

Ashes Fall
October 16th, 2015

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Whispers in the Dark



- Act II: Prologue -

Unknown Location

What is to be found within the Darkness? Is it truly something horrific, something beyond understanding? More and more, these questions are repeated but never truly answered.

Perhaps, the Light itself was a lie, an illusion? What if the creatures hiding — and be assured there is something hiding within both — were just two sides of the same coin? Or, perhaps, none of it even mattered.

Hiss. Kshaw.

Steam blasted from the pipes hanging within the dimly lit room — if it could be called such as that, given it was little more than a jungle of wires. Artificial light provided its own ambience through a symphony of blinking dials and switches scattered over the various towers that formed the main structure. A dark shadow broke through the steam, wispy strands of grey seeming to cling to his form as it passed, twirling like dancers in his wake. The floor beneath his feet suddenly shifted, the entire room seeming to shake. The sudden motion caused a series of wires to free themselves from above and spark against the pale white fabric that adorned the man.

A soft sigh left his slightly parted lips as he brushed past the sudden obstacle, the barely audible sound becoming the only sign of acknowledgement he betrayed. His advance continued with a methodical pace that implied a man who possessed all the time in the galaxy to spend. His hands came together suddenly, the light shining upon his white, gold-trimmed gloves. The fingers of his left hand slid under the edge of the material, tugging it on tighter over his pale flesh as he flexed the fingers of his right hand. Gingerly at first, as if adverse to the action, he ran a single finger from his right hand across the nearest terminal and made a sound of disgust as it came up coated in a heavy layer of dust.

As if in answer, a series of monitors blinked to life and added their pale, sickly glow to the chorus of others within the room. The man raised a thin, carefully trimmed black eyebrow and ran his left hand through his slicked-back, silver hair. He looked on as more and more systems powered up, finally craning his neck curiously as a speaker crackled to life.

"So... c-close... soon..."

The sound was utterly artificial, yet had an organic quality to it... as if the speaker was not comfortable with the words they were forming. The man merely stood, basking in the silence as he adjusted his gloves once more. A thin smile slid across his lips as he looked down at what now looked to be more like a mechanical coffin than a mainframe.

"And here I feared we were going to be late for our appointment," the man spoke with an air of authority hanging from every word, exuding a sense of quiet expectation that anyone listening had ears for him, and him alone. It was a quality often attributed to the aristocracy of countless worlds.

"I do so hate not keeping to the schedule, it's impolite you see..."

- Act II: Chapter 1 -

The Shadowlands Sepros, Orian System

Shi Long let out a feral roar as his heavy frame darted through the undergrowth, revealing itself to Bentre as he hung from the *Arachne's* grappling line. His saber was already active, humming through the air with deadly purpose. The blade bisected the cable in a clean cut, the sudden loss of pressure allowing Bentre to fall to his feet, cradling the ravaged arm close to his chest as he backpedalled towards the others.

The leader of Devil's Shroud felt a sudden weight on his shoulder and looked up to see his Quaestor as the man clasped him with his right hand and pushed his way past. Atra's eyes scanned the area but he could no longer see the man who had once been Tsainetomo, or the droids for that matter.

"Your brother is fine, Xue," Xia spoke up as she strode past. Her two-tone eyes scanned the horizon unblinking, seeming to take in everything. She tilted her head curiously for the briefest of moments before glancing back towards Bentre and Atra. "I assume neither of you can sense it?" the woman's lips curled into a mocking smile before she gestured casually towards somewhere deeper within the Shadowlands. The trio pressed forward, finding what appeared to be a secondary crash site, most likely created by additional shrapnel from the initial crash as the ships broke up in the atmosphere. Though there was no movement within the scope of their vision, the evidence was clear to any with a lick of wit about them.

The droids had found their own way into the catacombs.

"I don't like this," Atra stated flatly. The Umbaran ran the risk of becoming a bit of a broken record, a point punctuated by the expression that quickly flashed over Xia's face. His mismatched eyes of dark corruption and cool grey flicked towards the Matriarch of the Longs with a tinge of dry sarcasm. His eyes then turned once more back to the foliage that was quickly becoming a macabre tableau of machine and organics.

The Seer had wasted little time updating his counterpart with their newly discovered info, trusting that the other group hadn't run into it as yet. The communicator he held within his hand crackled to life, Sanguinius' voice coming in and out of focus. "*When you [...] digging you don't mean [...] like actual digging?*" The Quaestor of Marka Ragnos managed over the unreliable airwaves.

"No, I mean when a man loves a woman very much..." Atra sighed, not able to finish the sarcastic remark, even as Bentre chuckled not far behind him. "They abandoned the crash site and are working their way straight down. They may already be coming your way."

"*Thanks [...] eyes open—*" came Sang's response followed by dead air.

The Quaestor of Shar Dakhan eyed the device, even as Shi came stalking into sight from beyond the foliage, his unstable sunbeam blade still protruding from the hilt within his hand. A quick glance was shared by the pair, not without its fair share of animosity, before Atra turned and tossed the comm device to Bentre. "That thing broken?" he asked as Stahoes made the catch.

The young Shadow began fiddling with the device, losing himself in it despite the humidity of the jungle pressing down upon him. Atra brought a taloned finger up to his neck and tugged at the collar of his grey turtleneck, sparing a glance towards the other two Longs who seemed to be conversing among themselves without words.

Kriffing telepaths.

"Um, thing's in full working order," Bentre finally remarked as he held the comm out for Atra. The Umbaran waved it off, his eyes narrowing as his mind worked.

