

**New Tython
Seher
Shan Lyceum Forum**

“I don’t get it,” Teikhos muttered after a few hours of frowning in silence. He was sitting the back of House Satele Shan’s forum in Seher, where the Jedi and Harakoans had gathered to debate the status of the Sith prisoners taken four years earlier. It wasn’t going well. Aedile Brehevik was trying his best, but the Seherob weren’t having it.

“Don’t get what?” asked his master. Edgar Drachen was, as he liked to put it, ‘a man of action.’ Teikhos was surprised he’d made it this far into the negotiations without falling asleep.

“This,” the Zeltron replied, waving a manicured hand over the proceeding. “Why are we even negotiating this?”

“As opposed to what? Just killing the Seherob until they do what we want?”

“Obviously not,” Teikhos hissed. “But don’t try to tell me that we couldn’t free them if the Summit wanted it done. Master Kadesh could probably do it himself.” Teikhos could feel his master’s frustration. They’d been arguing about this all week.

“You weren’t here when the Brotherhood invaded. You didn’t see what they did to these people.”

“So, what? I *have* seen slavery. And now I’m supposed to just let these people rot because you and the Quaestor think they deserve it?”

Is there a problem, Neophyte? Mar Sûl’s voice burst unbidden into his mind, and Teikhos noticed the man himself scowling at him from behind Seridan.

No, Quaestor. I just need some air. May I be excused? Teikhos attempted to think the words loudly. He didn’t think the guardian liked him much already; the last thing he needed was for Sûl to start rummaging around his mind, looking for a response.

Do what you must. Just keep it quiet. Teikhos didn’t think he’d ever get used to telepathy.

The journeyman cycled through the various calming exercises the Jedi had taught him. None of them worked. Teikhos sighed. It was a beautiful day out, and he’d been cooped up in the Lyceum since he arrived in Seher. If he wasn’t going to be doing anything useful, he might as well explore. Seher was warm and humid, and the acrid smoke of the city’s forges lingered in the air. Still, Teikhos had lived in worse places.

The Zeltron spent the afternoon wandering the narrow alleyways that spread out like cobwebs from the central marketplace. Half of Owyhyee came to Seher for their smithing even before the captured Sith taught the Harakoans how to refine their metals.

The streets were packed with Harakoans from a thousand villages, jabbering in a hundred dialects, mostly about the red-skinned offworlder in their midst. Jedi and colonists had become a common sight in some areas, but the area around Seher was not one of them. The natives radiated curiosity, but they were rank with fear. Teikhos was beginning to understand why the House summit was so keen on trying to convince the Seherob to release their slaves themselves. The Jedi were outnumbered at least 50,000 to one.

At least they're armed with sharpened sticks, he thought to himself as he stopped to pick up one of the spears on display in front of a smithy. He had to admire the craftsmanship, but even still, Teikhos had trouble imagining how to take down one Sith with it, much less capture half an expedition.

Don't touch that! The voice rang clearly in his mind. Teikhos looked up and instinctively turned his gaze to the forge. A woman met his gaze, covered in ash and grime, her coal black hair crudely shorn to stay out of her eyes while she worked. Her ill-fitting clothing marked her as one of the slaves, though not so clearly as the metal collar around her neck, fitted with an explosive charge from offworld. The Brotherhood's strike team had probably brought them down, not realizing that they would be the ones wearing them.

But for all that, she was stunning. Her delicate features were set in a look of grim determination. Her skin was bronzed from the sun, and her piercing blue eyes sparkled with a fire that the years in captivity had been unable to extinguish. Her lean body had been honed by manual labor and, before that, the brutal training of the dark Jedi.

Teikhos didn't get to enjoy the view for long. A truly massive Harakoan lumbered over and ripped the spear from his grasp. He was only about a meter and a half tall, but almost as wide, with calloused hands and layers of muscle covered with rolls of fat.

"No human! No Shedai! No Sit!" he bellowed in heavily accented Basic, repeatedly thumping the butt of the spear into the ground for emphasis.

Told you. The human woman was smirking from over her master's shoulder. *He's not a fan of offworlders.*

Teikhos raised his hands slowly and backed away from the belligerent smith. "Sorry. Leaving now." *Maybe I'd better come back later,* he thought at the Sith woman.

He'll be out drinking within half an hour of dusk. I'll leave the window open, pretty boy. That smirk began to slip into a smile. Teikhos liked it.

It was an hour after sunset, a shower, and no small amount of preening later. Teikhos had been in his quarters since his return to the Lyceum, and managed to get out without anyone noticing him or asking inconvenient questions. He'd changed into a crisp, black jacket and pants with an equally dark cloak thrown around his shoulders. He would never pass for Harakoan, but with his hood up and gloves on he wasn't likely to be recognized by any of the other Jedi or colonists.

Seher was much more pleasant after dark. Most of the crowds had set out for home, and the poor lighting meant fewer stares from curious Harakoans. He found the weapons shop easily enough and, true to her word, the Sith girl had left a second story window open.

