to serve as a sort of prelude to another series of stories, which would tell yet another fannish clown's version of a "*Knights of the Old Republic III*" storyline, and for which I have an unfinished outline, as well as many disconnected ideas jotted down. Really, in hindsight I think I would have done better to skip over *KotOR 2*'s events and gone straight to my own story idea in the first place. Whether or not this current draft ever gives way to a polished and perfected narrative, the fact of the matter is that two thirds of its characterization and the entirety of its plot were basically written for me in advance by the writers of *KotOR 2*. The alternative would almost certainly have produced a work of superior merit (even if it ended up only being another unfinished draft), and at any rate it would have been a far greater and more rewarding challenge for me as a writer.

But that's a moot point, for I'm releasing *The Betrayer* as it is and putting the entire project back into the Rebus File for now. In spite of its flaws, I hope that there remains something in this draft worth experiencing, some obscure strand of quality that might show forth even the faintest glimmer of whatever grace or magic it is that makes me love to read stories – like a thin little vein of gold spiraling its way through the deep of the Earth. If I find myself with the necessary time and interest, then I will return to this draft, fix it up, and continue the story which it begins. If I do not, then I will not, for there are more things to life, for you and for me, than my fan fiction ideas, and there are more things in Heaven and Earth than are dreamed of in all of our space fantasies. God's will be done.

– MPK

"THIS STORY HAPPENED A LONG TIME AGO IN A GALAXY FAR, FAR AWAY. IT IS ALREADY OVER. NOTHING CAN BE DONE TO CHANGE IT.

A STRANGE THING ABOUT STORIES—

THOUGH ALL THIS HAPPENED SO LONG AGO AND SO FAR AWAY THAT WORDS CANNOT DESCRIBE THE TIME OR THE DISTANCE, IT IS ALSO HAPPENING RIGHT NOW. RIGHT HERE. IT IS HAPPENING AS YOU READ THESE WORDS."

— MATTHEW STOVER

*STAR WARS, EPISODE III: REVENGE OF THE SITH*



## PROLOGUE

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*The two walked side-by-side, winding their way out of the Refugee Sector of Nar Shaddaa, a place planted so deep in the world-swallowing city that the light of its sun never reached it even during the day. They went without haste or wariness, at ease in the empty corridors and the shadow-draped skywalks.*

*One of the women spoke with a silken, measured voice. She wore robes of black and maroon, and a veil that hid the empty recesses which in her species lacked eyes. "The Sith," she was saying, "have a simple way, just as the Jedi do - and ours begins with the denial of theirs." There then came ancient words from her lips, words that gave her voice a heft and sharpness. "Peace is a lie; there is only passion. Through passion, I gain strength. Through strength, I gain power. Through power, I gain victory. Through victory, my chains are broken; the Force will free me."*

*The other woman was older and wore faded white garments beneath a loose brown cloak that had once belonged to a Jedi. "Do you feel free?" she asked pointedly. "Is it passion that drives you?"*

*They began across another catwalk, where a cold wind cut between and around them.*

*"It is from this code, this training, that my strength has always come," Visas said at last. "Where do you find yours, exile?"*

*Meetra's jaw tightened. "I am no Jedi, and I'm certainly not a philosopher. I don't know where it comes from, or how it all fits into the grand scheme of things. I don't think about all these things. I act."*

## CHAPTER I – FEAR OF THE DARK

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*Meetra fought with all she had, not daring to let up for a moment, pressing the Jedi Master back down corridor after corridor until at last they had come out to the Sky Ramp. Sealed away within the royal palace, the din of blaster fire lowered itself to a distant murmur, and the sky that looked down on them was fresh and clear – except for the odd plume of smoke.*

*"We can stop this now," Meetra said. "There was never any need for us to fight."*

*Kavar couldn't hide his sneer. "You've made your choice – exile. Whatever your reasons, that choice has consequences. Consequences for us, and for the innocent people of Onderon!"*

*"Master, I only came here to find you. We need your help against the Sith. Can't you see that's more important?"*

*The Jedi almost imperceptibly shifted his stance, his grip on his lightsabers. Meetra noted the change. "Can't you see the damage that this war has caused?" he demanded. "What the Queen's death will cause for the entire Republic?!"*

*"I'm not a politician, Kavar – I don't care! This is Onderon's war, not mine. And not yours either! Can't you sense that I'm telling the truth? Come with me. I promise, I'll get you out of here safely."*

*As her words hung in the air, the two combatants listened and realized that the blaster fire had fallen completely silent.*

*Then Kavar lunged, his lightsabers spinning in a furious azure vortex. Meetra charged past him, slashing as she went, and one of his blades vanished, the hilt clattering to the ground in two sparking pieces. He turned round, dumbfounded, and faltered at last.*

A great circle of sunbeam, hazy with moisture, fell through an opening in the ceiling and spent itself on a broken floor of stones that were slowly being digested by pale grass. Vines hung in a heavy green curtain from the lips of the wounded canopy, and ivy thickly snarled about the walls, slowly consuming them in a process that would take decades or centuries.

Meetra was sprawled on her side just outside the light, facing away from it. She was waiting for herself to awaken, for body and spirit to return to each other, for the after-ringing of the screams within to fade. But the ringing, the screams, the voices, those she was sure would never leave her entirely. She had long thought of herself as being cursed with a perfect memory.

Just inside the opposite edge of the disk of light, there lay what had once been Zez-Kai Ell. One of the Jedi Master's arms rested in a taller patch of grass nearby. Severed bloodlessly at the elbow, its fingers just barely touched Master Ell's fallen lightsaber. Though he had endured several wounds before he died, his visage was a calm portrait: the heavy brown eyes and thick-mustached lips closed as though in a deep sleep. He had hardly looked any other way during his life, always seeming to float on an ocean of indifferent peace. Meetra had seen that peace even as she stepped into the council chamber-turned arena. She saw that peace and sneered at it, wondering what it could possibly have felt like.

When she had ripped the Force out of him, draining it like water from a glass,

her curiosity was not sated. It did not help her to know what that Jedi tranquility felt like. Instead Meetra only felt better – better than herself. More luminous. More powerful.

More unique.

In the center was Master Kavar, flat on his back as though lying in a morgue, a thick black burn-line tracing his chest cavity. He had died slower and harder, as deadly a blademaster as he'd ever been. But something of him had been missing in this fight. He had lost one of his lightsabers back on Onderon, but it was more than his combat style. "What a fool I was," he had said, "that I wished I could have trained you as my Padawan. Even back then I should have known..."

That remark had stung her. So it had felt good to fight him, to slice open his chest and finally glut herself on his life.

Meetra stirred, seeking the balance she needed to stand. She hadn't really wanted this. Things had only changed in the past day. As she had arrived for what she hoped would be her final visit to Dantooine, her entire world had altered as though a dreadful aching was descending over everything. The soil, the grass, the sky, her own clothing and skin was charged, was tingling with the outermost ripples of some echoing voice – or collection of voices. There had ended up being only one thing that could silence those voices.

Meetra didn't quite hear them anymore, but she knew she would again. In the meantime, now she was what more than a few of her enemies had wanted to be: a Jedi killer.

She rose, her legs shaking. She became aware of her own heart and how, with every beat of it, her whole being flashed with a searing, delicious pain. Keeping her back to the corpses, she swept the darkness with her eyes, vainly probing for a moment. Then she made a sweeping motion in the air and her lightsaber leaped from somewhere into her hand.

Two other such weapons remained on the ground. She felt a sudden urge to collect them, but the thought of their former owners stayed that thought. No, the Jedi Masters were dead, and she would not give them another chance to accuse her. She would not even look at their bodies.

She took a few heavy steps, memories of the past hour clicking back into place as though after a long night's sleep. What the Jedi had said and what Kreia had said...

Though her mouth was dry, Meetra spat on the ground. There was nothing left for her in that place or, for that matter, anywhere on that planet. She had gotten the answers that she had wanted from the Jedi, and then some. But she couldn't let herself linger on them any more than she could linger on Dantooine. The Sith would surely find her again soon, and she and the crew had to be ready. And Kreia had to be stopped.

When Meetra reached this conclusion, her daze began to lift, her pain to sink to a manageable level. Now that she had a goal again, power was flowing back into her. She shook herself, pulled her cloak round herself tightly, and strode back into the ruined corridor from which she had come, letting the Force guide her through the darkness.

Some distance away was the man Meetra loved. He searched for her with little grace: stumbling over ancient bricks, bumping into walls, and ripping his way

through curtains of ivy, all the while turning the air thick with expletives. More often than not, he was in darkness – only in occasional patches where the ceiling was missing, either from decay or from bombs, was some light available.

Subtlety was an art known to Atton Rand (few knew this, which was why it worked well for him so often), but he made no effort at stealth now. He couldn't make himself. He was sick with dread, barely able to think straight, tumbling. For some reason Meetra had left her comlink on the ship, and somehow he, along with the rest of the crew, had once again been stupid enough to let her go to a alone to a meeting with a group of dangerous and untrustworthy people – in this case, three Jedi Masters.

The site of that meeting could have been anywhere in the Enclave, but given that the lower levels of the place had recently been infested with laigreks, Atton supposed it was somewhere on the surface. Having no other hints, however, he'd been given no choice but to charge blindly in.

The Jedi Enclave was one of the loneliest places he'd ever been to, second only to the Sith Academy on Korriban and a few other places. As he passed through dozens of rooms and corridors, being turned around, coming to dead ends, and backtracking, it occurred to him that each part of the complex had served a particular purpose and had been decorated and equipped for that purpose: some rooms were undoubtedly for combat training, others for study, others for lounging or for meditation.

But now, just five years after Darth Malak's surprise attack, the entire interior was bare of accessory and ornamentation, stripped down to its foundations and base components, stone, brick, ferrocrete, and durasteel. The entire place was hollow, slowly being eaten by the surrounding environment, slow breezes passing through its gaping wounds.

Atton was aware that he could easily be ambushed in this place. The long stretches of darkness, piles of fallen stone, leaning columns, pits, and alcoves were only a few types of cover from which any assailant, such as a laigrek, could spring out and start chewing on his leg or something. But he had no time to waste on trying to sneak around, not when Meetra might be wounded or dead. And though Atton wasn't the type to brag (but then again, actually he was) he had always had a talent for surviving sudden encounters even without being unprepared for them. He had come to the Enclave thoroughly armed, according to one of his personal rules, with more than one of everything possible: blaster pistols, vibroblades, grenades – and stuffed into his jacket's deepest pocket was the last weapon in the galaxy he would have ever dreamed would be in his possession.

He kept himself calm by reminding himself, over and over again, that Meetra couldn't be dead. Not while Kreia was alive.

After what seemed like hours, he came to yet another small rectangular courtyard, open to the sky and awash with murky sunlight. Blba trees, bloated and twice a normal human's height, stood on either side. The wall at the far end featured a jagged-edged blast hole leading back into the Enclave's tenebrous depths.

Somewhere in the darkness of that maw there was a stirring, then a tiny shimmer of dull gold light, like a shooting star winking into and out of existence. A solid mass of blackness then seemed to emerge. Atton immediately reached for his blasters, but then, blinking, recognized the shape. He ran to close the distance and

they were lost, for a moment, in each other's arms.

In terms of mere proportions, Meetra Surik was an unremarkable woman, neither tall nor short, neither fat nor particularly thin. Her hair was blond and flat, tied behind her head in a simple bun. She wore boots, white threadbare Jedi robes and trousers, a heavy cloak of black armorweave, and thin black gloves. Though covered, her hands and arms were crosscut with old cicatrices as well as recent bandaged wounds, and her fingers were dry, her knuckles almost scabrous. Her face, by contrast, was radiantly smooth, barely matching the harshness of her late-thirty-something years. Still, there were a few things about her – the silvery hairs that sprinkled her head and eyebrows, and the occasional, compulsive clench in her jaw – that made her seem much older than she was.

Atton silently cursed the passage of time and melted away from Meetra's hold. "Kreia's gone," he said. "Atris' Handmaidens took her. They know who she is now." He paused and regarded her more closely, noting the sharpness of her breath, the lightsaber still in her hand. She had looked the same way the previous afternoon. "What the hell happened?"

Meetra sagged as though suddenly off-balance, tempting Atton to reach out to her again. Biting her lip, she cast a glance into the shadows behind her. "The Jedi – Kreia killed them. Then she attacked me. I don't think she was trying to kill me, just... Taking out her rage. And making sure I couldn't follow her." She kept her eyes down, wincing in bewilderment. "If the Handmaidens took her, she must have gone willingly..."

"To get to Atris. And Atris will do what she'll do to anyone she thinks is a Sith."

"She'll kill her." Saying this, Meetra started at a brisk pace down the way Atton had come from. He fell in behind her, relieved that she seemed to know where she was going.

"Yeah, if she can. But why would Kreia kill these Jedi and escape, only to let Atris execute her? What if it's gonna be the other way around?"

"I have no idea," Meetra said with a deep sigh. "I think she may have gone insane. But her life is linked with mine, and if she dies–"

"Yeah. I know."

They swept through darkness, light, darkness again – and in what felt like only a few seconds, Atton was astonished to find that they were passing through the outer courtyard on the south end of the Enclave, back into the parched fields toward Khoonda and the *Ebon Hawk*. A heavy gray shroud had drifted overhead, veiling the sun, and a mist of rain was sating the landscape.

Despite the cloud cover, the sky had a harsh glare to it that made Atton squint. "Please," he said at length, "tell me we're not going back to Telos."

Meetra replied without a drop of mirth. "We are going back to Telos. Is everyone else on the ship?"

Atton did some fumbling with his comlink and found that they were. Meanwhile, Meetra led him into a downward path that soon turned into a narrow, dried-out gorge. Apparently it was yet another shortcut that only she had known about, for it soon deposited them within sight of the battered, dome-headed collection of buildings that was Khoonda – and, more importantly, the landing pads. Nobody else was outside except for a lone, ambling sentry droid.

They said nothing for the rest of the walk. Atton took the opportunity to mull

over these new developments, his insides squirming with disgust at Kreia's betrayal. *I should have seen it coming*, he thought. *We all should have*. And, he was sure, they would have a hell of a time taking her down if she was able to kill three Jedi Masters and overpower Meetra...

The rain turned into a cold drizzle as they started to circle around Khoonda, and in response they picked up the pace. Atton looked at the flag that flew above the settlement, its design a nine-spoked wheel, and shook his head as though remembering a private joke. Khoonda sat in company on a long list of places – Onderon's capital of Iziz, Serroco, Duro, and Malachor V, to name a few – which had belonged to someone else, and that Atton had needed to fight someone else over.

They passed it, revealing a huge stretch of plains beyond, dotted by the occasional blba tree. The clouds out there were almost black and blinked with silent lightning. Just over that horizon lay the Taikaha Hills. Atton looked at it and shivered as he remembered the previous afternoon, remembered watching from Khoonda as Meetra had walked very, very slowly from that horizon, out of the bloody orange sun as it set.

He looked at her again now as she walked ahead of him, even faster than before, her lightsaber still encased in the deathgrip of one hand. As though in response to his seeing it, she returned it to her belt, then drew her cloak tighter around herself.

Once aboard the *Hawk*, they breezed past the rest of the crew to the cockpit, and within moments Dantooine and its storm was left behind. Meetra engaged the autopilot, called the astromech droid up, and asked it to set in a course for Telos. The little pest plugged itself into the navicomputer and said it would need a few minutes. Donning a tight smile, Meetra thanked the droid, patted it on its head (or whatever that part of it was called) and shuffled from the cockpit.

T3-M4 sat in its corner chirping to itself as it worked with the computer. Still irritated that he had to share his space with the droid, Atton left it there and went after Meetra. He stopped in the main hold, where he watched with bewilderment as she made a sharp turn down the port corridor, heading for the dormitory. He was left standing by himself at the holotable in the center, feeling somewhat stupid and exposed.

At one of the other tables sat Mandalore. He was hunched over the pieces of a half-disassembled blaster rifle and, as always, was wearing every last bit of his armored battle suit. Despite the opaqueness of the helmet, he was definitely giving Atton an annoyed glare. Mandalore hadn't said much to him lately, not since Atton had asked him whether he took the helmet off to eat, or just shoved a straw in through some port.

From the helmet came a voice like a saw. "Is she going to tell us where we're going now, or what?"

Atton was about to reply when he noticed Mira at the other table, idly playing with a few pazaak cards that he was certain had been stolen from his deck. Mira looked up, spinning a plus-one card between the fingers of one hand and pulling a face which looked like someone half-trying to hide a smile. In her case, this meant that she was about to make a biting remark. Atton brushed past her before she could. He didn't like her. In fact, he didn't really like anyone on the ship except for Meetra.

On second thought, though, Bao-Dur was all right. The Iridonian wasn't a terribly interesting person, but he never said anything stupid, and he was better than anyone else at keeping the *Hawk* in working condition.

There was a flutter of footsteps as Atton rounded the central console. Bao-Dur and Mical were coming from down the central corridor, engaged in hushed chatter. From the hall to the left came Visas, silent and about as charming as the onset of a case of Corellian mumps. That made the other half of the crew. *What, has everyone been paged for a meeting or something?* Atton hastily left them and went after Meetra.

"They're all waiting to hear from you. Meetra, what's the matter?"

She felt his hand on her shoulder just as she reached the threshold of the starboard dormitory. It was a cautious, un-Attonly sort of touch. She forced herself to turn around. They were the same height, but somehow she felt like she was looking *up* at him. And the *Ebon Hawk's* interior was well-lit, its air clear – she didn't like how Atton was able to see her so easily now.

She stopped knawing on her lower lip and wiped her glistening eyes. "You need to tell them, Atton."

"What?"

"That we're going to Telos. That Kreia killed the Jedi, everything else. I can't do it. I can't stand in front of them..."

She trailed off and Atton looked her up and down with naked incredulity. "Why not? This is your mission, and they're your crew." There was a silence, and a sharpness appeared in his inquisitive eyes. He took half a step closer. "What happened inside that Enclave?"

Meetra wanted to back away. Instead she brought her hands together and pressed them tight. And she reached into the Force. She imagined Atton's mind as a deep body of water that shone with gray light reflected from Dantooine's cloud-covered sun, and herself dipping her fingers beneath its surface.

She heard, as it were, a succession of numbers in Atton's voice, a half-conscious monotone. *Four and eight, next turn, eight and ten. Play the minus eight card, that makes zero and ten. Next–*

He was, of course, playing pazaak in his head. *If you don't*, he had told Meetra some time before, *you've left the door open. And anyone could walk right in.* "Anyone" in this case meant Force-users, and as she had ended up learning later, this was an indispensable skill in Atton's old career, hunting Jedi: shielding himself from their senses by hiding his thoughts. Why was he doing this now? Did he suspect what she had done, or was it simply an innocent habit? It had been a while since Meetra had last tried to read him like this.

Silver and black ripples murmured outward as she withdrew her mental touch. Atton blinked. His expression hardened, then seemed to thaw toward something more vulnerable. What did that mean? Had he noticed what she had just tried to do? Meetra had hardly trained him to use the Force at all. But even so...

Her eyes sank toward the floor. Whatever Atton was thinking, she had to stop him. She leaned forward abruptly, clutching his shoulder, and planted a kiss on his cheek. Though his skin was disarmingly hot, she pressed herself to him and lowered her voice. "Please, Atton. I need you to do this for me." It was a beg. She had never begged him for anything before. "I just need some time."

What she really thought was that she needed an eternity. An infinity to find the farthest, darkest corner of intergalactic space and disappear into it. She couldn't do that – but there was something close to it that she could do.

When she kissed him, Atton should have lost his mind, should have found himself in one of those indescribably sweet moments when, by some means known only to mystics and poets, one's whole life is split in two; a gap is opened between two instants in time and the bliss of a million undreamt lifetimes is somehow poured into that gap. In fact, it almost was.

But at the last nanosecond, it just *wasn't*, and instead a cold, irrational tremor ran silently down through his body.