"Try Sang again," Atra asked, watching as the Human keyed in the required frequency only to make a confused expression. "How 'bout Malik and Jeric?" Ventus continued, seeing a slow shaking of Bentre's head in response.

Without warning, the lightning-like tattoos scrawled invisibly within the flesh of his exposed right arm flared to life, becoming visible as the Force crawled like a spider up the back of his neck. Atra spun about, grasping and igniting his cerulean blade in the same instant. The sound of metal plates clinking together filled the area as a snake-like creature — no, a droid again — burst with blinding speed out of the brush. The world seemed to slow as he brought the weapon around in a horizontal slash meant to cleave the enemy in two.

Instead of his gaze filling with glowing metal, the droid twisted mid air, using its serpentine tail to contort itself down and under his attack. The Quaestor was known for his speed, and this enemy seemed on par with his own. His eyes widened, taking in the humanoid upper body of the droid. Its hands were more akin to daggers than actual hands, finger-like blades glinting with the light of his weapon. As it twisted under the deadly plasma blade and turned to face him, the inhuman face seemed to crack open, transforming into something closer to a blaster barrel. As he sought to reposition himself, Atra stared down the barrel and watched the bright glow forming within the darkness of the opening.

- Act II: Chapter 2 -

Catacombs Sepros, Orian System

Allistaire flung herself flat against the wall of the tunnel, the snake-like droid rushing past. She turned to watch it head towards the others and winced, feeling a strange tugging across the flesh of her right shoulder. Reaching back and touching the spot gingerly, her fingers came back slick with crimson blood. The Mirialan made a face as she looked down at her stained fingers.

Tasha'Vel was second in line to face the advancing, serpentine droid. Her blade swung upwards in a graceful arc that would have bisected the enemy, if it hadn't taken an immediate detour up the wall. It twisted about the tunnel as if it were carving its way through a slalom, deking past in a blur of motion. The blue Twi'lek spun about to take a second strike in passing but found herself deflecting a series of blaster bolts instead.

A battle cry reverberated within the confined space, purple-blue lightning crackling through the air from Armad's outstretched hands. The raw, angry energy carved a trail through the stone, following the entity along its path. The Umbaran could only sustain the current for several seconds, the height of his rage fueling it as best as he could muster, but it was not without success. A tendril finally caught the tail of the snake-like droid, pulling what sounded remarkably like a scream from the creature. In the sudden darkness, Armad raised his eyebrow in reaction while he fought to hide how draining the burst of power had been.

The droid flailed wildly as it sparked upon the ground, lashing out at anyone nearby. Macron took an easy stride forward and unfurled both of his hands towards it. Lightning flashed within the confines of the tunnel once more as it danced upon the surface of, and most likely within, the droid. He giggled to himself and then laughed with unrestrained glee as the cries rang out once more, smoke rising from the target of his ire.

Silence filled the chamber once more before Tasha spoke up, "is the communicator up and running yet?"

"Working on it," a voice shouted, though it wasn't clear exactly whom had responded.

Allistaire and Tasha shared an uneasy glance for the briefest of moments before a sharp 'hah!' snapped their attention back towards the others. A collective sigh of relief seemed to rush through the tunnel as the crackling static of the commlink finally hissed to life... though it was short lived.

"Mayday! Mayday"

"On your six!"

"I got em—"

"Blast it! Maintain formation, keep it tight!"

Tasha seemed to chuckle to herself uneasily as she listened to the intermingling shouts that were suddenly filling the cramped space. Then, a more recognizable voice crackled over the open frequency.

"Sang, if you can hear this, I will say it once... I do not like this..." Atra stated flatly, without a hint of sarcasm.

- Act II: Chapter 3 -

Warhost Command Center ACC *Absolution*, Low Orbit Sepros, Orian System

Simonetti stood at command upon the bridge of the *Absolution*. His expression was stern, showing no emotion other than the grim resolve of a commander who had seen more than his fair share of combat. His gaze fell upon the viewports of the bridge, lights streaking through the blackness of space as shapes swept to and fro.

The attack had come without warning, the enemy fleet dropping out of hyperspace in line with the blockade. Since Consul Locke had established the formation within the system, the net had never been tested. Well, it was most certainly being tested now. The *Abyss* and the *Harbinger* had fought gallantly, but were outnumbered by at least three Star Destroyers of unknown origin. And so, they had been forced to retreat to Sepros and regroup.

With the *Abyss*' shields critically low, he had wasted no time ordering them out of the fray, especially given that the Interdictor would be less than valuable in this level of combat. It would be focused upon and left to burn, something they could not afford. Instead, the *Covenant* and *Retribution* made their presence known to the newfound enemy the best way they could: a full-scale broadside.

The fighting had only escalated from there. In the back of his mind, Simonetti knew that the *Damnation* was at the ready, hidden on the other side of Sepros. He was no fool, and had wasted little time sending out the call for the mighty vessel to intercept their enemy, though it would still take time.

It was the proverbial trump card in their arsenal, and he was reluctant to reveal it so callously. Especially when so little was known about the enemy, however he had little choice given the circumstances. His gaze turned to the warmap at his terminal, studying the sensor pings given form through the holographic display. Simonetti didn't particularly like what he saw.

"Focus all available weapon batteries on those dropships. We can't afford to allow them to reach planetfall," he stated with finality, a chorus of 'aye's coming from the various officers scattered throughout the command center.

He watched carefully as he assessed the conflict once more, mentally cursing to himself as he watched several ships working their way towards the surface.