Teikhos flipped the hood of his cloak down and drew on the Force, making the leap up into the window frame as his cloak spread out behind him. It was, he thought, one of his better entrances.

“Have you been practicing that all afternoon?” The girl was lying in a dingy cot, propped up on one elbow. If she was impressed by the Jedi’s billowing cloak, natural grace, and flowing hair, she didn’t show it.

“I’ll have you know that most women would be thrilled to see me jump through their windows,” the Zeltron answered with an exaggerated pout. “Is the blue guy gone?”

The woman nodded. “He won’t interrupt your ‘come to the light’ speech, or seduction attempt, or whatever this is.” She extended a hand. “Lyra Sann, Sith of Arcona.”

“Teikhos Seleukides,” he said, taking her hand in his. “Jedi of Odan-Urr. We’re in negotiations with the Seherob to free you, but I wanted to see what we were fighting against first-hand.”

“Mmm. Negotiations. Why didn’t I think of that?” Lyra rolled her eyes. “Master, will you pretty please let me leave without blowing my head off? No? Oh, ok then, sorry to bother you.” Her gaze was fixed on him now, and Teikhos wasn’t sure if it was a trick of the light or if tears really were welling up in the Dark Jedi’s eyes. “The blues aren’t going to give us up. We’ve made them a fortune already, and they know we’re holding back.”

“They might listen to reason. They’ve got their secrets and their vengeance already.”

“No. You might convince a few of them, but you’d have to fight the rest. And we both know the Jedi aren’t willing to fight for us.”

Teikhos took a deep breath. He hated talking about this, so much so that he hadn’t mentioned it to Edgar during their bickering over the issue. “When I was a kid, the Ailon Nova Guard sacked Zeltros. I guess they decided the Vong weren’t making life hard enough. Took my whole family. Two years in, they decided we were more trouble than we were worth and handed us over to the Vong.” Teikhos leaned his head forward and swept his long blue hair up to reveal the back of his neck. “You can still see the scars from the surge-coral.”

Lyra ran her fingers over them, as if to convince herself they were real. “They kept my in constant agony for weeks,” the Jedi continued. “The only reason I survived it is because the war ended before it spread. My parents weren’t as lucky.” He dropped his hair and turned to meet her gaze again. “So yes, *this* Jedi is willing to fight for you.”

The two sat in silence for a few minutes. Eventually the Arconan sighed. "I'm not holding my breath," she began, "but thank you. Now make yourself useful and rub my back."

The Sith woman lied back down on the cot and the Jedi dutifully joined her. Before long, massages and the aching of sore muscles had given way to caresses, Zeltron pheromones, and the dangerous dark side passions Teikhos had heard so much about from his Jedi teachers.

It was still night when Teikhos awoke, with Lyra's warm, soft body pressed tightly against him. But for the slave collar and the coarseness of the sheets, it would have been paradise; sadly, it wasn't meant to last. The Harakoan smith was in the doorway, staring at them as if he couldn't believe his eyes and wobbling slightly after his bar crawl. And then he bellowed. The noise was horrendous, and loud, like something you'd expect a rancor to make after eating a firecracker.

Teikhos tried, and failed, to get himself to a defensive position over Lyra as the burly Harakoan grabbed a toolchest and lifted it over his head. The Jedi called on the Force in desperation, flinging Lyra's wooden chair at her owner's feet. One of the legs caught the Harakoan on the side of his kneecap with a sickening crack and he went down, slamming his head crest on the corner of the window frame as the box in his hands crashed to the ground.

The Zelton finally extricated himself from his lover and rushed over to the smith's side. Blood poured from the gash in his head and his breaths shuddered unevenly.

"Lyra, we have to—" Teikhos began, stopping as he heard the snap-hiss of his lightsaber igniting behind him. "What are—" The Sith screamed and lifted Teikhos' armory saber over her head, bringing it down repeatedly into her owner's body. The scent of blood and singed flesh rose from the corpse, and then Teikhos' vision filled with blue as Lyra pointed the blade in his face.

"Do you have any idea what they'll do to me?" she asked, her voice trembling with both rage and fear.

"Nothing, if I have anything to say about it."

The girl scoffed. "Well then, *clearly* I'm safe."

"Do you trust me?" Teikhos asked after a moment.

"No."

"Too bad. Unless you want to fight your way through a hundred thousand Harakoans and all of House Shan with a slave collar around your neck, I'm your only option. Now give me my saber back."

After a few seconds, Lyra turned off the lightsaber and held it out towards him. They were both, he realized, still naked, and the Sith's heavy breathing was having some remarkable—*No*, Teikhos thought. *Down boy. Keep it together.* He took a few deep breaths to steady himself.

“Hold still.” He reached out through the Force, extending his consciousness down his arm, slowly moving it into his hand and, finally, his fingers. He felt the weight of his saber, the distance its blade would extend when he activated it. He felt Lyra's neck, her hot blood and breath flowing through it to her brain and lungs. He felt the heaviness of a durasteel collar around her throat, and the latent energy of an explosive charge waiting for a signal from the collar's remote. Teikhos closed his eyes, took one last breath, then flipped the switch on his saber and swung his arm out. After what felt like a small eternity, he heard the collar fall to the floor

“I have to admit,” Lyra said, her voice barely above a whisper, “that was actually very impressive.”