Meetra let go of him and quickly turned away. She took a few steps and then, in a manner deliberate and mechanical, lowered herself to her knees in a posture of meditation. She didn't clasp her hands. Both hung at her sides, one limp, the other a fist.

Atton watched her a moment, watched her breath and almost imperceptibly sway, clearly in a state of anything but Jedi tranquility. He hated seeing her there, in the same room where Kreia had spent all her time, spent so much time conniving, brooding, planning, sinking her tentacles into everyone's heads...

Looking back down the way he had come, he caught sight of the Miraluka standing in the main hold, facing the others as they milled about around the galaxy map. She hadn't been looking at him and Meetra, but then again she didn't have eyes. She had the Force, and Atton pretty damn well knew better than to think that Kreia was the only sneaking, prying witch in the galaxy.

*Blasted Jedi*, he growled to himself as he stalked back to join the others. *Any time they want to, they can try to peep into my head, play their games. Someday I'm gonna learn how to return the favor.*

It was excruciating, but he did it. Atton told them what had happened – at any rate, what Meetra had told him happened – on Dantooine, about the deaths of the Jedi, Kreia's disappearance, and their pursuit of her to Telos. When he was done, he loitered with them in the main hold for a while as they traded questions and observations concerning what they had just heard. He didn't want to stay with them, but Meetra had asked him to speak on her behalf in the first place, so he felt obligated to.

He also felt conflicted, as usual. On one hand, this was all very tedious and unhelpful. And he needed some time to himself, even just a few minutes, to sort everything out for himself, to try to piece together the meaning of whatever was going on with Meetra, all the signals he had seen or thought he had seen. On the other hand, a big part of him was sure he didn't want to know what it all meant.

Yet when he was with her, he had been *making sure* that he was counting cards in his head...

Mira's voice, sharp and clipped, brought Atton back to himself. Echoing one of his own thoughts from earlier, she pointed out that Kreia had killed three Jedi Masters and defeated Meetra, apparently back-to-back. "And I really hate to be a downer, guys," she went on, "but am I the only one who thinks that this whole situation just screams, '*mission failed*'? I thought the plan was to find these Jedi so they could help us – and now they're all dead." She snapped her fingers. "Just like

that.”

A glare burned itself into Atton's face. They did not need this right now. “You're more than welcome to jump ship as soon as we reach Telos, if that's how you feel. But as for the rest of us...” As his eyes swept the room, he had to fight down a laugh. “We don't quit on the *Ebon Hawk*.”

Mira looked insulted. “Who said anything about quitting?”

A cosmic ocean, a hole in the fabric of space-time, a tunnel through reality – there were dozens of metaphors that had been invented to describe the silent black-blue rush of light that was hyperspace, but to Atton it was just something else to stare at while he passed the time. During his first days as a soldier he had been told that gazing into hyperspace for extended periods led to madness. He took the warning seriously back then, but now that a decade had passed, he found it hard to believe that his mental state could really suffer that much harm from hyper-rapture, or whatever it was called.

He was in the cockpit, as always, slouching back in the pilot's seat, his feet atop the main console, his arms crossed. The *Ebon Hawk* was traveling at many times the speed of light, blazing past stars, planets, other ships, and sentient beings in numbers too great to calculate or comprehend. An entire universe was outside that viewport, and it was all reduced to a vortex of blue fire as the *Hawk* flashed past it, carrying Atton, Meetra, and the rest of them. Heading for Telos, and then...

Atton thought of how smoothly the hyperdrive had been running through this entire adventure and chuckled dryly to himself. Some things hadn't changed since he'd met Meetra on Peragus. He still didn't know where they were all going – but he'd be damned if they weren't on their way fast.

Every half-minute, one of the consoles softly chirped for no reason at all. Or, at any rate, he hadn't been able to find which one it was. Sometimes he kept a count of the sound.

A subtle sort of ripple passed over him, as though the temperature had risen by a degree or the lights had grown a shade brighter. Sensing that he was no longer alone, he leaned forward a bit and decided to guess who it was. “You were just talking to Meetra.”

A voice, refined with an accent from the Core Worlds, answered him. “Yes...” Mical dragged the word out. “I was. I am worried about her.”

“Yeah, aren't we all.”

It was meant as a rebuke, but Mical went on in his usual way that left Atton unsure whether he was oblivious or just didn't care when he wasn't wanted. “Our conversation was not very enlightening, nor was it as... reassuring as I had hoped.” There was a long pause. “I think that she is deeply troubled about how she affects others, how she is affecting all of us.”

“How so?”

“I'm not sure. She seems to believe it has to do with her connection to the Force, and her connections through it to us.”

The phantom console chirped.

Atton didn't move. *Her connection with Kreia*, he thought. *I get that. But with us?*

“And I think it has to do with what happened to her in the Enclave. She never

showed a hint of this insecurity before.”

“Actually... Yes she did. Where were you yesterday afternoon?”

Mical gingerly stepped to the co-pilot's chair, submerging himself in the lightning-glow of the viewport. He sat down awkwardly on the chair's edge, not quite facing Atton. “I was with Bao-Dur, helping him in the garage with his repairs,” he replied. “I suppose I was tired of my studies for a change. Why do you ask?”

That funny feeling hit Atton again, the disturbance like a sudden change in light or temperature. Twisting in his seat, he cast a long look down the corridor to the rest of the ship – no one.

All the same, he dropped his voice and chose his words carefully. “This way she's been acting, it didn't start at the Enclave. It started the day before. I was outside Khoonda, see, just minding my own business...”

*...just minding his own business when Meetra reappeared, inching her way across the plains from the east where the sun was setting. She looked like a long black burn, a solid shadow drifting across the baking, blood-orange landscape.*

*For a reason he couldn't explain, he jogged to meet her. “Meetra!” he called. “Hey – Meetra!” He waved, but she gave only a twitch of her head in response. Up close, she was no more reassuring. Sweat was all but pouring out of her and she walked with a familiarly methodical, “just-in-case-we're-not-in-the-clear” sort of way. Her armorweave cloak hung loosely on her, caked in a few places with dirt. Her lightsaber sagged from her belt.*

*He followed close at her shoulder. “Have you just been in a fight?” He phrased it like a question, though it shouldn't have been one. “What happened?”*

*She almost interrupted him. “Kinrath. I was in the Taikaha Hills.”*

*“Are you all right? Look at me.”*

*Meetra didn't look at him. She kept walking, as deliberate as a storm cloud, and on her face Atton glimpsed a certain expression that he hadn't seen since his days as a soldier. It was a hard, barren, dead sort of face. He had seen the same face in the mirror for a week after Malachor. It had changed again after that, but not back to how it had been before.*

*Hers, though – it had something different in the eyes, something like a flame that had been frozen in place.*

*She brought her hands together and scratched at her gloves. They were coated with dried mud. “I'm fine, Atton.”*

“...and she's barely said a word to me since. Even then, I knew she was lying about it being kinrath. Wasn't a damn chance it was true.”

And in one of the darker compartments of his mind, behind the walls he had built and the doors he kept sealed, he had a pretty good guess as to what sort of thing had happened out in the Taikaha Hills – or wherever Meetra had been. But when he looked at Mical, saw the gloom hardening on his face and in his bones, somehow Atton couldn't bring himself to say out loud what he thought Meetra might have done.

Mical sat as motionless as his seat, his hands folded in his lap, his eyes fixed on them. Hopefully, he would realize what Atton was getting at. He was, admittedly, a lot sharper than he usually let on.

The phantom console beeped, in the exact same tone as before, three more

times. Atton kept count.

Finally Mical raised his head and looked at him with a surprising fierceness, almost a scowl. "Atton, do you remember when we spoke about Meetra before? I believe we agreed that, despite our differences, we will both be there for her when no one else is. I meant what I said, and have been doing what I can to hold to my end of that..." He winced as though someone had pricked him with a needle. "In the small way that I can. But we both know that you are in a better position than me."

For some reason Atton felt faintly embarrassed. "Well, I don't know about that. Like I said, she's barely talking to me at all."

"But you are still close to her, closer than anyone. And whether she speaks to you or not, there is a strong connection there. You can use it to see things that I will not – things that I *cannot*, no matter how carefully I look." He leaned forward, his jaw set, and Atton couldn't help but meet his gaze. "If something has happened to her, and if something terrible is *going* to happen, then it will be up to you to catch it before it happens. To save her in time."

"What makes you so sure?"

"You know what I'm referring to. *You're* the one she trained to use the Force—"

"Oh, come on. She barely taught me anything. She's spent more time training that Miraluka." He wrinkled his nose in contempt. "For some reason."

Mical pointed at Atton – or, rather, at a very specific point on his jacket. "I'm not stupid, and neither are you. You have that power. She helped you unlock it. But for some reason you have been holding back, hiding it. *Wasting* it. Whatever your reasons, fear or uncertainty, the time for that is past. There is too much at stake." As he rose, his voice dropped to a heavy whisper. "You may be her only hope."

Atton stared up at him, too comfortable to flinch. "Thanks. No pressure. But what about you?"

Mical glanced at the doorway. "If you fail, then I won't." And he was gone.

Meetra had found her center. She had nested herself in the darkness between all things and bathed in the energies she found there. *You can feel the Force*, Vrook had snarled at her, *But you cannot feel yourself*. Perhaps not. Perhaps she would not have it any other way. For a time she forgot about her body, about that scarred, stained flesh. It shrank, became only one more part of the environment while the mind swelled. Meetra fastened herself to the ship around her until she was seeping between its layers. She wore durasteel ceiling, floor, and walls as skin. The air recyclers became her lungs that pumped and fed the crew in a single, endless draft. Her own pulse was the electricity that coursed through the *Ebon Hawk* in a million microscopic conduits, giving it life, and her heart enclosed the pulsing blue flame that wreathed the ship as it sped across the galaxy.

And as she enfolded that ship, she enfolded its crew. She wore their skin and bone or, as it happened, their durasteel and electrodrivers. She oozed inside them, clinging to the candle-flames that were their souls and drinking in the heat and light from the Force there. It was as though Meetra had been burning and withering beneath Dantooine's setting sun, only for a cloud to suddenly shield her from its heavy glare. She lost herself in this communion, unseen and unheard, where she no longer remembered the Taikaha Hills or the body she had left there. No longer remembered the dead world's call she had heard from the wind or the hunger for

the death of an old man which would echo across so many worlds.

She no longer remembered the starflare of crossed lightsabers in those hills, or between the shadows of the Jedi Enclave. No longer remembered feeling empty and then glugged. No longer remembered the inferno of feeding and the coldness of the corpses afterward. No longer remembered the helplessness of not knowing how it had all happened.

She remembered none of it. Severed from herself, she did as Kreia had taught her, listening to the *Ebon Hawk* and to the dreams and fears that filled its corridors. She simply listened, taking in their thoughts and words, gathering up their light and, through it all, somehow remembering joy.

Without warning she felt a sort of intrusion, like the point of a needle piercing her enclosing heart. The starboard dormitory grew darker, heavy with an alien presence – and just as suddenly it ended. Meetra felt a hushed pair of footsteps crossing the ship toward her.

With a long, airy sigh she emerged, letting go of the Force as she would let go of a lover. Normal existence resumed: now she was again one of the strange, fleshly things that this blind vessel carried as it sped across the void...

But Meetra had taken her rest. She was, for now at least, balanced again. She no longer was afraid of Atton, of Mical, or of anyone.

She opened her eyes, rose, and turned. Visas stood in the doorway with her hands behind her back, waiting to be acknowledged. In the Force she looked unusually solid, unusually brittle; afraid to be struck, wanting to flee but unable to.

"I felt it," Meetra said at last. "It was your master speaking to you, wasn't it?"

Visas' mouth barely moved. "He is coming to Telos for the last of the Jedi. And for you."

Meetra paused to consider the announcement, slowly following it as it fell in beside the other events that were in motion. Atris was on Telos. Kreia, if not with her already, would be soon. Meetra and the crew were close behind, and now the Sith were on their way as well. She soon caught the meaning: all of Kreia's pawns were converging on one place so that they could be swept from the board at once.

All but one – one the destroyer of all the others.

Her friend went on. "You will face him there. And when you do, he will wound you as he has wounded me."

Meetra could not hide a strange smile. "I've been wounded before."

In an almost unnoticeable motion, Visas inclined her head.

"And we've fought the Sith already. Don't be afraid."

"It is your heart that is full of fear. It has been since you slew the Jedi on Dantooine."

In an instant the air went frigid. Meetra's smile evaporated and her whole body flinched with a desire to bound across the room, to coil and to strike. "What did you say?"

"The Force on Dantooine is clouded by the memories of war. But even there I felt it, saw it. I saw Vrook die, and the next day the others in the Enclave. And I saw you grow stronger."

For an agonizing moment there was silence as Visas stood waiting. Meetra herself was rooted to the floor, a frozen statue fighting to thaw itself from the inside with a deep, dark fire.

"You are like no Jedi or Sith I have met, exile. You walk your own path, and whatever drives you down it, whatever you keep in the depths of that heart, it is yours alone to know."

Meetra gritted her teeth. *Not alone*, she wanted to say.

"You have kept this secret for your own reasons, and it is for you to reveal it to the others – or to not reveal it." The Miraluka straightened and took a step forward. "But the fear that I see in you must be uprooted if you are to survive this battle. If not, my master will feel it, feed on it. And then even the strength of the Jedi will not save you."

*I'm not afraid*. But Meetra knew that she was, knew that otherwise she would have been able to speak to Atton, to look him steadily in the eye. Still, she knew that she had something stronger than fear. She still carried in her the fire she had fed on from the crew, from their battles, from the Jedi and Sith, from the lives and the deaths of this quest.

She stared at the veil which hid the eyes Visas lacked and let out the breath she had been holding. "Leave me." But that voice was barely her own. It had turned harsh, guttural, each word torn dripping and frayed from her throat. "Tell the crew that the Sith are coming. We must be prepared."

"Very well. But first I must ask you something. When we first met and you defeated me in battle, why did you not kill me, as you did so many of your enemies? Why did you spare me?"

"You asked me that before."

"You did not answer before."

Meetra wiped a gloved hand across her eyes. Her shoulders sagged. Although the last thing she wanted was to continue this conversation, she welcomed the change of topic. She cast her mind back to the very moment of her decision and found the scene sharp and clear in her mind: Visas on her knees, wobbling, bleeding, a suddenly pitiful figure for a would-be assassin; the gold-bleeding lightsaber cuts in the walls of the *Ebon Hawk*; Meetra herself, far from unscathed, fighting to keep in her hands the vibroblade that had somehow grown heavy and cumbersome.

All those details were like crystal, but the answer to the question... Meetra honestly couldn't remember the reason.

"Because," she said at last, "I could see that you were different."

With exaggerated deliberateness she turned away and returned to her meditative posture. For a moment Visas watched – and then she vanished like a thin shadow.

## CHAPTER II – A CURIOUS STRENGTH

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*She spoke a long time with Zez-Kai Ell in a dark, windowless little flophouse, secretly marveling at how modest and sad were the old man's eyes. On account of his glacial tone of voice, his gestures, and the way he slouched on the empty cot, Meetra could hardly convince herself that he was the same man who had sat in judgement over her a decade ago.*

*"And I was not the only one," he was saying. "That is why many scattered, and why many in the Republic do not trust us. And why we do not trust ourselves." Taking his lightsaber from where it lay beside him, he held it close to his face, staring at and yet seeming not to really see it. "Make no mistake, I am no Jedi. This is the end you see. After this, there will be nothing... And I think it will be for the best."*

*Then he looked at Meetra, took a long, deep breath, and rose to his impressive height. "Do you wish to do battle now? I have nothing more to say."*

*The question took her aback, for there was nothing further from her mind – and the past few days had been suffocated with fighting.*

*When at last they were back on the streets of the Smuggler's Moon, Meetra took his hand and shook it fiercely, as though by doing so she might put some of her own strength into him. "Listen," she said. "I never thought I'd say this to you, or anyone on the Council, but it's good to see you again."*

*Then they went their separate ways through the shadows.*

Telos: a dead planet being coaxed back to life, wore Citadel Station and its shielded restoration zones like a second face. The planet struck Atton in hindsight as an appropriate place for a Jedi Master to hide, and given the temperament of most Jedi, an unused enclave built into a massive, snow-sheeted polar plateau was especially fitting. He had hoped to never see the place again, but having traveled this long with Meetra and the others, he knew better than to complain out loud about his own hopes and wants.

He made sure to complain anyway, though. His heart wasn't really in it, but with Meetra standing over his shoulder as he worked the ship's controls, he thought it would be best to keep up his usual bravado.

"Boy, am I glad to see this place again. Maybe they'll throw us all into force cages again. That would be great."

"Telos'll be more fun a second time, just like Onderon was," Meetra almost mumbled, apparently trying to make light of the situation.

As usual, nobody bothered to thank Atton as he guided the *Ebon Hawk* through the blinding blizzard in a downward spiral over the plateau, cutting through harsh winds with relative ease. With a few taps at his console, he brought up an EPR scan of the ground below.

"The hangar bay's wide open and empty," he remarked. "Looks like they're waiting for us."

"Take us in."

In moments the *Hawk* was nestled into the snow-dusted recess, spraying jets of steam from opening joints in its hull as the landing gear extended and the engines powered down.

Since his talk with Mical, Atton hadn't been able to come up with a way to mentally relax. He could always play cards, but he did that anyway and it could only do so much good. But now that they were about to go in with guns blazing again, he was able to crack a fresh smile. Sith Lords, Jedi Masters, all their assorted minions and patsies, and whatever else would take a shot at them – all were just so many walls between them and their goal, walls to blow down. He would have to keep an eye on Meetra, of course, but for the moment things would go back to being nice and simple again.

Or they were, at least, until he went into the main hold and heard Meetra telling the whole crew that they were going to stay put.

"I can sense it. Atris is here, but Kreia's not. She probably just left. I'm going to find out where she's gone. I shouldn't take long." Meetra paused to allow for a few mutters of assent, but most of the crew was silent with the kind of silence that a held breath causes.

Mical was the first to actually speak up. "You shouldn't go alone, Meetra. You are taking an unnecessary risk."

She regarded him with a lazy twitch of her head. "No, I'm not. For once I'm hoping to get what I want without a fight. If the rest of you stay here, I think I'll be able to."

"What makes you so sure of that?"

"Atris will be willing to talk to me if I show that I'm not a threat. That means I go in alone."

Atton was standing to Meetra's right, his hands welded to the rim of the central hologram table, his eyes prodding at her harshly. "Or it means you walk right into an obvious trap. Do you really think she left her front door open 'cause she's just *dying* for you to drop in for a friendly chat? You two didn't exactly part as friends last time."

She turned, almost looking at him, but not quite. "That doesn't mean we're going to kill each other."

"Nevertheless, she is a threat." That came from Visas, who was loitering on the edge of the room near the doorway to the starboard corridor. Atton reflexively sent a glare in her direction, then immediately regretted it. She was on his side this time. Maybe, he thought, if he kept pressing...

"Don't we know better than to trust in the good will of enigmatic Jedi hags? You'll need us there if you don't want her to try anything--"

"I'm not going to argue with you," Meetra snapped, suddenly a general again. "We have bigger things to worry about, like the Sith coming to turn this planet into a graveyard again. I can sense Atris, and I'm telling you there is no danger from her. Stay here and keep the ship secure. That's an *order*."

And before anyone could protest or even agree with her, she was marching toward the exit ramp, leaving the crew behind in the same way she would a collection of furniture.

*She's lying.*

Atton wanted to scream it. She had looked perfectly serene and collected – almost casual, even. But somehow he knew, as surely as he was standing there, that Meetra didn't believe a word of what she had just said.

Whenever Atton said that he had "a bad feeling about this," he meant it. A gut feeling, a thought from nowhere that things were about to go very, very wrong

– and they always would. But he'd never had a bad feeling as vivid or as eerily *specific* as the one he had now.

He stood motionless as the rest of the crew shuffled away: Visas to her chamber; Bao-Dur and his little floating ball of a droid to the garage; the big floating ball of a droid and the T3 unit, one to roam and the other to continue maintaining the ship; Mandalore to the work bench, Mira somewhere else–

Atton scowled. *Damn sheep*, he thought. *How could none of them see it?* He turned, tracking Mical as he moved a little too quickly past, making for the communications room. “Hey, pretty boy. Good thing there's nothing *bad* going on, huh?”

His scowl got a scowl in return. “I need to make sure my message got through.”

“What message?”

But before he could take another breath, Mical had disappeared around the corner and shut the door, leaving Atton to fend for himself as usual. *Totals are twenty-four and ten. Playing the minus six card gets me at eighteen, the minus five at nineteen...*

It occurred to Meetra that she had changed since she had last walked the halls of this ice-shrouded academy. The first time, she had only just emerged raw from her decade-long blindness to the Force. Her eyes had been weak, her senses dull, and the fires that she had to feed on were few. She had felt a slight, obscure sort of discomfort in this Jedi Master's haunt, like a murkiness on the edge of her vision.

But now that she saw it while fully awake, the Jedi academy reeked of darkness. Still, it was nowhere near as strong or as entrenched as the aura that had permeated Korriban. This was somehow fresher, but it was of the same kind, and it had the weight of some years behind it. Meetra dipped herself into that ambiance without effort, carrying herself into the academy toward its deepest region.

To mere physical eyes, of course, the various rooms and hallways were quite unchanged: all of them undecorated, sleek and utilitarian, the colors varying only between a few shades of glassy white, gray, and blue. Meetra supposed that such a palette would be congenial to Jedi tastes, to their reverence for simplicity and serenity, and to their fondness for meditation. The presence of the dark side, though, made such an idea farcical. The architecture loathed itself.

Without encountering anyone, Meetra made her way through the compound and to a sort of central hub. From there she took a railless bridge to another circular chamber which sat atop a tower that emerged from a black abyss – and from there led another ramped bridge to a final towered room, which was apparently where Atris passed her hours of contemplation.

Meetra paused to take in the anteroom just after crossing its threshold, sweeping it with a naked, wounded sneer. The place had provoked this same reaction before. A mimicry of the High Council Chamber in the Jedi Temple on Coruscant, its circumference was rimmed by twelve rock-hewn thrones, all facing inward. In the center was a slate-faced, four-sided obelisk, carved out of bodrite and standing one meter taller than the average human. Called the center stone, it stood for the unity and strength of the entire Jedi Order. Meetra caught that irony

as well – with the Order down to one member, it finally did have a certain kind of unity, at any rate.

She raised an eyebrow when she noticed the company of white-garbed beings approaching from the other side. They marched in two lines of three, side by side, then spread out to form a human wall just before the center stone. Each of the women held a collapsed Echani electrostaff in her right fist, and each of them fixed Meetra with an identical silver-eyed glare. “Hand over your weapons,” one of them ordered.

Meetra cast her eye over and past the handmaidens to the massive sealed door to the meditation chamber. She stood breathing in the ripples of shadow that oozed out from there, where someone was calling to her – or *something* was, as it had in the hills on Dantooine...

Her hand closed around the lightsaber at her waist, looking for a comfortable grip. She entered the room, half-conscious of her own steps. “Bring me Atris if you want to live.”

There was a flaring hiss as the twin ends of six electrostaffs shot out to their full lengths, followed by a hungry crackle as energy wreathed them. The members of the human wall moved as one, forming a circle around their quarry. Glad to be done with talking, Meetra ripped the lightsaber from her belt, bringing its blood-orange blade to life as the storming circle tightened.

The Echani sisters' strategy was as deadly as it was methodical. Four of them attacked from different angles at once, coordinating their thrusts and slashes to keep Meetra off her balance. Only able to parry or block in one direction at a time, she was forced to test the limits of her Force-enhanced reflexes, sidestepping and twisting and contorting and spinning, the other three staffs always *just* missing her. To further complicate things, the two in reserve would switch places with two of those on the attack, giving them a few seconds of relief. Meetra, on the other hand, had hardly a second in which to let up her defense.

Normally this would not have been a cause for concern, but Meetra's power did not seem as willing to come to her aid as it usually was. Even as she whirled back and forth to meet the Echani's strikes, she reached out to them with her power and found that they barely registered as presences in the Force at all.

When a Jedi did battle, especially against multiple adversaries at once, her strength lay in the use of the Force to anticipate the actions of those adversaries. This was most effectively done by establishing power over their minds, invisibly reaching into them and drawing out their plan of attack, minute by minute, second by second, and then countering it.

The handmaidens, however, had been trained to resist this technique. They were not using quite the same method of shielding their minds as Atton did, surrounding it with a screen of raw, manufactured emotions and minutiae, but it produced the same effect. Probing their thoughts was like digging into soft, loose sand; each time Meetra tried to make a hole, it would promptly refill itself.

All she could do was keep herself moving, tracking the deadly electrical arcs of the staffs and meeting them blow for blow. Yet an unanswerable intuition told her to keep prodding them, to find an opening.

She found it soon enough. Hidden beneath Echani precision and concentration, almost invisible even to the Force, one of the handmaidens was different. A crack had formed in the wall around her mind and red-hot light was

seeping through it, putting just a bit more frenzy into her attacks, a bit more *feeling* into the fight. She was like an Aurean vulture trying to escape a planet's gravity; she moved as though trying to recite a song that had been played at the hour of her own birth, and it was the Force that sang out of her, that uncontrollable heat. Her sisters heard only the raw sound of the world, but she heard the voice that was the pillar bearing it up, though she didn't understand it.

She was the weak link.

When the handmaiden broke off her attack so one of her sisters could step in, Meetra's will knifed its way into the crack of her mental wall and twisted, turning it into a rent. With no Jedi training, she had no way of guarding the Force within her. It came out in a blazing stream and Meetra took it in. The room was swallowed by a rich glow and long-casted shadows as a vibrating ribbon of yellow-red light leaped from the handmaiden's heart to Meetra's outstretched hand.

In seconds it was over. She fell on her side before one of the Jedi thrones, her electrostaff clattering to the floor, fitfully sparking before fizzling out. Her sisters drew back from their target and froze. Outrage and dismay showed in their features for only an instant, but they did not resume their attack. Feeling solid and pure as a star, Meetra lowered her hand with theatrical slowness and eyed them, not quite managing to hold back a grin.

"*Enough!*" That one word, shouted from behind by a clipped, refined voice, spoiled the moment. Meetra turned. Standing at the top of the stairs was another woman in white, her dress that of a Jedi but her bearing that of an aristocrat: tall, crystalline, and sharp like a dagger. Her eyes were a dark blue, filled to the brim with all of the confidence and spite that Meetra in her lifetime had ever wanted for herself.

"Leave us and wait in the central hub. If her companions try to interfere, kill them." Atris spoke to her handmaidens, but held Meetra's gaze without wavering. Behind her, a shifting red glow wafted from the now-gaping portal of the meditation chamber, and something about that glow seemed to tug on one's heart...

Without a word the handmaidens deactivated their staffs and withdrew, passing live enemy and dead sister alike as though neither existed.

"Your puppets would make perfect Jedi, Atris," Meetra remarked. "They're perfect little toy soldiers."

Atris' hands were clasped before her, each one hidden in the opposite sleeve. She didn't move. "They are," she said wistfully, "though you have your own uses for fanatical devotees."

Meetra held herself back, listening to the hungry hum of her lightsaber, tightening and untightening her grip.

"Did I strike a nerve?"

"Where is Kreia?"

"Gone. My... old *friend* paid me a visit to make things more clear. Only I will follow her, after I have dealt with the Sith. And with you."

A smile crept back onto Meetra's face. "So I'm here to stand trial? Again?"

The Jedi Master lowered her hands, one drifting to the ornate lightsaber hilt at her belt – not the one that had been Meetra's, taken ten years ago. "There will be no such formalities, exile. Only the justice that you have been so long denied." And with long strides she descended, her saber hissing to life with a steady blue-white flame. Meetra brought her guard up and their blades met in a joyous clash.

Atris came at her fast and aggressive, a pure Jedi Master of the Makashi school, her blade in one hand, slicing and spearing with exuberant precision. Meetra gave ground at once, parrying with effort but gathering strength at the same time, soaking in the curious darkness that filled the academy's air. To her, lightsaber combat was more an intuitive matter than an academic one. She used the Force to guide her hands and feet, reading Atris the way Kreia had taught her to read Kavar and the others. For a Jedi Master, this one's style was surprisingly frank.

Halfway across the room, Meetra sidestepped to slash at her opponent's shoulder as her momentum carried her past. Atris caught herself quickly, though, twisting to deflect the attack away. With a thick, growling sound, Meetra's lightsaber sliced a molten line into the center stone, half-burying itself before being choked and stayed by the hyper-dense material. With the help of the Force she wrenched the weapon free just in time to dodge a follow-up attack, but when she answered with a sweep at Atris' waist, the Jedi seemed to have vanished completely.

Holding her breath against the stench of vaporized stone, Meetra could only look about in bewilderment at the inexplicably empty room. A sudden prodding from the Force made her realize that she could still hear the hum of Atris' lightsaber, could hear it fast approaching – from *above* her. Frantically she whirled, and seeing the Jedi Master alighting atop the center stone like a bird of prey, lurched backward. The blue-white blade flashed down at her like a bolt of lightning, just missing her face.

Her vision half-returned in time to see Atris taking leave of her perch in a somewhat theatrical backwards flip. She barely touched the floor for a second before leaping in yet another attack.

Still on defense, Meetra bided her time, continuing to probe with her mind, trying to see to the heart of her opponent. *First it was measured Jedi swordsmanship*, she thought with an atypical, clinical calm. *Now these acrobatic tricks. Not a typical combination, is it?*

It had to be part of some wider strategy to throw her off-balance. Makashi was easy enough to counter, but Meetra was in no mood for a contest of aerial stunts. She was gathering energy for a Force push to throw Atris to the floor in the middle of her next leap when, rather than taking that leap, the Jedi Master changed her tactic yet again. Clearly beginning to enjoy the fight, she strode between the various chairs along the room's perimeter, slicing chunks from them and hurling them with the Force. Meetra ducked, hopped, and rolled, electing to let the stone missiles crash to pieces around her rather than wasting energy deflecting them. And all the while she was edging her way across the room, letting her rage collect inside, compacting, sharpening – and reminding herself that sooner or later Atris would have to cross blades with her again.

Though confident that he was going in the right direction, the intensity of the bad feeling that Atton was having gave him the sense that he was going backward, or backtracking toward something he had forgotten. But the central hub could only be a room or two away, and right now he was in a fat hallway, empty except for a few drum-shaped plasteel containers.

Not that there were only vague, nebulous reasons for having a bad feeling. The staff-wielding welcoming party, approaching like a solid wall before him, was

more than enough. "Ghost women" was what he'd called them the last time he was here.

*New match. Totals are zero to zero*, he thought. Stuffing his hands into his pockets, he decided to play the idiot. "Hi, I'm with the TSF, Citadel Station Catering Department," he said, studying the five faces for an effect and finding none whatsoever. "Someone ordered a box of... muja muffins?"

The low hiss of five electrostaffs reached his ears.

He told himself that it had been worth a try as he drew a blaster pistol from each pocket, a flick of his fingers setting both weapons to full power. The corridor exploded into motion, a blur of gray-blue sliced with lightning-red bars of laser fire as he fell back. The white wall became a blizzard, each handmaiden leaping, running, or rolling in a different direction. One of them produced a blaster of her own and snapped off a burst of shots that hastened Atton's retreat.

As calm as ever, he made his way to one of the plasteel drums, not bothering to aim but blasting like a maniac until the walls and ceiling were freckled with hissing black wounds, the floor thick with pebble-sized bits of debris, and the air swimming with white smoke. All the while he continued counting cards, not by design but out of habit.

He paused and ducked behind the drum. The handmaidens had all retreated into the smoke. Occasionally a random laser bolt flashed out and slammed somewhere far past Atton's cover. Satisfied that he'd bought himself a few seconds, he froze, his guns trained on the smoke. He tried to imagine his targets' positions, straining, *willing* to know them, waiting for his luck to put an itch into his trigger fingers and say, *Now!*

Nothing happened.

His mental pazaak game uninterrupted, Atton re-holstered one pistol and pulled a frag grenade from one of his pockets.

He was just about to pull the pin when he heard the almost-silent scuff of a boot on the floor behind him. He whirled, an uncommonly vicious expletive lost on his lips as one of the handmaidens came barreling at him from the same doorway he had entered through. He threw himself to the side, allowing the staff to slam into the plasteel drum rather than his handsome face with a flashbang-burst of white light. In his haste he let go of the grenade, which went flying and disappeared into the smoke – mercifully inactive.

The handmaiden didn't waste a second. As Atton took aim at her she swung at his hand. The tip of the electrostaff just barely grazed the business end of the blaster, but that was enough to zap it out of his hand and send a stinging jolt all the way up to his shoulder.

Still in the middle of trying to regain his balance, Atton ripped the other blaster from his pocket and took another crazy shot. A clear red bolt speared through the woman's thigh and burst against the floor behind her. Flailing, a scream lodged in her throat, she fell at Atton's feet. *Play the plus seven...*

Three of the handmaidens then erupted from the smoke with a thunder of footsteps. Atton turned and bolted, spitting one shot back over his shoulder. Leaving the hallway and taking a door to the side, he noted with some dread that his blaster, taxed to the limits of its power cell, was growing uncomfortably hot in his hand.

*Totals are ten to four...*

The room was empty save for a row of computer terminals and chairs hugging one wall, a square crate on the other, and another doorway on the opposite wall – and standing there, taking aim at him, was the handmaiden with the gun. She fired, and a bolt roared past Atton's head so close that he staggered, his ears ringing, almost thinking it had grazed the side of his skull.

In the blink of an eye she had switched back to her staff and was closing in. Either her blaster was a holdout and had run out of power, or she wanted Atton's death to be up close and personal.

Atton had no such preferences, though. He aimed with both hands and fired, perfectly on target, but in a motion difficult to describe the handmaiden flinched to the side, and the bolt went right past her. Atton couldn't help but wonder if Meetra was wrong, and these women really *were* Jedi after all. Or perhaps this one was just lucky, like he was.

*Lucky – yeah, that's me*, he thought as the other three handmaidens filed in through the other door behind him.

Atris had finally grown tired of throwing things and allowed Meetra to close in. She again took up the offensive stance of Ataru again, no longer leaping about but still employing its wide, sweeping slashes. But such aggression was Meetra's forte and she answered it with her own. Atris' shoulders rattled as she was forced to block crashing blow after blow, and in seconds she was giving ground, her own attack blunted.

As Meetra suspected, her opponent had overextended herself, spending her power too quickly. It came as something of a surprise – none of the other Jedi Masters had made such an amateurish misstep. Perhaps Atris was different, so caught up over the years in her plans and machinations that she had neglected the more practical skills.

Only briefly did these speculations cross Meetra's mind. For the most part she gave herself over to the fight, gathering the power and rage she had been filling up in herself and letting it loose in withering bursts of strength that her body had not enjoyed in a decade. Atris fell back, safe for the moment behind a shield of blue-white thunder, and Meetra took pleasure in breaking her down bit by bit. She reveled that they were alone and she didn't need to hold anything back. This was no moment of weakness or confusion like in the remote parts of Dantooine. She had chosen to fight Atris, and so she loved that choice, feeling no guilt over hating her.

Slashing with more heart than method, she pressed Atris back up the stairs she had descended, across the solitary catwalk toward the meditation chamber. From within there still reached out that enticing red glow within that she had seen before. The invisible darkness that she was sensing had to have a visible source, and Meetra hungered to see it.

A frigid silence fell when they at last entered the chamber. Atris broke away and Meetra let her go, staring at the walls. Mounted on them in three concentric rows was a collection of pyramid-shaped artifacts, each about the size of a human fist. From murky glass faces or through graven recesses and clefts there flowed unbroken scarlet rays.

Meetra had never seen a Sith holocron before, but she didn't need to have. Such a dark heat could come from no other object. It flowed from them into her,

heart to heart, as it were...

Remembering where she was, she said, "So this is what you've been hiding."

"The tools of the Sith are powerful and dangerous," replied Atris, suddenly calm as though explaining things to a Padawan of hers. "Those that the Jedi do not destroy, we keep safe so that in times of crisis we may use them to understand our enemy. For years my servants scoured the galaxy for these treasures and brought them here to me."

"Treasures? For all those years I was taught that the dark side is forbidden, evil, that it corrupts you. But you masters get to play with it when you like?"

"It was necessary that I learn the secrets of the Sith in order to track them down. I suppose that's a moot point now, since you managed to draw them out of the shadows. But this collection would have needed to be gathered, sooner or later."

Meetra eyed the holocron-studded walls again, unsure whether she was feeling desire or contempt for them. She wondered how many years it would take for one being to absorb the information they contained. Atris was apparently one woman with such a mass of time on her hands, but there had to be more to this room than that. "By you alone? With none of the other Jedi even knowing you're still alive, let alone what you're up to? Even I know better than that."

The barbs in Atris' voice returned. "And what do you know of the ways of the Jedi, slave of passions that you are? Why don't you tell me – when you killed Vrook and the others on Dantooine, it wasn't even for revenge, was it? It was what drew you to the war, to Dxun: the joy of killing. You're simply an animal at heart."

In the back of her mind Meetra wondered how Atris knew about that. From Kreia, she supposed. Whatever the case, it felt surprisingly good for the truth to be out between them. "I did you a favor, didn't I? The other masters weren't part of your plan, and they would be uneasy about this collection of yours. And your other plans, I imagine." She said it slowly, her words closely tailing her own thoughts. With a fluid gesture she reached out and Force-pulled one of the holocrons from its perch to her. Atris took a long, sudden step, her free hand crushed into a fist, the Force coiling within her, but she held herself back.

Meetra turned the holocron about, feeling its edges and the arcane carvings on its sides. It gave off a warm, steady hum, but was less heavy than it looked. "And that's why you weren't at Katarr, isn't it?" she asked finally. "Once you're the only Jedi Master left, you can remake the Order however you see fit."

That brought Atris to a boil. "Of course you dare to mention Katarr," she sniffed. "The truth is that I only suspected the Sith would attack the conclave there – and be destroyed. But in the end you're right, that the dawn of the new Jedi will come easier now."

"The Jedi have had their time, Atris. The galaxy doesn't need any more of them."

"On the contrary. The galaxy will always need us, and it will always *have* us – to lead, to guide, and to destroy all who threaten it."

"With the dark side? By walking the path you exiled *me* for supposedly taking?"

Atris raised her blade, letting it incline this way and that, and her eyes followed the blue-white line as though eager to see where it would come to rest. "You chose the path of brute slaughter, exile. I am a Jedi Master, the last of the Jedi. I possess Jedi power as I do this weapon – and Sith as I do yours. I have

achieved this through decades of discipline and training, decades that no one else has matched. I alone have had the power, the knowledge, and the will – not Vrook, not Kavar, none of the others. Not even Grand Master Sunrider, though she came close. It *is* a pity she made it to Katarr.

But in the end it had to fall to one being to rebuild the Order: one with perfect Jedi clarity, perfect detachment, perfect *ruthlessness*, in order that the Sith be destroyed for good and balance return to the Force.”

Meetra regarded the holocron again and squeezed it tight, letting its hum reach her bones. Sick of talking again, sick of these sophistries and grand schemes, she tossed the device aside and moved in, tracing a jagged storm of sunset lines in the air, hissing and raging as it met the sky-white blade.

Atris met her blow for blow, deflecting without counter-attacking, waiting for an opening. But her patience betrayed her, and one block made a fraction too slow allowed the blood-orange saber to just nick her in the shoulder. She took in a sharp breath and Meetra felt the dark currents around them begin to swirl faster. Letting them carry her on, she kept up the attack.

With a surprising swiftness Atris fell back, out of reach, and threw up a hand. Meetra froze in place, wincing against a high-pitched whistle in her ears as cords of pale violet light encircled her. For several seconds she strained against them, fought against a fast-spreading numbness as they joined into a tightening web. But the Jedi stasis field was an old trick, one that Meetra had outgrown. With a surge of willpower she knifed through the field, sweeping it into nothingness.