“Thanks,” the Jedi answered, his voice flat. “Now on to problem number two.” He gestured towards the Harakoan, or at least what was left of him.

“Doesn't look like much of a problem to me,” the Sith answered, taking a seat on the cot and reaching for her clothes. “I never cared for him much anyway.”

“Mmhmm. And how do you think the Seherob are going to react when someone comes in here and sees lightsaber wounds on his corpse and no sign of you but a broken collar.”

“Oh. *That* problem.” Lyra slipped a shirt over her head. “Ugh, put some pants on. I can't think with you flopping about like that.” Teikhos chuckled but did as she asked.

After much debate and careful consideration, the sage Jedi Neophyte and the subtle Sith put together a cunning and nuanced plan. They were going to light the building on fire, and then they were going to run away. Fast.

There was a cask of oil in the storage room, meant to be used in cooking and as fuel for the lamps. They broke it open and spread it over support beams, furniture, and especially the fallen Harakoan's body. Lyra dumped what was left of the oil on the floor and walked over to the hearth. She reached in with a shovel and pulled out some of the charcoal they'd placed there earlier. With a grunt, she flung it into the puddle of oil, dropped the shovel, and joined Teikhos as they ran outside and down the street. After a few blocks, they ducked into a dark alley and stopped.

Teikhos hoped nobody had seen them. He'd given his cloak to Lyra, and with the hood up and the poor lighting she could probably make it out of town without being recognized. But there would be no mistaking a red Zeltron wearing a lightsaber and towering over the Harakoans.

“Think you can make it out alright?” he asked.

Ignoring the question, Lyra leaned in for one last kiss, biting his lower lip before she pulled away. "I'll be thinking about you, master Jedi." With that, she turned and walked off into the night. The Jedi watched her go for a moment, then slowly turned and started off for the Lyceum. Somehow he knew this was going to come back to haunt him.

Teikhos awoke to a knock on his door, then Edgar's face peering in a few moments later. "Rough night?" he asked.

"You could say that," Teikhos answered with what he hoped was a roguish grin. "What's up?"

"Seridan wants to see you. Don't keep him waiting."

Sithspit, the Neophyte thought. *That was quick. I figured it would take them a little while to figure out what happened.*

Seridan Brehevik was meditating when Teikhos got to his office. He wasn't quite sure what to make of the Miraluka. He had the ramrod straight posture of the Imperial officers Teikhos had seen in holovids as a child, and every time he looked at Seridan it seemed he found another scar peeking out from behind his robes. Yet somehow the Aedile was one of the most serene people he'd ever met. Maybe it was just because you couldn't see his eyes.

"You wanted to see me, sir?"

"Yes, Teikhos, please come in." Seridan replied. "Edgar and I had a rather lengthy conversation about you this morning."

"Sir?" Teikhos didn't bother trying to hide the concern in his voice.

"Oh, it's nothing like that," Seridan interrupted, as the warmth of his smile softened the sharp, precise angles of his face. "He says you're an exemplary student. He also tells me you're frustrated with the pace of our negotiations with the Seherob."

"Well, yes."

"Why?"

Teikhos took a deep breath and paused for a moment, struggling to find the words for his feelings. "We're Jedi. We're supposed to be the heroes. My whole life, politicians have talked while their people died. The Jedi haven't always been able to save the day, but at least they've been willing to die trying."

Seridan's expression turned grim. "Is that what you want? To die trying?"

"I'd rather not, actually," Teikhos said, frowning slightly. "It's just... I don't know, it's just that when I joined Odan-Urr, for the first time in my life I felt like I was doing

something meaningful. And sitting in the back of a room while the Harakoans scream at you and the Quaestor doesn't really strike me as serving the greater good."

"We all feel that frustration sometimes, Teikhos, but the righteous path isn't always the quickest. You have to trust that the summit know what we're doing."

The Zelton exhaled, thankful that Seridan hadn't just kicked him out of the House then and there. "I understand, Aedile."

"Good. That said, it's true that the House does need people willing to take action when it's necessary. I want you to report to Master Skrumm immediately. I think you'll enjoy what his team has to offer." The Miraluka's smile returned. "And hopefully he can keep you out of trouble."

Teikhos turned pink as the blood drained from his face. *Spast. He knows.* "Thank you, Aedile," he managed to mutter before slipping out of the office and back down the hall to his quarters.

If Seridan knows, he thought, what am I still doing here? Why haven't I been turned over to the Seherob? Have they actually been working covertly the whole time to free the slaves? Teikhos walked into the fresher and splashed his face with cold water. Glancing in the mirror, his eyes were immediately drawn to a spot on his neck, presumably the same little wound that Seridan had noticed.

That Sith witch gave me a frizzing hickie!