Blinking, she glowered at Atris, who had stayed in place, her guard up. It was sickening, how she still postured with her Jedi lightsaber. “Stop *hiding*, Atris!” Meetra barked. “Show me your power!”

Atris propelled herself forward, blurring into a white wraith. Meetra crouched, letting the lightsaber sweep overhead as it passed by. An instant later she sprang up, her armorweave cloak whirling as she tracked her opponent. To her disappointment she found that Atris was already facing her from across the room, in no position at all to be slashed across the back.

Before Meetra could move again, a jagged chain of blue-white energy leaped from Atris hand and flashed across the room to her. The Force-conjured lightning ground itself on her left arm, stayed only an instant by the heavy armorweave before knifing into her body. The pain was incredible, a raw, pulsing, staggering burning that enveloped her arm and sent licks of lava streaking into the rest of her body. She reeled backward, slamming herself against the wall, desperately thrusting her lightsaber into the path of the bolt. Mercifully its blade caught the lightning, drawing and swallowing it effortlessly until it ceased.

Propped up by the wall, awash in the light of the Sith holocrons, Meetra writhed and gnashed her teeth. Seared, numb with pain, her left arm hung limp. But she told herself that she was used to pain, and that survival was worth any amount of it. She called the Force to her other arm, letting it guide her; as if of its own accord it twitched, the lightsaber shifting just enough to catch Atris' second bolt of lightning.

But there was more power behind this attack: it pressed Meetra flatter against the wall, bent her arm at the elbow, and jostled her lightsaber with crackling sparks as though trying to wrest it from her hand. And the pain in her other arm seemed only to sharpen.

She clutched that agony to herself. She thought of every other pain she had ever felt, reached down into the dark center where all the years of her life were stored up with their stings and aches, and stirred them, thinking of the ones that Atris had added and still wanted to add.

Atris...

She would never let *her* win.

Straining, reaching, holding her saber before her like a spitting flare, she planted one foot against the wall, pushed off, and started to walk.

As luck had it, Atton's blaster chose that moment to burn itself out. With no time to think of a new tactic, no more ground to fall back to, he drew a vibroblade and sank into sheer muscle memory and reflex as the handmaidens came at him, two or three at a time. Silver arcs of energy snaked their way up the blade each time it blocked an electrostaff, terminating at the specially insulated handle. He was entirely on defensive, cordoned in from all sides.

Harsh, stinging outrage welled up inside him. Though constantly in motion, he was just waiting for one of those vicious weapons to meet its mark – and then it would be over. Ever since Peragus he'd known that he didn't have long to live, but to die now, so close to the journey's end but not quite *there* yet, was unbearable. He knew – or had to believe, at any rate – that Meetra would need him to be there at the very end.

So he swallowed his pride and, as best as he could while in the middle of fighting for his life, he tried to remember what she had told him, that one time, in the cargo hold...

*Just let go, Atton,* she had snapped in frustration. *Stop thinking, stop counting cards, stop planning, stop arguing, just feel-*

*Well, if you say so,* he thought as the storm circled him, and he freed one hand to open the inmost jacket pocket, the one that had been closed the tightest, and from it he drew the last thing in the galaxy he had ever expected to own. With another flashing white blur the vibroblade was knocked from his hand, but now the eye of the storm was colored by a bar of blazing blue-white fire. In the blink of an eye Atton changed and so did the world: the wind, the frigid air, the fight, for an instant, was his. At once the handmaidens flinched back, no less surprised to see their prey draw a lightsaber than Atton himself was. That flinch was a breach, and he flung himself into it.

He would always find that moment hazy in his memory whenever he looked back on it. It was, he would suppose, his luck finally coming through again. In the split-second-to-split-second interplay of slash and block and counter-slash, he simply saw what to do and did it. There was no knowing, no planning, no trying; there was only his will, his quaking, iron determination that he would see Meetra again, and save her.

Atton passed one handmaiden, his lightsaber cleaving through her leg as easily as through air. Continuing its arc unbroken, it went on to slice an electrostaff in two, then an arm from its body. Another staff came at him from behind. He could just barely hear the charge of its power cell, but it was not from that but from *feeling* it as though *he* was the one holding it, that he spun to parry, then to amputate its actual wielder's arm at the elbow. From a similarly arcane sense he shifted to avoid the thrust of the fourth handmaiden's staff, and with the speed of a

whip striking and then retracting, burned a black-orange hole through her torso.

The last handmaiden left was the one with the blaster (or another blaster) who, when she drew that weapon, must have been doing so against her better judgment. She snapped off one shot, which the lightsaber met and sent back like a mirror's reflection. A burst of impact flame slammed into her and left her crumpled against the wall.

Atton looked one way and another as though coming out of a trance. He found himself surrounded by maimed bodies, some stirring and some not, and for that moment of transition he did not fully know where he was. The bodies could just as easily have been his fellow soldiers from a lifetime ago, or Sith...

Remembering to breath, his eyes settled on the alien weapon in his hands, the weapon which he had just wielded with skill that he knew he didn't have. Cobbled clumsily back together, needle-width sparks and bulbous pulses of plasma flickered up and down its blade, which sputtered as though fighting to hold itself in existence. He thumbed the switch and the blade vanished with a hungry, wet sound.

He shook his head and left the room. *Totals twenty to nineteen, I stand... Wait a minute. Doesn't Atris have six handmaidens?*

Keeping the lightsaber in his hand, he strode through two more rooms before remembering the way to the central hub. Then, as though some awful scream had reached his ears, he was on edge again. It was another one of his bad feelings, and his stride turned into a run.

Atris cut the lightning at the last second and Meetra met her, blade to blade, in the center of the room. Wading through her pain, Meetra attacked one-handed, her strikes blunt and vicious, each one just barely turned aside. It was a brazen, clumsy assault, but somehow Atris failed to counter-attack and paid for it with a cut just below one knee. The lightsaber barely went through her clothing, but it left just enough of a burn to put her even more on defensive – until another blow came at the hilt of her weapon, turning it into two sparking bits of metal that clattered across the floor.

*Some Jedi.*

A heavy heartbeat passed as the two women faced each other, one standing tall, relishing the moment, the other hunched, favoring her wounds, both hissing outrage and murder through gritted teeth.

Forcing her leaden feet to move, Meetra rushed forward again, her blade hungry for more than a flesh wound, but it stopped dead just inches from Atris' throat, stayed by a steady bar of white light wreathed in scarlet. Straining in the lock, Meetra let her eyes follow the new lightsaber blade down to its hilt. Its design was familiar, with a ridged handgrip favored by Jedi Guardians. But it was longer, less compact in its construction, built by younger hands.

Meetra's hands.

Without warning the blade retreated into the hilt, causing Meetra to stumble forward. Struggling to recover her balance, she found herself assailed by a bizarre series of strikes. Atris was rapidly deactivating and reactivating her lightsaber, the scarlet-white blade blinking into and out of existence to bypass Meetra's defenses, forcing her to duck, twist, and sidestep in a perilous chain of close calls. A desperate kick to the gut gave Atris pause, allowing another break, however brief,

in the fighting.

Restraining herself from charging back in again, Meetra stared at Atris piercingly, noting that her aggression had abruptly ceased: she held her lightsaber horizontally, the hilt just below her chin, her eyes bathing themselves in its glow. And in the Force *she* had a strange glow, one that mingled with the darkness around itself, weak one moment, strong the next – anything but harmony. The weapon she held, the one Meetra had constructed and used in the Mandalorian Wars, its crystal chosen as a taunt against the Council – it was a contradiction that Atris would wield it, and yet it seemed to suit her.

It struck Meetra then that Atris was close to her breaking point, but the reason was more important. A Jedi Master, she had learned, relied on discipline and endurance in combat. Vrook, Kavar, and Zez-Kai Ell had each chosen one style, one technique, and spent decades honing and perfecting it, ending with a maximized balance of body and mind, a single flawless weapon wielded with flawless control.

It was this edge that Atris lacked; she had forgotten who she was. So she fought nothing like a Jedi of her years would, instead switching from one technique to the next, over and over, posing a threat with each but clearly the master of none of them. And even now she was calling on the Force as a Jedi would, bidding it to renew her strength and take her wounds out of mind, but the Force was *weak* in her – she had spent herself.

But Meetra, too, was reaching her limits. She had little left in reserve that she could bring to bear, and her arm still tingled, spasming with the memory of Sith lightning. Flesh itself seemed her enemy, if such a base thing as pain could sap her strength.

Yet it was not all sapped yet.

Atris lurched out of her guard stance to counter another flurry of slashes, parrying them at length, falling back onto the fencer's precision of Makashi. Determined though she was, Meetra felt her weapon grip loosening, bit by bit. With both hands she would have the advantage, but the pain in her free arm still gnawed and gnawed.

The air began to ripple as though with visible shadows, and through the electric hum and clash of plasma there seemed to come an urgent voice, a whisper like night. Meetra's heart thudded with words she didn't know, and as her arm continued to spasm, she resolved within herself that if it meant she could finally make Atris pay, then this pain, *any* pain at all would not only be a price well paid, but a pleasure well had.

She dropped her guard and twisted, presenting her wounded arm and side. Atris took the bait and drew her blade back for a decapitating crosscut – but then Meetra lunged, her free hand catching the lightsaber hilt that had been hers in a furious death-grip. Her whole arm shrieked in an agony like fire, but it was an agony she wanted to have.

Surprised but undaunted, Atris jerked, her grip two-handed, bringing the blade almost to Meetra's throat – almost. Meetra let a helpless second pass, then thrust it back.

Atton ran, possessed by a sense of urgency and terror that he could not name, like an invisible monster that he was simultaneously hunting and being hunted by. He ran puffing and gasping as though liquid ferrocrete was being

pumped into his heart and his veins and his lungs. He ran so hard that his eyes watered, turning the ice academy into a tingling dark blur, a shade moving swiftly over the world, a shade that grew darker as he passed a circular chamber where a dead body lay sprawled within a ring of broken stone chairs, and that thickened as he crossed a bridge across a deep, dry chasm. He thought that the shade might swallow him up until a searing light cut through it, and he came to a stop to stare at the light as it burned the distortion away in a clear red breath.

In the middle of the floor lay a lightsaber. Like Atton's own, it had no auto-shutoff, and its bloodshine blade sizzled a molten line into the floor at the end of a shallow trail of scorched metal, as though it had rolled some way and come to rest.

A few feet beyond that was a woman's hand, its skin white and taut against the bone. A few inches of forearm terminated and closed into a lump of burned flesh and bone, still aglow but cooling fast.

And beyond that, at the end of the room there was Meetra, her back to him. She held one hand palm-forward, the origin point of a wave of power that kept a white-garbed figure suspended some feet off the ground, splayed against the wall like an insect pressed behind glass. Atton had never met Atris, but he knew her from the old holo-recording of Meetra's trial before the Jedi Council.

She was flat against the wall, trembling as though something had invaded her body and was eating her, every bone, every organ. Her left hand was missing. A single mark topped off the end of her right shoulder.

One of her eyes was gone. In its stead was a steaming, glistening black streak that traveled back, almost to her ear, then down over the cheek.

Atton tried to speak. He couldn't, had no breath in him, but as though she heard her own name, Meetra jolted. Her outstretched arm fell as though suddenly numb. The other one snapped off her lightsaber and hid it in her robe. At the same time Atris slid to the floor, where she writhed in an eerie red glow cast by a collection of odd stone pyramids that lay scattered about.

Rooted in place, Meetra opened her left hand, which trembled. The red lightsaber on the floor leaped into it, then disappeared as the other one had.

In a motion that implied effort, she turned around.

She explained that she knew where Kreia was now.

She explained what the pyramid things were.

She explained that they couldn't afford to spend any more time here.

She had a carved, cracked, shaking smile on her face.

Atton regarded the trembling, deathly silent figure slumped against the wall. "We just gonna leave her here?"

And when he said that, something flashed across Meetra's face, but like lightning it was gone, and he could not say for certain what it had been. "She's no longer a threat," she said, not looking at him. "But we'll be back another time."

And then the smile collapsed, but she was already past him, already locked up in that black silence of hers, walking, striding, all but running, her back to him again. And he followed her, no longer afraid, exactly, no longer being chased. He had closure now, clarity. There had been no confession, no new evidence, and yet his hunch about what had really happened on Dantooine was no longer just a hunch.

But so what? What was he supposed to actually *do*? So she had killed the Jedi after all. What difference did it make?

The feeling he'd had before, the sense of being hunted by a monster, was gone now. The monster, as it were, had fled. But it was still out there and he had to kill it.

He picked up the pace, walked side-by-side with her now, looked at her to see a wet, gold gleam in her eye.

Kill *what*, exactly?

## CHAPTER III – THE DAGGER IN THE SKY

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*The Ebon Hawk's garage had only one work bench and Mira was sitting at it, going over her half-disassembled wrist launcher with an assortment of brushes and other small utensils. Undaunted by the fact that the bench was less than five feet wide, Meetra pulled up a plasteel container next to the bounty hunter, who grunted and shifted to the side without looking up.*

*Though her lightsaber had just been built and so probably didn't need any maintenance, she put it on the bench and took a hydrospanner to it. Eventually one of its outer plates came off and she found herself fiddling with the power cell.*

*"I heard someone say you don't kill your targets," she said. "Why is that?"*

*"I've killed people before. But not if I don't have to." The sound of the brass brush in her hand became intolerably harsh, causing Meetra to wince.*

*"I haven't seen you holding back since you joined up with us."*

*Mira put the brush down and stared at the wrist launcher. "I know. It's started to feel different. I dunno why."*

*"Are you okay?"*

*For the first time Mira looked at her, mildly venomous as usual. "Yeah, what do you care?"*

*Meetra idly picked at the casing of the power cell. "I don't know," she said.*

The *Ebon Hawk* streaked far above Telos' ruined surface, a dim spark carried on the cusp of a strong wind. Meetra sat alone in the cockpit, squinting through the viewport ahead as she carried the ship over the dejarik board of shielded restoration zones, over the tracts of encrusted rust-orange land that had once been fresh and alive. Coating the horizon was a glimmering line of silver, Citadel Station, the mask of life that Telos wore.

Meetra piloted the ship alone. Grim as she looked, she was secretly happy to be alone, even as she drifted unseen through the corridors of the ship, coating and enclosing the crew. She was in the air, and they obliviously breathed her in as they waited for war to return to their lives: Atton and Mical standing on opposite ends of the main hold, one man glowering, the other inspecting a skid mark on the floor; Visas kneeling in her chamber in the dark, praying to the specters of another, more obscure dead planet and tasting its poisoned atmosphere; the rest of them constantly in motion, brushing or elbowing past each other as they visited the cargo hold and other remote crannies of the ship, stuffing their pockets and belts and bandoliers with weapons and other machines. They took Meetra in and she took them in, nibbling on their curiosity, ambivalence, anxiety; hardening their resolve to stand together, stand with her, whatever was going on. She did this without thinking to; she did this with her presence.

Slowly Citadel Station grew closer. Its shine outmatched the stars above it, but in some deep pit in her soul Meetra felt a dampening tremor begin to rise, a sort of seismic shift brought on by the pull of a new source of gravity. The light of star and station alike seemed to grow faint; a sun of darkness was rising over Telos.

A high-pitched alarm sounded from the main console. Meetra had just silenced it when the void over Citadel Station blinked with a distant staggering of pinpricks of light as a flotilla of capital ships emerged from hyperspace. There were

six beak-hulled, triangular starships, their skins the color of a blaster's muzzle – dirty gray. They were purposefully clustered in escort around a solitary vessel twice their own length, a sharper-pointed hull that pointed across the sky like a dagger waiting to dip down toward Telos' half-beating heart.

*He is coming to Telos for the last of the Jedi. And for you.*

Meetra brought up a public traffic feed from the orbital satellites and switched to one that showed the lead vessel, which was already gouting streams of starfighters from its side hangar bays. Even with its engines burning, it looked every bit as dead as Telos. In many places its hull was blackened with turbolaser burns, and in a few swathes it was altogether absent, ending at jagged edges and protrusions of debris where entire sections of armor had been blasted away, exposing the durasteel bones of the ship's skeleton. Where it was not savaged in this way, the hull was a clean white, immaculate in a way almost darkly comical.

*Republic battlecruiser, she thought. Centurion-class.*

Citadel Station stood anchored in place as before, as though asleep or indifferent. But fear was pouring from it in a low tidal roar that Meetra felt coming. In the Force she rose up to her full height, letting the waves rush about her ankles and begin to rise, millimeter by millimeter, with a frenzied, giddy cold.

She stared at the lead ship and knew that she had as long as it would take before that cold reached her throat.

There was an odd temptation to stretch one hand toward the window, like a child, and pretend to take hold of the starship, the great dead dagger, so tiny, so huge; to run her fingers over it and to feel its decade-old wounds, because she knew without scanning the vessel, without looking for an ID signature, that those wounds were that old, like her own.

"*Ravager.*" She said it slowly. The incantation was an afterthought, for the spirit had already arrived.

The station and the fleet loomed larger. Glinting in the fading sunlight, the starfighters separated into packs that circled like buzzbirds as blocky, flat-faced troop transports descended among them. Needle-thin spears of red light began to spew from the battlecruiser's belly, tinting the scorch marks there. Those marks were black and hard, brittle. They were cold and did not glisten.

Frowning, Meetra flitted her look back and forth between the viewpoint and the radar screen, which was sparkling with red dots that represented the invading ships. It soon occurred to her that it would be impossible to directly reach the *Ravager*, where Visas' master had to be. That left Citadel Station as the only place left to go.

Citadel Station, which had no fleet and no army, only the less-than-adequate Telos Security Force. Rather than leaping into the starfighters' teeth, they would land the *Ebon Hawk* there... and then what? Let the Sith land, then build a tower of bodies to climb up to the *Ravager*?

Her mind went back to the heart of the Jedi academy buried in the ice. She remembered Atris shrinking, shaking, trying to hide her face, speaking between sharp, horrid breaths. *You know where she is*, the Jedi had said. *The place where this began, where you began. Where you still are.*

Atris had said this, and Meetra had known what it meant at once. And now that she thought of it, there was no reason they couldn't go there now. It would simply be a matter of escaping Telos' mass shadow in order to make a quick hyper-

jump out of the system. The only tricky part would be shaking any fighter pursuit. But they could be on their way to Kreia that much sooner...

She looked up again at the ghostly dagger, flashing red in the dark sky, and shrugged. They had come all this way for her. Who was she to disappoint them? Who was she to run?

The last time Atton had seen the Entertainment Module Concourse, it had been alive with the spastic flashes and ebbs and flows of gaudy holographic colors. An ethereal fleet of projected advertisements for hundreds of establishments had filled the concourse's central chasm, around which there flowed more than a dozen levels of walkways and platforms allowing access to the pazaak dens and cantinas. Each square of text and animation had been constantly shifting, constantly changing size and shape, quite literally competing with each other for the attention of visitors to a truly hypnotizing and eye-searing effect.

Now that they were gone, the chasm and the concourse seemed to have multiplied in size. The former loomed like the maw of a beast, frozen in place just before it would have swallowed the world. The walkways themselves were soaked in the pale glare of red emergency lights, and it was that glare that Atton Rand was charging through, weathering and contributing to an acrid storm of smoke and laser fire. Of the several fellow misfits who charged alongside him, none were people he would think to call friends, and yet they were all counting on each other to stay alive.

The Sith troopers had seemed surprised that there would be any sort of counter-attack on any part of the station, but didn't slow their own advance. They hugged cover wherever possible, though they thought nothing of their own lives. To Mical and the others, their equipment and tactics were familiar enough from recent firefights on Onderon and elsewhere. But to Atton they were as familiar as the decade-old pazaak deck that he kept in his back pocket. He fell effortlessly into the familiar rhythm of a straight-forward gunfight, all thoughts of mysticism and morality blissfully asleep. Everything was pure action, facts and muscle memory, space that smelled of ozone and time that passed him in blazing seconds, like the counting of cards that still murmured in a low stream in the back of his head.

A while back they had come across a TSF officer who remarked that nobody was sure exactly what objective the invaders were after, or if they even had one. From their seemingly random drop points they were shredding their way through module after module, wrecking power generators, burning station supplies and equipment, and generally bringing mayhem, taking no prisoners or spoils. Between that and the generous turbolaser bombardment, it seemed likely that Citadel Station would lose its orbit and plunge, leaving a continent-sized hole in Telos' crust. Everyone would fall together and be buried. The Sith would leave a new graveyard right on top of the old one.

There was a narrow little space of unoccupied thought in Atton's mind which he might have given to contemplating that awful possibility – but he decided to think about other things.

For instance, when a small squad of Sith troopers came rushing out of some narrow side corridor, only to be blown to pieces by a grenade launched by Mira, that gave him something to put in the little empty space. It occurred to him that he wouldn't mind having a wrist launcher of his own, a relatively small weapon with

surprising range and power.

From time to time he could see, a few levels up and on the other side of the chasm, two slicing, flashing bars of light, one sunset and the other scarlet, advancing against an onslaught of laser fire no less fierce than the one Atton was enduring.

He saw them over and over, those two blades appearing out of the corner of his eye. Together they moved, together they stilled, partners, two blades with one wielder, or so it seemed. And every time he saw that it seemed so, he decided to think about the wrist launcher instead, and the thought lasted for a second or two, and he looked anew down the sights of his blaster carbine.

Meetra wanted nothing on her mind but battle, but as she and Visas deflected bolt after bolt, took step after step, she found herself all too cognizant of each passing second. She had been waiting to fall into a sleep of fury, to return to her dreams where the only things that mattered were her power and her opponents, weapons and targets, Point A and Point B.

Yet the *Ravager* was looming overhead like some great shape come out of a dream of its own, unforgettable though hidden for the time being. It was one of a thousand such vessels, manufactured at the shipyards of Corellia, and yet it had passed through some dark fire on the Outer Rim that made it more than itself – or less. It hummed; it filled Telos and Citadel Station with a constant, primordial sound, a note that had been struck ten years before and yet carried on across time, across the galaxy.

They made a swift advance, catching up to soldiers before they could fall back, or else cornering them against magnetically sealed doors and dead ends. Lightsabers snarled, slashing heads and limbs and bisecting bodies which tended to fall with gasps rather than screams. There was a whisper of odd meaning in their deaths that Meetra struggled to apprehend. She caught herself wondering who these men were, and if they were from the same place as the vessel which had sent them, if they had passed through the very same fire that it, and Meetra herself, once did.

This curiosity nagged at her, and for some reason she resented and welcomed it at the same time.

In moments the squad of Sith troopers on that level had scattered, withered, and crumbled, the last of them slumped dead in the threshold of the doorway through which they had first entered the Entertainment Module. Meetra and Visas strode side-by-side through the suddenly silent corridor, their weapons' light casting a harsh tinge into the hazy air. In that moment between skirmishes, every step was an obscure pleasure.

The stamping of feet and shouting reached them from behind, echoing about the huge void of the concourse as Telos Security forces followed up on the counter-offensive with all of their meager strength, thundering into unexplored side-corridors and hatchways.

The two women emerged onto a long avenue defined by huge skylights and viewports to the left and right. A dozen doors on each wall led to tube-shaped connector arms which stretched across the blocky cityscape to other modules of the station. The sky seemed a living, crawling dark mass, thicker than before with circling starfighters and sinking dropships. Some miles off, turbolasers were falling

on Citadel Station like blood-colored lightning, and thick, jagged lines of molten metal were tracing across its surface like fault lines. No sound of the destruction reached them.

Meetra looked from window to window and then finally to the sky, her teeth clenched. She hadn't felt this small in a very long time.

"The others are still below us," Visas said at length. "Should we wait for them?"

A touch of the Force, gentle but firm, brought Meetra's eyes down and to the doors on the far side of the avenue. Beyond them she felt rather than heard a swift, steady marching. Without looking at her companion, she shrugged. "I don't see the point."

What felt like a day or two passed. A few dozen or hundred more Sith troopers were now dead. Atton was walking faster, now laden with fewer spare blaster clips, and he was still thinking that he might as well make sure to use them all when the metal cloud over Citadel Station began to thin in places, then to lift. Crystal-clear streams of emerald bars appeared, interrupting the bombardment.

Somewhere a TSF officer shouted, "It's the Republic!"

Atton glanced back at Mical, who trailed close behind him. "That was fast. I suppose we can thank you for that."

The other man mumbled something that Atton didn't quite hear.

They had only just finally caught up with Meetra and Visas at some junction when it turned out they were going to head off alone again. Meetra cleared up the confusion. Some more unlikely friends would soon be arriving from Dxun to help with the defense, and more importantly to get a boarding party onto the lead Sith cruiser. From there it would be a simple matter of strategically planting some bombs, killing the allegedly planet-devouring Dark Lord on the command deck, and escaping in time to watch the ship go down in flames.

Meetra explained it all to Atton, and all in all it was a perfectly dangerous and insane plan. "I take it the two of you are going up there with the Mandos?" he asked.

"Visas knows more about that ship than anyone. And Citadel Station needs as many boots on the ground as possible."

Atton glanced at the storm overhead, searching for the dagger-shape of the Sith flagship. "Okay," he said with a sigh. "You know what you're doing, right?"

Meetra gave him a hard, heavy kiss. "Never," she said, then strode off down the corridor, the Miraluka close behind.

A less-than-pleasant walk later, Atton found himself squatting behind a plasteel crate, his blaster trained down a wide street in one of the Residential Sectors. His crate, along with a cluster of others, marked the spot of a chokepoint where he, Mical, Mira, Bao-Dur, and a gaggle of TSF troopers constituted a line, and as the Sith onslaught came, the one job of that line was to ensure that it was not broken.

Being in harm's way didn't bother Atton, even if "in harm's way" meant "in the way of an entire army". In fact, he hardly ever felt as alive as he did when he was one blaster shot's width away from death. What he didn't like, though, was the one part of war that the holos never, ever conveyed: its boredom. Standing still like this, babysitting some incidental corridor and waiting for the enemy to come to him,

that didn't suit him at all.

For a few minutes the world would be only light and death and fire, and Atton was at home in that world, able to slip into his soldier's muscle memory. In that world he could just as easily be back on the surface of Obroa-skai, Duro, or Dxun as on Citadel Station. When each skirmish ended, silence came crashing in on the world and he would find himself blinking wearily as he stared at a field of steaming corpses, eying them as though he wasn't quite able to believe they were dead, and feeling too old to be especially glad he was alive. And then he would check his ammo, crack his neck, and count the cards in his head faster and harder, waiting, longing to be attacked again.

At each lull between waves, the defenders slouched against their bits of cover, or stretched, staying still – all of them except Mical, who had a habit of wandering over to his neighbors to ask if they needed a kolto patch or a sip of water or something. When Atton asked him if he had any brandy, he said no, apologized, and scurried back to his crate. Strapped to his hip was a stun pistol that he'd had when they first met him on Dantooine. It was a large, clunky, black thing. He'd gotten himself a real blaster without too much prompting, though.

Wave after wave came and went, the spattering of blaster fire on the station echoing the thunderstorm in orbit, and each time it was a larger contingent of faceless soldiers treading over their comrades' bodies, and each time they came closer and closer. The TSF lost one man, then two, then three, and Atton looked straight ahead, his tongue growing drier and his limbs heavier by the minute. Grenades and anti-infantry rockets burst in the hallway, filling it with red-tinged smoke. A few of the TSF troopers sent random shots into the clouds, but the others waited for their enemies to show themselves.

Atton heard a voice, Mira's, shouting from somewhere off to his left. "Hey, anyone have a spare grenade?"

The TSF didn't, but the Sith apparently did, and Atton squinted as he watched a dull gray orb sail out of the bloody mists. It bounced once and rolled just past the fat cargo cylinder that Mira had been using for cover. A split second later a wall of Sith troopers emerged from the smoke. In tandem they opened fire, as though saving all their shots for that moment, and Atton didn't seem to even hear or see the grenade going off as he frantically defended his own position.

A moment later he had time to take a breath. His blaster carbine dry, he switched to one of his pistols. The smoke was thickening and drifting closer, and with it came the enemy's concealment. The darkness traded sporadic blaster shots with the defenders, who held their ground.

Atton swept the haze, his skin crawling and mind racing. A new round of pazaak played out every second, a tie each time. He squeezed his eyes shut, trying to calm himself, trying to remember how to call on the Force again, to tell him where the Sith were.

Nothing happened except that as the sprinkle of laser fire continued, he glanced left. At the outer edge of the drifting haze he saw that a slender figure lay face down amid a field of pebble-sized bits of burnt metal and melted plasteel.

Atton stared at Mira until a scuffling sound from the mist drew his attention away. But he looked again, unsure of what he was feeling. There was certainly a cold sort of surprise, as though it had never occurred to him that anyone in the crew wasn't invulnerable. None of them could die, at least not from one stupid

grenade – could they? No, they were too tough like Mandalore, or too slippery like Mira, or already dead of natural causes like Kreia, or just a survivor like Meetra, or–

The body stirred, trying to roll over. Or did it?

The cards in Atton's mind continued to fall, and he continued to catch them.

Then he noticed Mical a couple of containers over, his blaster heavy in his hands, glancing madly between Mira and the veil between the line and the Sith, clearly trying to work up the nerve to be a hero.

His eyes met Atton's and Atton looked back into the smoke. He was, by a certain and very loose definition of the word, comfortable enough where he was.

But he could feel Mical's eyes raking themselves against him, making him squirm, and what's more, he couldn't help but think of the next time he saw Meetra again, and what it might do to her to hear that one of her crew didn't make it.

Atton didn't want to care what happened to Mira. Not at all. But at that moment, for some damn reason he just couldn't seem to help himself.

Muttering a curse, he left his cover in a crouching run, a thick arc of red bolts following close at his posterior. He threw himself flat against the container behind which Mical was hiding, violating both of their personal spaces in the process.

"Cover me," he hissed. "I'm going to try something."

Mical nodded in Mira's direction. "You're going out there?"

"Too far."

"Then how are we going to–"

"Just shut up and shoot at the bad guys." The container rattled under a burst of impacts, and Mical robotically inched his way out to return fire.

Still hugging the crate and the ground, Atton peeked round its corner, holstered his blaster, and licked his lips. *New match.* Cards fell and clicked softly in his head. *Totals are two and three.* He looked at Mira intently, ignoring the shouting and the cacophonous pulses of blaster fire. *Seven and four. Eight and five.* Nothing happened.

He looked harder, tuned out the noise harder, tried to see nothing at all except the bounty hunter. *Play the minus four, four and five.* Click click. *Nine and six.*

Slowly, deliberately, he raised one opened hand toward Mira, willing her to move. *That's how Jedi do it, right? Play the plus six card, makes fifteen and six...* Nothing happened.

He closed his eyes and thought very hard, pretending, imagining that he was over there dragging her by her legs. The cards fell and fell and the numbers made a great big pile in his hands and nothing happened.

Then a bolt sang past him just before his face, raking the side of the crate and burning a blotch of sparks before his eyes. He flinched back, hiding his face and his eyes in one sleeve, and all his cards and numbers fell into space and were lost in the fiery blizzard of the battle overhead.

Atton flattened himself against the crate again, his eyes squeezed shut, trembling, allowing the sounds of battle to pass into his empty ears and disappear. He pictured Mira again, imagining her to be within reach, and this time she was. A strange warmth seemed to bloom within his mind, as though another person's breath was wafting over him.

He breathed, his eyes still closed, and the half-conscious body thirty yards away rose a few inches from the ground and began to drift backward, toward the

defensive line.

The warmth suddenly left. Atton opened his eyes, weary, and looked to see Mira now lying beside one of the containers, a short run away.

Mical's voice broke in on his incredulous pride. "You did it, Atton!" A glorious smile flashed in the reddish air, and in unison they dashed for their wounded crewmate, firing crazily down the corridor to cover themselves.

Mira had rolled onto her side, allowing Mical to study the shrapnel-pocked back that oozed with thick, blackish blood. Noticing that some of the TSF officers were edging closer and providing covering fire, Atton crouched and waved a hand in front of Mira's whitening face. Her eyes stared up at him, frantic and tingling, but seemed to not really be seeing him.

Another salvo crackled out of the smog and blazed overhead, and Atton's blaster was back in his hand before he thought of it. He surprised himself when he leaned down toward the pale face and said, "Hang in there, kid! Mical's gonna get you out of here."

Her lips twitched, reaching for some type of a smile. But her words were a contrast as Mical gingerly hoisted her onto his shoulders: an unconvincing, even uninterested, "Lucky me."

It stung Atton, though it shouldn't have. Just like he shouldn't have just saved her life, and he shouldn't have let Meetra out of his sight again. But before the sting could grow hot and turn into open flame, he found himself taking cover, because Mical and Mira were already gone and he was back to being a soldier again. The Sith were coming harder now, more numerous and more solid and more determined. And just like before, it suited Atton just fine, for they left him no time to be angry at Meetra, at Mira, or at himself. All he had to do was keep his eyes open and keep fighting, minute by grinding minute, and wait for Citadel Station to fall out of the sky.

## CHAPTER IV – WHEN THE GALAXY REMEMBERS

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*Atton tapped one of the dozens of footlockers scattered about the cargo hold with his boot. It was open and contained a large, neatly-folded black garment. "What's this?"*

*Meetra turned away from the cylinder of medpacks that she had been rummaging through. "Armorweave. Very expensive. Visas says some of the Sith on Dxun wore these, so she kept one to give to me."*

*He grimaced. "Well, that was sweet of her." Bending over, he picked up one of the sleeves of the cloak and weighed it in his hand. "It's heavier than it looks. Does it live up to its name?"*

*"It's supposed to be able to shrug off medium-power blaster shots. Fireproof, too."*

*"How about lightsabers?"*

*She shrugged. "I suppose it might take an extra couple milliseconds to burn through than normal clothes."*

Strapped to a shieldseat in the rattling cabin of a battered Mandalorian boarding craft, Meetra was able to feel something less than anxiety, even as she hurtled up from Citadel Station toward the *Ravager* like a meteor in reverse. Packed in among fifty fully-armored Mandalorians, she was struck by a kind of nostalgia turned on its head. Ten years before, in the blink of an eye she had killed more of these people than she had ever seen face-to-helmet, yet now she would fight alongside them, and their target was a vessel that had been under her own command at Malachor – the place where war itself had ended, as far as Meetra was concerned. There had never been another war since. Fighting here at Telos, as it had been on Onderon, was simply a way of going back to those old days.

Braced by additional armor plating and upgraded deflector shields, the transport shuddered and bucked with laser blast impacts as it continued its voyage. Occasionally its pilot skimmed the surface of cruisers and corvettes close enough to grate their shields, or to scratch the hull paint. The Republic fleet had closed in, turning the sky into a kaleidoscope of fire and debris that the boarding craft could mostly lose itself in.

In no time at all the port side of the battlecruiser was looming large in the ship's front viewport. Operating the controls with an eerie concentration, the pilot whispered a prayer to his ancestors and precisely fired a pair of concussion missiles. They disappeared against the target in crisp white flash, creating a precious seconds-long gap in the *Ravager's* shields, allowing the boarding craft access to a secondary hangar bay whose doors had been blasted away years before.

The ship's passengers were treated to a stomach-crunching lurch as it came to a halt inside the great wound. But in seconds the Mandalorians, hitherto silent and motionless, were struggling out of their seats and arming themselves, barking orders and wishes of glorious death to one another. Soon the first squad was pouring into the hangar and then into its connecting corridors and ending the resident silence with shrieks of laser fire. A handful, supervised by the one named Zuka, remained to guard the hangar and to prepare the coffin-sized proton bombs

for placement. Mandalore spoke with him for a moment before joining Meetra and Visas as they followed the initial wave of the Mandalorians.

"Strange to see this ship again," Meetra said flatly as they entered the first corridor. The air was disarmingly cold and thick with dust.

"We tried very hard to destroy it at Malachor," Mandalore replied, hefting a blaster rifle. "Now we get to finish the job."

A moment later they were stepping over fresh corpses. Meetra's and Visas' lightsabers snapped on, and a moment after that they were adding to the pile, all caught up again in the excitement and monotony that was combat. Here, as on Citadel Station, the Sith troops gave out stale, dry whispers in the Force as they died, and they fell with light-gashed wounds or in pieces as men falling into a crash of bottomless sleep, and as the invading force knifed its way deeper and deeper into the *Ravager's* body, Meetra caught herself wondering between two rooms when *she* would next be able to sleep, and when she would be able to part with her lightsaber.

Then she remembered her mission, her ultimate destination, and the Dark Lord on the command deck that stood between her and that place. She remembered the fire she carried in the place of her heart, the fire she was taking at that moment from Visas and from Mandalore as they fought together, and she laughed at herself for thinking of things so human as sleep or peace. She drew on the Force and carried it on into the next roomful of troopers.

And the next.

And the next.

Periodically, Mandalore received radio messages from his men, reporting on casualties as they were taken and given, and on the proton cores as they were escorted to the target zones. Meetra overheard him having a short argument with Zuka, who was advising that they simply leave the ship and detonate the cores once they were in place, rather than dealing with the Sith Lord on the bridge first.

A moment later he commented on the argument to his two companions with surprising cheerfulness. "Zuka's a good man, but he hasn't been in the business of death-defying antics like I have – and like you have."

Up the corridor from where they were, a squad of Mandalorians was placing charges on a blast door. Watching them, Meetra said, "I'm not sure how much longer I want to stay in this business, Mandalore."

"That's understandable. But I think you already know that it has a way of staying in you."

The door exploded inward with an ear-popping flash, and the battle was joined in a large central access corridor, one of several which connected to virtually every sector of the ship. Curiously, Meetra seemed to remember very little in particular about the *Ravager* itself, but its class (and therefore its layout) had been rushing back to her since her first moments on board, and she was all but counting the steps that remained from there to the elevator that led to the bridge. She threw herself at the Sith with greater and greater fury, straining against the gripping cold of the ship, burning to remember more and to forget everything.

Mandalorians poured in after her, eager to contribute to the carnage, firing wantonly in long bursts and pulses of clean fire. The defenders crumbled and scattered like kretch, frantically looking for thicker shadows.

The last of the troopers slumped dead against a wall, and the Mandalorians

spread out to secure the dozen or so entrances. A shuddering metallic groan hummed up through the floor from some incomprehensible shifting of massive machinery. Emerging from herself, Meetra stood alone in the center of the room, her saber angled toward the floor, and realized that Visas had disappeared.

Perplexed, she closed her eyes and cast out her will, reaching, following a thin web of fire down several corridors. She found Visas behind a very, very heavy door, taking firm steps through a barely furnished dormitory and into a domed chamber where whispers could be heard.

The blind woman reached the chamber's center and Meetra felt her kneel, heard as she heard a soft crunch of ashes that had been following her.

Inactive for now, Visas' lightsaber rested in a crushing grip. Meetra heard her whisper: "Past the surface, there is the Force." *You are a breach that must be closed.* But that was another voice, an intrusion, and Meetra thrust it away. "Where once there was a world strong in the Force, now there is an empty wasteland.

"The echo of one man's crime carries far, far..." There was a blood-filled pause. Without thinking, Meetra raised a hand up before her heart. The next words reached her as a future thunder. "The death of an entire world brings... great power. From now on hate will be my vision, vengeance my light. You shall be avenged, and the one who did this shall die."

Then she silenced the whispers: "There is nothing more for me here." Visas stood, the web of fire now a cord, and she followed it back to Meetra.

Soon enough, word came through that the four proton cores had been armed and were ready for detonation. Though Visas knew the layout of the ship, so did Meetra, and she found the lift leading to the command deck with little trouble. At the door to it, she turned to Mandalore. "You don't need to come with us," she said numbly. "Visas and I can handle the bridge, and your men may need your help to keep the shuttle safe."

Brushing past her into the lift, he snorted as though good-naturedly choosing to shrug off a grave insult. "Not in your life."

It was settled.

It may or may not have been some uncanny trick of the thin artificial atmosphere, but the bridge of the *Ravager* seemed much more massive than Meetra knew was possible, its ceiling and walls forming a durasteel cavern. At the far end, an ancient distance off, the planet Telos loomed in the center of an enormous transparisteel viewport. Citadel Station, bleeding gold and red, served to frame a black-clad humanoid figure which, in another sort of mirage, had its own celestial size and density.

Flanked by Visas and Mandalore, Meetra walked a long, long distance toward the black shape, her eyes unable to leave it. They passed between two narrow pits where several dozen officers and technicians stood at computer stations and readouts, oblivious to the intruders, their flesh ancient and gray.

The three passed the crew pits and paused as though waiting for their quarry to acknowledge them. It remained motionless and erect as a tower of obsidian.

Meetra stood as though she would never move again, until an invisible fist closed on her whole being and wrenched her into the air. A few feet off the ground she hung struggling – but not struggling at all, for the fist enclosed her as totally as a solid mold of permacrete, and even as she called on the full might of the Force,

the bond of the Dark Lord's will around her did not budge, and her rigid, splayed form only trembled and shuddered for all her effort. She was only barely aware that Visas and Mandalore had been similarly restrained. Everything hurt. Every bone threatened to splinter.

The Dark Lord turned and approached, slow and deliberate. His were the steps of a primordial giant leaving its throne to walk for the first time in a millennium. Beneath the hood there lurked a stark white mask that glowered like a skull split in half. Bloody stripes reached up from gaping eye-holes beyond which nothing at all could be seen.

Meetra was conscious of a new presence beginning to collide with her own, a kind of pressure that went beyond the physical. A mountain was rising and preparing to fall onto her, an infinite avalanche of pure, naked hatred or curiosity or longing for death, or a terror that could drown the distress that was overflowing from Citadel Station.

Doing her best to stare into those empty black eyes, she forced herself to speak. Knives raked themselves down her lungs, but pain was what drove her words to begin with. "Release me... or I'll blow your ship to Hell."

When the Dark Lord spoke, she was not ready to hear it. The words were far worse than unfamiliar. Guttural and jagged, volcanically deep, they were words that smote her ears and tormented her spirit, pouring the avalanche of solid, indecipherable darkness into her and into her until she marveled at how great and wide and deep was the hollowness in the center of her being, that it could hold such an alien mass, and in a marvelous moment she felt that she finally understood Visas when she said that this man had put her world to death when it heard his voice.

A dead world was invading her, and she could imagine no response but to hate. Drenched and drowning in otherworldly pain, she reached within herself to rekindle that fire of power that she knew was still there, to coax it and command it and draw it up and ready it for an infernal eruption, and she groaned as she strained anew against the grip that assailed her. The fingers of her left hand twitched, imploring her lightsaber hilt.

"You're doomed already," she said through her teeth. "Even you won't... survive."

Then another voice, ragged with terror but still comforting in its humanity, raised itself up. "He doesn't understand... He thinks he can survive it."

At the sound of those words the giant suddenly seemed to become a man, and he turned to Visas with a gaze of irritation, or suspicion, or pity. Then his shadow grew solid again, and Visas' voice became her older one, begging for mercy and dripping with a dozen promises, forgetting the new promise that had been made to the spirits of Katarr. She would crush herself, would immolate herself, would feed herself to him, if only he would allow Meetra to live.

But the black words overshadowed her again, and all pleading froze on her tongue. Meetra's life, all life, existed only to end: to end in her master.

His grip began to tighten. They were as insects in his fist. Meetra was just preparing to panic when something clicked inside her mind, and it occurred to her that this confrontation had to be a part of Kreia's plan. This Sith Lord, Sion, Atris, the Republic, Meetra herself and the crew of the *Ebon Hawk*, all were her pawns, all of them placed exactly where she meant them to be. So in spite of the

unconquerable power that this enemy seemed to have, it was Kreia's plan that it be brought to bear against Meetra; they were meant to fight, and she was meant to win.

She took a tortured breath and followed her intuition. "Leave her!" she choked. "You want *me... my power.*"

Instantly Visas and Mandalore were released from their unseen restraints, collapsing to the floor like ragdolls. The Dark Lord regarded Meetra, gathering up all the solid darkness that he had collected over the decades from the deaths of Jedi and worlds and stars, and remembering how they had filled him. He spoke to her and the words seemed to enter her mouth rather than her ears.

Then he raised a hand and plunged it into the cavern of her soul, following the torrent of macrocosmic dark matter that was invading her and looking for the secret fire where the Force of life was hidden. With mighty strides he went deeper and deeper, the arm of his will spanning the distance of the intergalactic void, his inhuman hand spreading out farther and farther to finally close on a star. But when it reached the center he sought, there was nothing or there seemed to be nothing, and his grasping hand was a fist closing and crushing itself in its own unnatural gravity, as the world which had given him birth.

The torrent ceased, the avalanche fell silent, and all at once the presence that had filled the Telos system and strained to see even the light of its star and satellites fell into a prison made of flesh, or at any rate something that resembled it. The giant was a man now, struck onto his knees, shaking like a man who had broken a bone.

At last the man and the woman rose. With a thought Meetra gestured to Mandalore and to Visas, and like her they found their footing. A vibroblade slipped free of its scabbard, three lightsabers flared to life, and the Force crackled as the battle was joined.

The huge black shape stayed rooted to the floor like a statue as his assailants threw themselves at him, motionless but for the whirling blood-light of its weapon, parrying blows and answering with its own. The three attackers crashed against his defenses or were turned aside by its countering strength, blunting themselves against the sides of a mountain. Meetra thought nothing of fighting as a team with her friends. Her left arm burned and her every bone cried out, and that burning and those cries filled her with such a darkness that she was barely conscious of Visas or Mandalore or even of the strength that she drew from them. The only thing sharp and clear in her mind's eye was the Dark Lord, and her only thought was to return the pain that he had given her.

The intent that drove Visas was rather the same sentiment, but her revenge burned less bright, being fuel for Meetra's own, and she cast no shadow of her own. The clean, burning odor of plasma gave new life to her rage and power, and to the promise she had made to her people. Yet their whispers were difficult to hear over the clashing of lightsabers, and she saw their specters grow fainter and fainter as her master raised himself. Soon it was the three warriors who were on the defensive, buffeted by withering blasts of invisible power that struck them like missiles.

Meetra found herself in a crouch, cocooning herself in the Force and weathering the storm, and beside her was Mandalore, seeking the same protection. At that moment the Sith finally moved, advancing on Visas with a shadow's speed,

driving her back further. Even as his Force blasts continued, he suddenly wielded his blade with the grace of a master swordsman, unleashing a flurry of precise strikes, consummated with a grand, circular sweep that sent his apprentice's lightsaber spinning into space, its light winking out, and clattering to the floor on the other side of the room. A final burst of dark power struck her in the chest, driving all the breath from her lungs, and she fell beaten at the Dark Lord's feet, weeping in utter silence. The blood-red line drifted toward Visas' neck, only to freeze a centimeter off. Then with a flourish its wielder turned to his two remaining opponents.

Still regaining her strength, Meetra watched with a sudden fascination. That motion with the lightsaber had seemed ritualistic, like one a Jedi would perform upon winning a sparring match. More puzzling was the matter of why in the galaxy a Sith Lord would spare his apprentice who had betrayed him.

The answer came to her with such force that she hesitated, failing to notice that Mandalore had stood up. The reason could only have been that there existed a bond between Visas and her master, one strong enough to be a threat to him. Kreia had once suggested as much, warning that a time would come...

Meetra's eye rested on her fallen friend, and for an instant she entertained a cruel, cunning thought.

But it was only the briefest of instants. The Sith Lord lashed out again, hurling hissing arcs of blue light that flowed into Mandalore, stopping him in his tracks. Without thinking at all, Meetra bounded out of her crouch and stepped between ally and enemy, bringing her guard up, and the Force lightning ground itself on her sunset blade. Released from its deadly grip, Mandalore fell facedown and lay still, his armor smoking and sizzling. Meetra slung her left hand forward, snarling, and one of the thin barbs of energy bent on itself and lanced back toward its master.

But the Dark Lord spun to the side, his cape whirling, catching the bolt with his hand and redirecting it harmlessly into a distant wall. In the next heartbeat the storm died, and the buzz of two energy blades alone sounded in the air. Their wielders stared at each other, waiting for some occult cue, like a sound in the Force, to bring the moment to an end.

In a crisp motion the Sith brought his blade up before his face, which yet remained in darkness, then swept it down in a challenging salute. Then both exploded into motion and clashed together, spinning, kicking, chopping, and parrying, mirroring each other in desperate ferocity, two singularities side by side, orbiting each other closer and closer.

At last the two met when the Dark Lord made a feint, drawing an opening in Meetra's guard. In the next second his lightsaber met her left leg just below the knee and went deep. Her breath left her in a numb scream, her eyes squeezed shut as though against a searing, white-hot light. But even as she crashed to her knees, she did not try to block the pain out. Instead letting it goad her and guide her, she made two wild slashes, the first above her head, the second horizontal.

Her ears were again smote by that horrible voice, a thunderous wail that could only be a reaction to pain. Opening her eyes, she saw the Dark Lord above her again as a blurry mountain of darkness, seeming about to crumble. His right arm was shortened to an elbow-length stump whose end glowed molten gold, and a thin line of the same color crossed his lower abdomen.

Agony yanked at Meetra's spirit. Having long forgotten that such a pain existed, she feared she would lose her senses completely. With a wrench of effort she called to her power again. A shout of the Force struck the Dark Lord from behind and he fell forward onto her blade, which buried itself in the center of the wound it had just made.

Meetra's vision abruptly returned to her in time to show the Dark Lord leaning down, his blank visage filling the world. She saw the white death-mask and found herself clawing savagely at it with one hand, seeking to break it, or pry it off, anything to find some hint of the man behind it. But she saw nothing at all in the eye-holes, and her fingers felt nothing beyond them. It may as well have been the front of his skull.

A deathly cold pressure settled on Meetra's wrist: still impaled, the Dark Lord was trying to wrest her lightsaber from her grip. Gnashing her teeth, she took the weapon in both hands, pressing it tight. They fought each other with monstrous strength and she dragged the blade upward, inch by inch, toward his heart.

Still staring into the void behind the skull-mask, Meetra stifled a cruel, desperate laugh. Did this man *have* a heart, or any flesh at all? What was this creature, and what could death possibly even mean to him? She could see him clearly, and the Force didn't flow through him at all, but into him, into nothingness, ribbons of fire and light vanishing past an event horizon. All the powers of the universe circled him, but he was complete and utter stillness, emptiness, the all-enveloping, inexpressible cold that waited for Meetra at the end of the world, waited for everyone after the end of *all* worlds. He was incarnated death, and he was with her. He had always *been* with her, as Malachor had been.

As no nightmare ever could, he terrified her – but he did not surprise her.

Molten carbonite bubbled and stirred inside of her leg. In a great surge of motion Meetra fled, somehow. She was upright, and then she was tumbling, and then she had stopped. Some moments or hours later she found herself collapsed against a safety rail overlooking one of the crew pits, drenched in icy sweat. One hand was weighed down by her lightsaber which, still ignited, was melting a shallow, idle pattern of cuts into the floor. She switched off the blade.

Wrapping one arm around the rail and putting all her weight against it, she bent over and reached into a wide black burn-slit in her pants just below the left knee. She was baffled to find that the leg was still attached. Moreover, at the point of what should have been severance, there was only a line of what looked like scar tissue, a glistening, dead white.

She did not touch it. She looked up. Her gaze settled on Telos. The dull sound of an explosion drifted through the *Ravager's* superstructure.

A stone's throw away, Visas Marr dragged herself to her feet and walked a few painful steps to a black-garbed shape that lay face-down. Shakily she knelt beside it and reached for the hood of its cloak, beneath which she perhaps hoped to find the bounty of a slaughtered people.

Nearby, somebody else groaned in pained indignation, jolting Meetra out of her mindless haze. It was Mandalore, twitching, stirring, trying and failing over and over again to raise his heavy armored frame. Meetra approached, her legs distant and numb, her head full of smoke.

He saw her coming and flinched as though trying to roll away. "Get away from me," he choked. "I don't need your help. Just let me die here."

Meetra was taken aback. She swallowed and said, "You've lived through worse fights than that, Mandalore. It's not gonna be your last." She half-crouched, half-collapsed beside him, and called to the Force, reaching for some way out of death, her eyes closed.

When she opened them Visas was there, wavering but erect. "There is no time. We haven't the strength to take him with us."

"What?"

"The *Ravager* will soon be destroyed. We must return to the hangar immediately. "

Meetra looked unsteadily up at Visas, and in that moment she wanted to strangle her. "He's one of *us*."

"Master, we have no choice. We must leave him behind. It is what he wishes."

Meetra felt that she would go under, that she would fall into oblivion if she moved, if she so much as closed her eyes again. But she took a deep breath, brought up the trickle of fire still left in her, and slung one of Mandalore's arms over her shoulder. A feverish twitch of a curve formed on her lips and she almost, almost smiled, because even though she was at the end of her strength, even though this ordeal of a mission would not end at Telos, even though she knelt on the bridge of that ghost of a starship where death was close enough to touch her, there was someone else there who was just as close to it. It was a member of her crew who would die unless she could drag him off of that doomed battlecruiser, and something unutterable about that fact nestled itself down close to the embers in her heart, and Meetra Surik found that she was beginning to feel just a little bit like herself again.

Not at peace, but still – like herself again.

"Visas," she said, "I have a *name*. Now shut up and help me."

Blaster bolts flitted up and down the corridor in a continual crackle of light, sustained by mindlessly persistent invaders and mindlessly tired defenders. Still crushed against the half-melted remains of a plasteel crate, Atton found his eyes pulled upward as a new star burst to life in the clear darkness far above. But the star was fading even as he squinted at it. In its wake it left a cloud of fragments of superheated metal, expanding in all directions like shooting stars or glowing grains of sand.

The firing came to a reverent stop, the battle itself holding its breath. When it let out that breath, the struggle was over. Across Citadel Station, Sith troopers scurried back the way they had come, boarding their dropships. Overhead, squadrons of fighters and bombers that had been scattered continents apart swept back into formation and headed for the hangar bays of their motherships, making themselves sport for the pursuing Republic pilots. When the last of their survivors were collected, the warships in turn shrugged into hyperspace. Telos and Citadel Station hung in space, bloodied and shaken, but also alive and very much awake.

The crew said nothing as its members shuffled very, very slowly down the ruined streets and back to the hangar bay where the *Ebon Hawk* waited. For his part, Atton didn't feel awake until their fearless leader appeared again. When he noticed that Meetra was limping, he went to her side and they held each other as they ascended the *Hawk's* loading ramp.

"Mandalore's people took him," she said in the main hold. "Visas will be here

in a minute. Soon as she's aboard, we're leaving."

He let out a disbelieving laugh. "Yeah, good idea. It's not like we're all half-dead or anything."

"We've got kolto in the medbay. And we've got you," she added, nodding at Mical as he entered the room. "Look, I don't want to keep Kreia waiting and encourage her to... do something to me, through our bond." She stood up straighter. "Besides, if we don't leave, the Republic might ground us here. Say they want us for questioning, or something. I don't suppose you'd like to spend another night in a force cage?"

"Good point," Atton said. "Guess I'll get this crate ready for takeoff, then." Before he could move, though, Meetra put a hand on his shoulder.

"I'll do it. You take a load off, and get some sleep once we're in hyperspace."

He sank slowly into a chair and watched her shamble toward the cockpit. "All right... Hey, where are we going again?"

## CHAPTER V – THE SHAPE OF HER SHADOW

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*From space, Dantooine looked much the same to Meetra as it had when she'd last seen it ten years before: a beautifully mild orb of earthen tones. War had come to the planet in the meantime, but it had gotten off easy, all things considered: in order to see its ruin, one would have to land and see it up-close. For now, though, the Hawk was coasting along blissfully slowly on autopilot.*

*Atton and Meetra sat in the pilot's and co-pilot's chairs, playing pazaak on the console between them. Both were happy to be wasting time for a change.*

*"Anyway," Atton was saying, "sorry if it's none of my business. It's just... I dunno. It's probably my imagination. Haven't been drinking enough."*

*Meetra smiled, but didn't laugh, and played a card from her hand without looking at it. She was going to say something, but the sudden chirping of some random console distracted her.*

*"The Jedi decided a long time ago that I'm not one of them," she said finally. "That's not going to change, and you know, that's okay. We just need their help. And some answers. That's all I want to do with them."*

*Atton shuffled the cards in his own hand – both of them. "Fine by me. But even if it all works out and we track them down... I mean, not like I care a whole lot what happens to them or anything, but how much can a couple of Jedi do against a whole army of Sith?"*

*"You'd be surprised."*

*"But still. Considering all the crazy stuff that's been happening, to ask these people to come out of hiding and sign on with us, from their perspective, it must seem like we're recruiting for a suicide mission."*

*"Maybe we are," she said with a shrug. "Maybe we're not. But the Jedi have been around for a long time. If this war with Revan was their last, well, they can't say they weren't given enough chances. And when all's said and done, it's not them I'm fighting for. And not the Republic."*

*Atton slowly set his cards down on his lap. "All right, then, you've got me curious. What are you in this for?"*

*Meetra suddenly felt very exposed. She looked straight at him and said, "I'm in this for me. And you. This ship. All of us. That's really all I care about."*

Atton stayed melted into the chair in the main hold for a long time. He didn't stir until he heard Meetra's voice over the intercom saying, "Entering hyperspace in three... two... one," followed by the great, shuddering *thud* of the *Ebon Hawk's* frame as it dove beyond the stars. Some minutes later Meetra appeared from the cockpit, shuffling awkwardly toward him.

The sight of her shot something cold and frantic into his bloodstream and he knew, or remembered, that something was terribly wrong, that he had to do something. "You're limping," he said barely.

She stood leaning against him, one hand on his shoulder, wearing a smile. "I got hit."

"You gonna be okay?"

"What do I look like?"

"Like you haven't slept in weeks..." Their eyes met and he trailed off, seeing in hers a glimmer of unnatural light, a dull gold or hard yellow, and he blanched, not sure whether it was real. "Or a year."

She gave him a squeeze and turned away. "So do you. Get some sleep, flyboy."

Then she was gone, leaving him cold and bewildered. He felt inhumanly exhausted, his brain turning to mush, his body half-emptied of blood and life. He wanted to follow her, to hold her, talk to her, listen to her, just be there wherever she was.

Instead he dragged himself to the pilot's chair in the cockpit and strapped in, hoping that if he could just *stop* for a little while, he might be able to pull himself together and do whatever he had to do. With all else gone from his mind he tried to make himself comfortable and, dazzled there by the meaningless crackle of blue light, he fell into sleep.

It may simply have been the *Ebon Hawk* proving true to its reputation as the fastest ship in the galaxy, but the trip ended all too soon for Atton Rand as a familiar, frantic whine from the navicomputer yanked him back awake. Cursing, he silenced the alarm and set his hands about switches, levers and keys, conducting safety checks and procedures by bare habit. Squinting at the navicomputer screen, he brought the intercom to his mouth and said, "Coming up on... Malachor V in ten seconds."

*Of course*, he thought as his hands continued to fly over the controls. No one had told him they were going there, but now that he knew, it only made sense.

The rest of the *Hawk's* flight turned out to be a nightmare, presumably as the Force's way of making up for the dreamlessness of Atton's nap. Mere seconds after hyperspace blinked out, he had to throw the ship into a breathless series of evasive arcs, turns, and spirals. Gutted shells and dismembered fragments of capital-size starships dotted the region by the hundred. The space between them was thick with smaller chunks of metal, ranging from corvette-sized blobs to man-sized motes that crashed into oblivion against the *Ebon Hawk's* particle shields. Hoping, cursing, and almost praying, Atton grappled with the control yoke, weathering the artificial hail and plotting a course through it, kilometer by kilometer, toward a huge, misshapen clump of black rock circled by eerie, sparking rings of green-white light.

From that point forward it was a blur. Later on Atton would remember voices, one of them his own, shouting back and forth in the roaring, rattling interior of the ship. He would remember descending like a meteor through an empty sky, through stale clouds that bristled with lightning and howled with winds that tossed the *Hawk* about like a speck of dust. It was a descent not unlike one of his own hidden hopes, except that both the ship and himself, not to mention the rest of the crew, survived it. Notwithstanding the burnt-out stabilizers, the one exploded atmospheric thruster, and the shorted-out sensors, he brought them to an approximately flawless landing on a narrow strip of dark earth, surrounded by jutting spires and mounds of rock and *just* far away enough from the edge of a sheer cliff to be comfortable.

Not bad, Atton decided, for a guy who'd only just woken up.

He found Meetra in the main hold, apparently already in the middle of giving some spiel to the rest of the crew, or at any rate to a rather helpless-looking Mical

from across the holotable. "Mira's wounded," she was saying, wearing her general's voice, "and Visas isn't in the best shape either. You worry about *them*, I'll be fine." She whirled on Atton. "You, help Bao-Dur and the droids, get this bucket ready to fly again. I'm not assuming there's going to be another way off this planet."

Atton's blood ran with ice again. He didn't need to hear any more. "What? I don't think so. There's no way in Hell—"

Her look stabbed at him. "I know where I'm going. There's no time to argue." And in the blink of an eye she had disappeared around the corner, and Atton heard the hiss of the exit hatch opening up.

"Son of a—" He made a great, clumsy dash across the room, bumping into tables and overturning chairs. Without thinking he headed down the exit ramp. Meetra was already out of sight and he shouted her name, but his voice was swallowed up as a great roar of hot wind came whipping across Malachor's surface and sent him stumbling back. Shielding his face against a spray of dirt and pebbles, he was just about to charge outside anyway when he remembered that not only could Meetra move fast, but his own weapons and other gear were still on board the ship.

He closed the hatch and went back to the main hold, murder on his face, and turned to the rest of the crew to hear their excuses.

He found the Iridonian in the garage, a hydrosponder in one hand, standing very still until he heard Atton's voice. "The general told me to fix the ship, and that's what I'm going to do." How could someone be so smart and yet so stupid, so gullible, so *uncaring*? That was Bao-Dur, Atton decided: no thinking, just doing what he was told, like that little pest of a droid of his – wherever it had gotten off to.

Speaking of pests, Atton heard the little astromech droid whirring toward them from the other doorway, presumably to help the mechanic with his meaningless work. Since he would sooner eat his own blaster than stoop to ask for its help, Atton turned away without a word.

As for the other droid, Goto's one, it was nowhere in sight either. Atton had barely seen the thing since they first picked it up on Nar Shaddaa, and he didn't spend much time looking for it.

Back in the main hold, he was momentarily astonished to see Mira leaning against the doorway to the medbay. Her face was wavering between a wince and a derisive grin. "What's the matter, hero? Still think she can't take care of herself?"

"Shut up."

Then he turned away from her too, thinking. Somewhere far in the back of the ship, thin flames and sparks sputtered out of its damaged engines, and Atton felt suddenly conscious of how very empty the *Ebon Hawk* was.

Mical appeared at his shoulder. "She won't be of any help," he said confidentially, waving his hand toward the starboard dormitory – the Miraluka's haunt.

"That's a surprise." Atton gave him a hard look. "That just leaves you and me – if you're in this time."

Mical's face mirrored his own. "Of course I am."

"We're going after Meetra, wherever the Hell she's gone off to." He decided to make light of it. "We'll probably die."

"I don't care."

"Then grab whatever you can carry. We're heading out in two minutes. She's already got a head start."

Atton went to his favorite corner of the cargo hold and rifled through the stacks of plasteel containers there. He collected his usual assortment of blasters, plus twice as much ammunition and all the grenades he could fit in his pockets and an extra vibroblade. He took a step back and shifted his footing this way and that, trying to get used to the extra weight. Remembering his lightsaber and thinking it a good idea to have it more at hand, he retrieved it from his jacket's breast pocket and clipped it onto his belt.

He crossed the room to another container, one of Meetra's, and retrieved a worn, blaster-singed brown cloak, and hurriedly donned it. For a moment he stood in that corner, still and silent, and for that moment he stopped counting cards. Then the fear and disgust and rage came flooding back in, and he had to move.

He found Mical at the *Hawk's* exit ramp. He wore a pistol, a stun blaster, and a short vibroblade – the exact same armament that he'd had when they first met him in the sublevel of the Jedi Enclave on Dantooine. He flashed a puzzled look at Atton, and the two men exchanged mumbles to the effect that they were both ready to leave.

Then the loading ramp extended and they slipped out together into the storm.

In a heavy stride Meetra traversed an austere, nearly empty hallway whose massively high ceiling gradually sloped downward to meet the head of a heavy door of black iron at its very end. On either side of her, the occasional window gave a grand, sweeping view of the hideous, storm-swept landscape, beneath which most of the Sith academy seemed to reside. Since entering the place she had caught barely a glimpse of its residents, but in the Force she could quite clearly feel them scattered throughout the labyrinth of chambers and concourses, obviously aware of her and making sure not to obstruct her path.

There was one exception among them, though, and his grotesque, imposing bulk was sure to be more of an obstacle than the huge door he guarded, which was itself clearly of singular importance.

Meetra had had a feeling she would meet Darth Sion in this place. She found him an easy man to hate. The very sight of him disgusted her. Like Visas' master, he was a walking mass of death, but he possessed more of a physicality, a certain *solidness* that repulsed her eyes rather than drew them.

His voice, painful to hear, reached her and echoed far up the hall. It was a fierce, wounded voice. "You should not have come here, exile. She will break you – your mind, your body. You will be lost!"

She said nothing, did nothing, but walk as she had been walking, scowling at his death-frozen flesh, at his blank, ruined eye.

He left the door and met her ten yards from it, pointing at her with an imperious finger. "I will not let you pass. Return to the surface and let Malachor claim you, as it claimed the other Jedi! There is no need for you to suffer as her other apprentices have."

Meetra's hands were both fists, one of them clamped around her lightsaber. She swallowed his pity without a second thought. "I already have."

"No. You have only begun. *This--*" The Sith Lord brought up a fist of his own and struck it where his heart may have been. "What you see here is the future. *Your future.*"

"The future means nothing to me."

For some minutes they continued to speak, but none of their words were so important as those, and they ended with the beginning of two beams of light, one sunset and the other scarlet. They raised their lightsabers in unison, letting their hungry electrical hisses fill the empty hall for a few precious seconds as each warrior gathered strength.

Meetra suddenly winced ever so slightly, reacting to a subtle tremor in the Force. Something was happening elsewhere, behind her, or else had happened in the past, and carried to her an echo of some desperate battle of which she was not part. Or perhaps it was not at all the Force, but the tiniest aftershocks of sound carrying through the floors of the Sith academy, vibrations of far-off explosions and thuds of blaster fire...

Before she could contemplate the premonition or stretch out to seek its source, Sion lunged and brought his blade to bear in a vicious overhand chop. Meetra parried and gave ground, letting all things aside from battle vanish into the void. The two crashed together, clashing and feinting and circling about, matching each other's ferocity. Sion was as much a master duelist as Kavar had ever been, and he was easily much physically stronger. But Meetra could read him just as she could the Jedi and the other Sith, and moreover she had changed since Korriban.

As they blurred past each other yet again, Meetra's crosscut went just an inch or two past Sion's defenses and reached his arm, leaving a glowing mark that had to have reached bone. But as she came about and faced him again, she saw that he paid no heed to the wound at all. She did not wonder.

"You are stronger than before, but your strength is futile," Sion boasted, "compared to the true power of the dark side."

*Give me another opening, and we'll see,* Meetra thought as he advanced on her again. But Sion's assault was more careful now, more methodical, sacrificing speed for precise, measured slashes and thrusts. She gave ground for a moment, still reading his movements, then put some distance between them with a Force-enhanced somersault. As she landed she extended a hand and opened herself, sending an eye-searing torrent of crackling light that filled the hall with thunder. One bolt ground itself on Sion's lightsaber, but the other two passed it, stopped him in his tracks, and bent his knees. Meetra strained and increased the lightning's intensity, marveling at how easily it came from her fingers now.

But when finally the storm died, the Sith Lord immediately stood back to his full height and advanced again, the onslaught he had endured meaning as little as the thin smoke that rose from his body. "Now do you see?!" he bellowed. "I cannot be killed here. Every wound you open allows this planet to flow into me more freely, and I only become stronger than before!"

He reached Meetra again, forcing her back faster and faster. She went entirely on defense, falling back into a narrow corridor off to the side. Sion was right about the source of his strength, but what he did not fully realize was that Meetra was following his own path to power more closely than either of them could know. She had been learning to drink of her own pain, and so Malachor was flowing into *her* as well, so quickly and easily that it seemed it had been there all along.

The sheer volume of all its screams, every last one having begun in her a decade ago, that the Force was only just now awakening again, and as those screams awakened, Meetra grew stronger. She had the strength of death as well, the strength of the darkness that is between all stars – and the darkness that is left behind when they have passed away. Her arm cried out from when it had been seared by Atris' lightning, and she suckled herself there; her leg stank with the burn that had been inflicted by the lightsaber of Visas' master, and she breathed it in.

The side corridor gave way to an oblong deck, open to the winds that fell on it from an angry sky. Without looking, Meetra sensed that its end overlooked a small lip of rock which quickly sloped down into one of Malachor's countless abysses. All fire and rage and power and skill, Sion drove her toward that hazard. She gave ground effortlessly until she reached the end, at which point she flipped herself from the deck to the ledge, carried more by brazen excitement than by tactical astuteness. She would feed Sion to Malachor.

The Sith Lord paused at the balcony's end, looking at her, looking past her as though distracted by something off in the midst of the storms. Some question or remark was poised on his lips. Meetra, on the other hand, knew that nothing was behind herself, and she divided the air between them with an impatient crosscut.

That made an end of the moment, and with a contemptuous sneer her opponent leaped to join her on the ledge. On that uncertain ground their blades crossed again and again and they were lost in the storm, a convergence of bolts of lightning, circling each other closer and closer.

Sion launched a kick at Meetra's torso. Though it barely connected, she twisted and exposed her left flank, and Sion, caught up in a fresh gust of pride, lunged forward, his scarlet blade meaning to bury itself in Meetra's lung. Instead, though, it blazed past her and came to a sudden stop, arrested by a steely Force-augmented grip. When he lurched back, he was dumfounded to find himself unarmed, his lightsaber now in Meetra's hand as she took the offensive. She being silent as a wraith, it was the two lightsabers that screamed in triumph as they whirled against him.

He leaped back, two glowing lines already traced across his cheek and his chest. The mere pain of fresh wounds meant nothing to him, but a lightsaber could still cut him in two. All the same, it was more shock than anything else that drove his retreat, and without warning his balance was gone and he tumbled down the slope toward the abyss. Quickly he righted himself, clawing at the rock face to slow his descent. He snarled furiously, gathering strength wherewith to hurl himself back up to the ledge and rejoin the fight.

But the fight ended there as a blast of the Force fell on him from above. With the sound of thunder the obsidian slope exploded into a landslide which swallowed up Darth Sion and carried him in a panicked rush down into the darkness.

Meetra stood atop what was left of the slope, staring down as though dumbfounded by how quickly Sion had disappeared. She could sense him, hear him as a murmuring echo, another single layer in the ambiance of Malachor. He would fall for a very long time.

Numb to the pleasure of victory, she holstered both lightsabers, turned round, and slowly clamored back onto the balcony.

## CHAPTER VI – CHILDREN OF THE JEDI

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*"So you will do nothing?" Kreia scoffed. "Apathy is death, worse than death, because at least a rotting corpse feeds the beasts and insects..."*

*Before Meetra could think of a worthy retort, Atton turned to her, keeping his lightsaber still raised. As the rest of the crewmembers followed suit with their own weapons, his voice lowered itself to a droll monotone and he said, "Apathy is death."*

*"Atton? What—"*

*But then Bao-Dur appeared at his shoulder, hissing, "Apathy is death."*

*And one after the other the same phrase fell from the lips of the others, becoming a curse and a mantra, and they moved on her. Meetra's heart thundered against her ribcage and she backed away, all too quickly striking one of the walls of the rock-hewn tomb. Without thinking she fled down its length until she was in a corner. All the while she was shouting and crying out, trying to overcome the voices of her pursuing friends. "Atton! Mical! What are you doing!? Stop— Answer me! Please—"*

*But they were almost on her now and she had nowhere else to fall back to. But though her pleas did not faze them, she had something else that would. Like water boiling into steam, terror became rage, and she ripped the lightsaber free from her belt.*

If the galaxy had a dark center to it, a place that swallowed light and life on the cosmic scale while giving nothing in return, it had to be there on Malachor V – Atton and Mical were just over it. Up from that unseeable abyss there jutted a pillar of black rock that terminated at a lonesome platform, which was adorned with two rows of claw-shaped megaliths, all facing inward. The ground inside the second, smaller ring was raised slightly and paved with some alien rock that radiated a harsh bloodshine glow, broken only by the diminutive frame of an old, old woman who knelt there motionless. It was only that glow, as well as a shifting, hazy sort of green light from far above, like the sun shining down through an ocean, that allowed them to see anything at all in that place of nightmares.

From the platform there proceeded three stone walkways, just wide enough for three to walk abreast, and each leading to pitch-black tunnels that opened into the walls. In the mouth of one of these tunnels stood Atton and Mical, their loads in weaponry and other equipment much lighter than when they had set out from the *Ebon Hawk* and their spirits similarly diminished. The excitement of embarking on their extraordinary brave or insane two-man invasion of Malachor V had spent itself now that they were at its end. Only one challenge remained. Indeed, it was the *only* real challenge from beginning to end: the challenge posed by that wily, clever old crone.

Atton cracked his neck, fidgeted, and shifted his weight from one foot to the other. Between shuffling the pazaak cards in his head, he eyed Kreia's tiny form and thought glumly of how they had no grenades left. The thought of waking that witch from her meditations by blowing her to pieces brought a smirk to his lips, but it died quickly there in the tunnel. Even if they had a spare grenade, there was no way Atton could throw one all the way across that chamber. Then again, he

thought, what about Mira's wrist launcher? If only he had swiped it while he was gearing up! But no, even then, there would still be the matter of the old Jedi witch's pesky precognition... unless, perhaps, there could be a suitable sort of distraction...

Mical fixed his eyes steadily on their quarry, his hands drifting from vibroblade to blaster to stun pistol in a cyclical rhythm that followed his breathing. Had anyone thought to ask him if he was afraid, he could have truthfully said that he was not. At least, he was not afraid of anything that was ahead.

"What's the plan?" Atton whispered suddenly.

Though they couldn't see each other, Mical made a point to frown at him in the darkness. "I thought you were the one who knew how to fight Jedi."

"Yeah, well, we haven't got much to go on at this point. No more explosives, no sonics, and it doesn't look like we'll have much room to maneuver, or fall back to."

"But Kreia's strength is manipulation, not battle. We must have a chance."

Atton bit his lip. "Let's hope you're right about that. Okay, you get up close and force her to use her lightsaber. Then keep her talking, do anything you can to distract her. If we can break her concentration fast enough, we'll take her down easy."

"A Jedi's power relies on the mind," Mical noted approvingly.

"Only problem is all the tricks she knows," Atton mused, half to himself. "And she's telepathic. In fact, she's probably listening in on us right now."

"What? Then what is the point of discussing a plan?!"

"Okay, new plan," Atton said, mentally kicking himself. There was a soft click as he took the lightsaber hilt from his belt. "Just get up there and be yourself. Go." With that he stepped from the solid dark onto the platform. Mical appeared at his shoulder and they strode fast. Facing away from them, Kreia didn't move.

As they entered the first ring of giant stone claws that lined the platform, a new game of pazaak began in Atton's head and he whispered, "Stay calm."

Then a step or two ahead, Mical cast an irritated glance over his shoulder, but before he could demand to know what Atton was talking about, he noticed that his companion had disappeared. He stopped, a pit opening in his stomach for a moment. But it was only a moment. He took a deep breath and marched to the edge of the bloodshine glow in the center of the platform. He stopped there as though on a cue and was met by the uncannily strong voice of an old, old woman.

"You have wandered very far from home, tiny Jedi." As slowly as smoke, she rose.

"Kreia, I have come to stop you." His hand wrested on the vibroblade's hilt.

She faced him, her eyes veiled as always by a cowl, but her skin now the color of death. "To do that, you must strike me down."

Mical did not move.

A wicked smile began to grow on her. "Come now, you have taken many lives already on this journey, in this academy. Is it too great a challenge to slay an old woman? Can you not see I am defenseless?"

The vibroblade slipped easily from its scabbard and added its nearly imperceptible whine to the air. "I don't want to kill you."

"Oh no? Is that not what you do to Sith? Or is there something holding you back?"

Glowering at her, still trying to find her eyes, Mical brought his guard up. "Yes – that curse of a bond between you and Meetra. That you would dare use another person as a shield for yourself, someone so beautiful, so noble–"

The old, old woman cut him off, her remaining bony hand now a fist, her voice shaking with rage. "Beauty, nobility, is that what you see in her? Then you are twice the fool Atton is! But mark my words, you *will* see clearly when *I* am through with her."

At that moment Mical felt at home in the red haze of Trayus Core, and he threw himself forward with all of his weight to crush and trample and smash the source of his misery. But the dark side was strong there and in Kreia; she stepped to the side, quick as a shadow, and as Mical came round again a lightsaber appeared in her hand and flared to life. She raised it toward him with imperious disdain. "Too slow, little one."

Undaunted, and moreover having completely forgotten about Atton, Mical closed in and struck again, this time with the vibroblade. Kreia parried again and again, not striking back, leading him away from the center of the platform. Atton came out then like a thunderbolt from behind one of the massive stone claws. His blade was a line of blue-white fire, swung in long, powerful sweeps that Kreia seemed determined to stay away from.

Her entire form was a deception. She looked frail and unsophisticated and held her lightsaber with little art or finesse, as a novice would. Yet the Force lent her burst upon burst of uncanny speed and grace, by which she continually slipped around and between her two assailants and their strikes. She replied to them with well-timed slashes and crosscuts that were themselves easy to anticipate, but all the while Atton and Mical were spending the last of their stamina.

Suddenly Kreia rose in unnatural strength as well, and with a vicious, back-handed blow she battered Mical's defenses, jarring his arms and sending him stumbling back, further away from the platform's center and toward one of the claws on its outer edge. Another slash knocked the vibroblade from his hands altogether, but then she had to turn to fend off Atton, who was behind her, and this time she was a second too late to get out of his way.

Mical observed the clash of lightsabers for an instant, making a mental calculation, then drew his stun pistol and fired. A pale blue bolt of light struck Kreia square in the back and she staggered with a cry, then ducked under a slash from Atton that would have taken her head and shoulders off. The pistol was on full power and had enough potency to stop a charging kinrath, but Mical fired again without stopping to nurse his disappointment.

The shot flashed over Kreia's shoulder and passed just close enough to Atton's face to make him leap away. In the same instant of distraction the old, old woman sent a tendril of dark power behind her that ripped Mical's pistol from his grip and toward herself. With a casual flick of her wrist, she caught it on the very tip of her saber blade and cut it in two.

The blade flashed again and again, and Atton collapsed onto his knees, gnashing his teeth against the pain of two sizzling wounds that traveled up both of his thighs. Even in that moment, the effortless precision of Kreia's attack did not escape him; she could just as easily have cut his legs off altogether, or brought an even more permanent ending to their contest.

Mical snatched up his vibroblade and lunged, putting all of his strength into a thrust at Kreia's back. But she whirled and met him. Lightsaber and cortosis-augmented steel crossed, squealing and hissing against each other. She didn't fall back a step. It didn't seem *possible*—

A fierce whisper came to him through the solid blaze of energy. "Power does not reside in the flesh, but in the will."

He knew these words to be true. Sweat began to drip into his eyes and he closed them, trying to ignore his aching bones, to rid himself of their weight, to escape from his skull and feel the electric pulse of his vibroblade's power cell, of the lightsaber's plasma arc, of the beating of his enemy's aging heart. He thought of his sore, clammy fingers and tried to imagine that they were wrapping themselves around her throat.

Nothing happened – except that the old, old woman pressed, inching the point of their blades' crossing closer and closer to him. "Did she never train you?" she asked. "Perhaps you were too old to train... That is how much she cares for you." Then she gave a twist and the sword left Mical's hands, clattering somewhere among the shadows.

Then he did want to kill her, and he wanted to use his own hands. The lightsaber meant nothing to him and he rained blows against her by the dozen, but each fist met a forearm and was knocked aside. The Force sheathed his foe, as it were, and he knew of no weak point that he could exploit on his own.

Finally Kreia came back at him with a vengeance, raising her lightsaber high and slashing horizontally. By luck or by fate, Mical caught her arm in both hands and held it, the bloodshine blade flickering hungrily mere inches from his throat. Something faint and distant jolted within his mind and he wondered what had become of his only help. Atton seemed to be just out of sight.

But Mical himself was at his breaking point, soon to be overwhelmed by the arcane strength of that old, old woman. She leaned in closer and at last he could see her eyes: black and deep, they cast back a clear reflection of the white core of her blade. "The dreamer still has yet to wake," she said with brutal finality.

In the center of Mical's shallowing chest there welled up the sum total of all the impotence and rage and defiance that had ever been nursed by his own kind – men who wanted to be *good* men – and he spat in her face.

Then the lightsaber's red glow vanished and gave way to a flashing, howling storm of blue-white sparks that sent Mical spiraling across the platform. The Force lightning burned and cracked and tore and rent, and it left him in a smoking, twitching heap less than a step from the abyss, reduced to a stupor no less close to death.

Kreia spun round, her guard up again, but no assault came. Seeing all things as she did through the Force, she had no use for her eyes to find anyone or to navigate. She felt the architecture by the pulse of the Universe through it, and Mical's withered form through the threads of destiny in him that united body to soul, and in the same way her final pupil, who was lowering herself down another thread to that deep place. But Atton was not where Kreia had left him, and though close by, she knew him only by a vague aura of presence that dispersed itself across the immediate area, like a shadow cast from far away, or an echo of his thoughts. She focused on those thoughts and eased her way into their midst, listening.

*Play the minus five card, totals'll be eleven-three. Play the plus three, nineteen-three. The hand's empty otherwise-*

The old, old woman gave a hiss of a laugh and began to pace along the platform, tightly orbiting the inner ring of claws about Trayus Core's heart, and flung her voice into the empty air. "If only you could hide forever, Atton."

Flat against one of the megaliths, scarcely even breathing, Atton waited and continued to count cards, drowning out Kreia's voice and the pain of his own wounds. His lightsaber was sleeping in his hand.

"You are only delaying the inevitable. The part you had to play in these events is all but completed. Do you continue to dream, like this tiny Jedi, that you can change her? 'Save' her?"

He knew what game this was. *Draw a two and a three, the totals are thirteen-six. Now play the plus three, totals are sixteen and six. The hand's empty-*

Kreia continued, completing half of a circuit. "You need not worry, Atton. I will save her. I will make her see the truth, so that these decades and centuries of war will not have been in vain. And as you murdered the Jedi for a good cause, so your own death will serve *our* good cause."

Atton gritted his teeth and squeezed his eyes shut. *Sixteen and six, damn witch. The hand's empty, stupid Jedi witch. Draw a three and a six-*

"She will fall before me, you know... but she will rise again as my other students never did, never could have. And before she snuffs out your life, murderer, she will look on you with all the contempt which you deserve."

The cards fell in a shambles from Atton's mind. In a pure, wordless act of ferocious will he called to the Force, leaving his concealment and streaking across the ageless stone toward Kreia from behind, silent as death. She felt the approach of his footsteps and was ready for him, parrying and countering as he drove her back and back, around the Core.

For Atton it was another euphoric moment, like the turning point of his fight with the Handmaidens on Telos. Racked as he was with the confusion and exhaustion the past several days, he did not realize how it was that he had unchained the Force within himself. Whatever the key was, he had found it a second time on Citadel Station when he saved Mira from the Sith, and he found it again now.

In the Force he lost himself and yet somehow found himself at the same time. His mind and his reflexes still worked, split second to split second, employing the training and tactics of swordplay, everything that he had known and had absorbed, and yet he soared beyond those things, beyond his knowledge and his skill and even his rage, though he knew it to be a fuel that he was tapping for his power, and he was moving and advancing in a state of total being where things were no longer divided into "possible" and "impossible." So it was that, for instance, the weavings of his lightsaber through the air were not clumsy or awkward; the hilt in his hands was warm and familiar, and though its blade was mere weightless energy, he knew it and its movements as tangibly as his own arms and legs.

They passed Mical, who lay crumpled and unmoving where Kreia's fury had left him.

The old woman put herself just out of reach with another burst of speed, nearly tripping over herself. Atton lagged behind, his knees wobbling as his wounds made themselves known again. But he did not dare let up now. He raised one hand,

and a wave of telekinetic power roared across Malachor's heart and fell against Kreia, sending her reeling back into one of the giant stone claws on the outer edge of the platform. Panting, her rail-thin body sagged as she braced herself against the curved surface of the wall.

Atton saw her there, finally weak and no longer cackling, no longer looking superior, and he drank the sight in, wild-eyed and giddy. The hope of victory took his mind like a wildfire, and even the distant question of what would happen to Meetra – every last drop of doubt melted away. But he had to end it then and there; to prolong the fight would mean disaster.

He thrust his hand forward again, meaning to kill, and he called to the shadows for Sith lightning, to finish Kreia once and for all with her own weapon. For a second the darkness seemed to respond and he felt something unseen crackle and hiss at the tips of his fingers and in the air before him – but he had spent himself already, and nothing else happened.

The old, old woman gave out a loud, weary sigh and left her support behind. Her blade wavered, then steadied itself. "Your clumsy power betrays you, fool," she said, her voice frigid with restraint.

Atton lunged at her. He missed completely as she sidestepped, then spun to block a counter-slash, and their blades locked in a fitful flare of light. Tumbling back into himself, into his crumbling, wounded, battered body, Atton tried to regain his focus, but he grasped at nothingness and his mind was falling to pieces, as spent as his body was. He gritted his teeth and blinked sweat from his eyes, trying to figure out what had happened, why he was suddenly so weak.

"A Jedi's power relies on the mind," the Kreia noted nonchalantly. "And your mind, Atton, is in my hand."

He broke away, a wordless cry of dismay sticking in his throat, his whole frame beginning to shake with dread. Before he realized it, his lips were trembling and sputtering with words that he had half-forgotten and his eyes were running with decade-old tears. He was half-somewhere else, half a different person, half buried alive in old uniforms and aliases so that he nearly forgot where he was and who was his enemy. She was doing what she had always threatened to do. Barely connected to his own body anymore, he lurched back and forth, willing in vain to break free of the mental invasion.

He couldn't hear himself scream. It was too late to fight anymore. Somehow he managed to extinguish his lightsaber and then he was running, bouncing off one of the giant claws, then running again across the rock bridge out from Trayus Core, aiming to lose himself in the mouth of darkness that he and Mical had emerged from. He fought down a wild urge to hurl himself into the abyss below.

When at last he came near the hole in the wall of the massive chamber, he stopped as though he'd run into something. Two points of faint gold light glinted in the darkness and then Meetra emerged from it, one hand raised, holding him tight with the Force. She looked strong and focused, and with her appearance a sudden heat seemed to envelope Atton, wiping his mind of the raw, monstrous, buried things that Kreia had awakened inside him.

An unrecognizable emotion flashed across her face. "Atton." She choked on his name, but just as suddenly she was like living stone again. "Please go to sleep."

And then the warmth gave way to a spreading numbness. Atton felt himself sinking, being gingerly lowered to the floor. As it came up to meet him he had a

brief flash of clarity, or prophecy, and he managed a whisper. "Never... You'll never..."

Then he was gone into the deepest of shadows.

## CHAPTER VII – THE BETRAYER

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*They were in the cockpit yet again, but this time the door was closed.*

*"But Jedi don't kill, do they? At least not their prisoners. Maybe you were counting on that when you went back in chains. So you got off easy. You were exiled, brushed under the cargo ramp, another dirty little Jedi secret."*

*Atton stood with his back to the viewport, his face a blistering red. Meetra gave him a blank, absorbing stare.*

*"I'll tell you something," he went on. "Those Jedi at Malachor? They deserved it. Every single last one of them."*

*That was like a punch to the gut. Meetra controlled herself so that on the outside it hardly seemed to register. But for the rest of that hour, for the rest of that week, in the back of her mind there festered a response which, in that critical moment, she couldn't seem to make herself say out loud: "I didn't deserve it."*

Meetra stepped over Atton and strode down the bridge toward a solitary platform, bathed in dim red light, where an old, old woman waited for her.

Halfway through the journey she saw Mical sprawled on the floor, his face contorted and pale. There was already a knot in her heart, and though it seemed impossible that it could tighten more, it did just that as she went to him. Unable to place what she was feeling or hoping to feel, she lowered herself to check his pulse.

A voice full of hollow warmth came to her through the dark haze. "At last you have arrived. Tell me, is Malachor as you remember it?"

Meetra bit her lower lip and tasted it. "Yes," she called back, rising. "It feels like I never left this place. I've been seeing it every night."

"In your dreams?"

She went to the platform's center, the source of the bloody light. "In everything."

Kreia and Meetra faced each other in silence for a very long moment. Both of them felt ancient.

It struck Meetra in that moment that the woman whom she had tolerated as a mentor was not so easy to hate as she should have been, now that she saw her as she was without the mask of lies and riddles. To find her hiding at the bottom of the deepest pit of a long-dead planet, and to see her rail-thin frame and her wasted, ashen flesh, her sightless eyes blackened with a lifetime of hates and disappointments, all for the sake of the failed Grand Plan of yet another Jedi, or Sith Lord – Kreia was not easy to hate at first. She was pitiable and she was incomprehensible.

But she had also hurt Meetra. And her friends.

The old, old woman bowed her head. "Do you wish to speak? Do you suddenly have a use for words again, at this last hour?"

And neither of them really did, though Kreia did use them then as she always had used them. For the last time she left her lightsaber on her belt, drawing mind instead of blade, all of her will and reasons and desires and proofs that had been honed over the long, long years of her life. As she had said before on Dantooine, the victory that she so craved was not through killing but through conversion, and her last enemy to convert, the *only* one to convert, was her own last apprentice,

Meetra Surik, her last love if that old woman had ever loved anything or anyone. To see her as she was then, so very cruel and impulsive and damnably obtuse, it enraged the old woman, for she was a teacher, and a failed student was a reproach like no other. But even in that final hour Meetra still meant more than everything, and she could still be saved, for she had only just started down the path of the Sith Lords.

And so Kreia tried, with all of the words that she could bring to bear, to make her apprentice see true light: the light that the Force could never give. She denounced her and scrutinized her and refuted her and threatened her, she tempted her, cajoled her, belittled her, begged her. The threat of impending death did not trouble the old woman – in fact, she looked forward to it eventually – but she had to survive a little longer; she had to be the one to remake Meetra, to arm her with the blade that would cut the galaxy free of its bonds forever, that would rid all beings of the Force and its cruel, conniving, awful will.

But Meetra believed in no will of the Force, and in the end no will at all. Arguments of doctrine and duty, truths and obligations and dreams of a freer, quieter galaxy, all of Kreia's words simply vanished into the air and never truly reached her ears at all. What she *did* hear was the screams of Malachor as a hollow roar at the back of everything, a dead current that hummed through all that she experienced. The sound had not diminished since she had first heard it a decade before; instead she had simply accustomed herself to it, and as it permeated every syllable that Kreia spoke, it reduced her scheme into mad nonsense. The galaxy would never be quieted. Malachor, in fact, would always be with it, and its solid, blackening voice would grow and grow...

And besides that, Meetra thought of the two men who lay half-dead nearby and of her own aches and wounds, of the sleeping pain in her leg and in her arm, and when the old, old woman demanded in exasperation to know what she wanted, if she wanted anything at all, Meetra's voice went deep and harsh as stone. "What I want is you to *die*."

That was a deadly gamble, of course, and Kreia was quick to point it out. But Meetra could all but see the Force shining bright within the soul of that old, old woman. She thirsted for the secret fire there and believed that her prey was bluffing, that the bond in the Force between them could be broken, that she could live while Kreia died. She could live, live on...

And that was when Kreia let go of her hopes for a more pleasant ending to their meeting. Her heart sank as she thought the ordeal ahead of her, thought of her apprentice's youth and defiance, her depravity, her hideous power – but that old, old woman had power of her own, and with a deep breath she let it blaze to the surface as though she, too, were young, and in unison their lightsabers flared to life.

They fought for seconds and they fought for hours, the duel's ending secretly as inevitable as its beginning. They circled Trayus Core one way and back the other. Again and again they passed Mical and Atton, who both slept dreamlessly, unaware of what new nightmare would soon be waiting for them.

Kreia fought defensively, weary and privately frustrated at having to hold back, always giving ground, afraid to risk striking too lethally and thus being her own defeat. After a while she fled to the edge of the platform, where her lightsaber caught Meetra's in a bind, and then with a twist and a Force yank she sent the

weapon hurtling into the abyss, its sunset blade winking out for the last time. The old woman was just about to gloat when her quarry reached into her cloak and drew out a second lightsaber which spat another bloodshine blade.

It was Sion's, and it naturally suited Meetra more than she was aware. With a mirthless laugh she threw herself back into the fight. Her ferocity redoubled, she drove Kreia back and back until they both were cast in the hazy glow of the platform's eye, and it was there that the destiny which she scorned began to be sealed. The lightsaber she had inherited struck home in a lightning-flash of pure white plasma. Kreia's wound leaped from mind to mind, coating Meetra's right hand in an agony familiar but exquisite, a burning that she had described as molten carbonite back on Peragus. For that moment the whole rest of her body seemed to be swallowed up in numbness, and there was nothing to her at all except for that hand and its sheer, mind-flaying pain.

Her whole frame trembled and bent and wobbled as she struggled to stay on her feet. "Now... do you see your mindless folly?" croaked the old, old woman, no steadier on her own feet. "Are you strong enough to drink of *this* pain as well?"

Her movements stiff, Meetra returned the lightsaber to her robe. She raised both hands, which shot jagged streams of roaring lightning that speared Kreia and raked her and drove her away. Snarling and shrieking, the old woman tried to bear the withering blasts, and they forced her back only inch by inch. The numbness of Meetra's body was gone now; she felt her very marrow burning along with Kreia's and she screamed with her.

When the lightning ceased, the pain did not. The apprentice pulled herself forward until she was with her master. She made a fist and the old woman rose into the air and drifted over the edge of the platform. Dethroned a second time, her broken, smoking limbs splayed as though she were being pulled apart, the old, old woman already looked worse than dead, but Meetra saw the fire that still hid within. She could see nothing else.

There were no more words to exchange. She reached her way to Kreia's center where that fire was cradled and ripped away the walls. Then it could be seen with the eyes, pouring out of the heart as a red-orange ribbon of light and into Meetra's own, and for a godlike instant all confusion and exhaustion and pain was gone, covered over by the indescribable bliss of power. But all too quickly it was over, and without a whisper of sound Kreia's body vanished into the bottomless center of Malachor.

And something of Meetra – or all of her – vanished down there as well, or seemed to disperse itself, so that at any rate she no longer felt as though she belonged entirely to her own body. Much as she felt her own skin and the fabric against it, which throbbed and crawled and wailed, she felt also the stone and metal around her and beneath her, and she found herself cleaving to the cold purity of those things, to their emptiness of sensation, and to the huge caverns that snaked about beneath Trayus Academy, and the smaller cracks and hollows that were the graves of Mandalorians and Jedi, and their crumbling bones and their weapons and armor and starships that were still sinking into the surface of that planet, which gnawed at them for years and years and years...

More and more, Meetra's flesh and bone racked itself, its invisible torment increasing beyond reason and sense, driving her on and on. Wild thoughts

bombarded her – perhaps Kreia hadn't been bluffing. And yet, if the bond was strong enough to kill her, why wouldn't she *die*?

She willed herself to move – again, it was as though she were *pulling* her own body, from the outside – and she stumbled across her own numb architecture back to the center, to the eye of Trayus Core. There she fell to her knees, prostrate before nothing, as Malachor continued to mingle and twine itself with her. The voice of that place had not stopped. Still trying to distract herself, she focused on the sound, on that scream that traversed the galaxy, and it carried her mind up and out and across the void. In a way far beyond imaginative fancy, she felt herself brush up against worlds that she had known and had known of, the places that knew each other by way of the bonds of war, and the trillions and trillions of little, little people that knew each other by way of the same bonds.

Telos, that dead world with the floating city for a mask, and its hidden Jedi enclave with its high-domed room where the Sith teachings whispered to anyone who would hear...

Dxun, the place of endless struggle and hunting, the place which had always known savagery but which had not known *pain* until Revan sent her armies there, boasting that Mandalore had no stronghold that she could not overthrow...

Dantooine, a Jedi home that had become a Jedi grave, and had been made so a second time, so suddenly...

On a mindless whim, Meetra pulled herself away from those places, away from the Republic and back to Malachor, then flung herself in the opposite direction, remembering that Sion had called this place a "gateway." Hungry for secrets and for life, she flew through that gate and into the darker parts of the galaxy to planets and stars that Jedi had never laid eyes on, and as she was carried by the breath of Malachor to these other places, to these worlds with secret names, she found that the Unknown Regions were merely that – unknown, not empty as she had always thought of them. They were quite full of beings, beings who were builders and fighters. They were single-minded and full of proud fire. They believed in passing down stories, in keeping alive their reason for being. They nursed themselves on ancestral dreams of vengeance and so had not forgotten.

Meetra was not a Sith – so she said – but she knew their kind.

And she knew then that the war had only started.

She gazed on that Empire in the dark for a very, very long time. She was not trying to decide what to do; Bao-Dur had perhaps been right when he told Meetra that she was "stuck being the general," and so her decision was no decision at all. Without thinking it or willing it, she knew that she would go on fighting, feeding, marking the times in preparation for her own final escape.

What made her reluctant to return to Trayus Core was that she would find her body there and would feel again. But she knew that eventually she would have to, and when she did...

Enfolded in the darkness between the stars, Meetra allowed herself a sharp pang of something like embarrassment. She had forgotten about Atton and about Visas, Mical, and the others. She would need them, of course. They had strengths and skills that no one else had, and they would follow Meetra wherever she went, whatever she did. They would be very–

*Useful.*

That was a word that she hadn't attached to them before. It felt clumsy, unfamiliar, and yet now it seemed to fit.

Mical would be *useful*.

Visas would be *useful*.

Atton would be *useful*. And so would the others.

But they were not useful *yet*. The Sith would come for them all, and if they found the galaxy, found Meetra and her friends as they had always been, the war would be lost. They were all so disorganized, prodded and pulled about by trifles and distractions, things which meant nothing when seen from the eye of Malachor. They did not have discipline, they did not have real training, they had not been tried and sharpened and tempered, as Meetra had been in the Mandalorian Wars. No, they needed her guidance first. *First...*

Slowly the halls of Trayus Academy muttered with footsteps as its residents began to come out of hiding. They knew much of death and, having felt the tremors caused by a very significant one, they timidly approached the Core to meet a new master.

And, they would find, soon to meet the rest of the *Ebon Hawk's* crew.

Meetra turned and moved back toward Malachor, back toward herself and Atton and the all others who were caught in her web.

*They will have to be broken.*