

Broken

Rhaine Panbreedle fell to his knees in front of the dark robed figure that stood before him. Deep within Rhaine's chest, inside the very core of his being, a storm raged, growing more intense with every passing second. Memories of pain, anger and anguish rushed up from the long forgotten depths of the young man's soul, filling Rhaine's thoughts with dark and ominous desires. He could hear the blood rushing in his ears, each beat of his heart sending a wave of agony pulsing through his body. The man standing before him, seemingly a demon cloaked in shadow, extended a hand, placing it upon Rhaine's shoulder. It felt like ice, like death. The being spoke, a terrible voice that had haunted Rhaine's nightmares, a voice that belonged in a crypt.

"You can no longer deny the true nature of your being. I know the pain you feel. It is pain caused by others. Your entire life you have known you were meant for something greater, yet those around you have held you back."

Rhaine shook his head, tears welling up in his eyes. He couldn't bear to listen to any more of the dark man's evaluation, yet he could not escape; there was no escaping the truth.

"You are talented; your life should have been a success. Yet it seems that every endeavor you undertake ends in failure, ends in tragedy.

Anything you have desired, you have destroyed. Anything you have touched, you have tainted and tarnished.”

Tears streamed down Rhaine’s cheeks, his body racked by uncontrollable sobs. Placing his head in his hands, he tried to protest, tried to deny the man’s claims, but Rhaine’s voice was barely more than a whimper, “No...please...no!”

The shadow man gripped Rhaine’s shoulder tighter.

“I alone know how you suffer, I alone can help you. I understand your misery. I have felt it, too. I assure you it is not your fault. You are indeed meant for great things, you only have to embrace your true potential. Let go, allow your emotions to surge through you. Feel the power created by your suffering, created by your mistreatment, created by your rage.”

Rhaine’s breath came in gasps. The darkness swelling in his chest felt as if it would crush his heart and tear it from his body at any moment. The entire universe seemed to fade away, swirling away into nothing, until all that remained was a voice inside his head.

“Your failures are not your own. You have extended yourself selflessly for others, for those you care about, and they repaid you with betrayal. Those you care most about care least about you. Search your feelings; you know it to be true. I know how you have sacrificed your own

well-being for them, for nothing. I also know that, in comparison, all the suffering you have endured is nothing when compared to the absolute anguish you have felt because of *her*. She hurt you. For no reason, she betrayed you. You loved her with your soul and in return she ripped it from your body, only to toss it away like another meaningless toy!”

Rhaine surged to his feet, a tremendous energy surging through his body, filling the man with dark ecstasy. He felt himself screaming, but the voice was one he had never heard before, “NOOOOOOOOOO!”

Rhaine lashed out at the man before him. Although his fist came nowhere near connecting, the dark robed man flew backward, landing prone twenty feet away.

Darth Iratus climbed to his feet, laughing as he brushed off his robes. “Yes! Yes! Now you know; you can feel the power of the dark side flowing through you! You can feel your true potential!”

Rhaine could not deny the man’s words. A power swirled through his veins, heightened his senses. For the first time in his life, Rhaine Panbreedle felt truly alive. How wrong he had been to doubt this man, Darth Iratus, the only one who knew his suffering, the only one who cared. Iratus’ voice no longer sounded ominous or dark, it was a voice filled with truth, with love.

Rhaine rushed toward Iratus and flung himself at the Sith Lord's feet. Grasping the hem of Iratus' robes, Rhaine pleaded with the man, tears of joy streaming down his face. "Please...please teach me...Master. You are right, you were always right! Please...I will do whatever you ask of me...please..."

Rhaine felt Iratus place his hand once more upon his shoulder, yet this time there was nothing cold or uncomfortable in the feeling. Instead, it seemed an embrace of warmth and love. Rhaine turned his tear stained face toward Iratus and listened as the Sith spoke the words that would forever change his life.

"I gladly accept you as my apprentice. You have tasted only a fraction of the true power that will be yours. Together we will right the wrongs of the galaxy and make suffer those who have wronged us. Rhaine Panbreedle was weak, and had to die. The weak deserve their fate. You are from this day reborn, a being of absolute power and control. Rise Darth Malorum, and take your rightful place by my side."

TESTS

The young Padawan paced the room in agitation. Barely out of his teens, the man absent-mindedly stroked the soft down on his cheeks. Finally, when he could take his master's silence no more, the exasperated Padawan stopped his pacing and addressed the Master Jedi.

"Master Karfu, how long must we wait? Isn't it obvious the bounty hunter you hired could find no more trace of those we sought than we? Likely he has given up and ran off with your credits, if he ever even tried at all!"

Master Karfu remained silent for another long moment. Just when it seemed he would remain that way and his Padawan, Ryeth, sucked in an annoyed sigh, the wise Jedi gently raised his hand and uncoiled from his meditative position.

"Padawan, a Jedi's path is often one of patience. I do not believe the bounty hunter Jazrel will try to deceive us." The dark skinned Jedi slowly crossed the room to his apprentice. With a smile growing on his face he softly placed his hands on the young man's shoulders. "See there, now calm your thoughts. A Jedi's mind must be clear of agitation. Besides, our friend approaches even now. If you were focused you would have sensed as much."

Outside the building the two Jedi had made into their temporary base of operations another young man waited and watched. This man, formerly known as Rhaine Panbreedle, now Darth Malorum, also waited for the bounty hunter Jazrel Teth to return. Malorum could sense the presence of the two Jedi waiting in the dimly lit room on the first floor of the building across the narrow street. The only reason the Jedi remained unaware of his presence was that he willed it so. He was not actively trying not to be felt, his Master Darth Iratus had taught him the error of that trick.

"To try to remain hidden is only a beacon to those from which you wish to hide." Iratus had told him. "Instead of hiding *who* you are, just cease to be. Only when you clear your mind and let your surroundings wash over you can you sink deepest into the shadows."

Darth Malorum was a shadow as he waited. His master had sent him to Forunsaal in an attempt to intercept the bounty hunter, Jazrel. The mercenary had been asking too many questions lately, questions that seemed to allude to the fact he was searching for Malorum and his Master. This thought was disturbing as Iratus and Malorum had been very cautious in all their dealings not to leave a trail. That someone had taken an interest in the pair despite their efforts at stealth could only mean one thing. Jedi. Malorum and his Master had sensed the presence of two Jedi

a few standard days earlier. However, these particular Jedi were not supposed to be here on Forunsaal. The last Malorum knew, the Jedi remained on board their ship in a different system. Yet, Malorum was certain these were the same two Jedi he and his Master had sensed.

Darth Malorum was just supposed to intercept the bounty hunter and interrogate him, before killing him of course. Yet now, with the presence of not only the bounty hunter, but the two Jedi as well, everything had changed. Malorum quickly formed a new plan. He would wait until the bounty hunter returned to report to the Jedi then he would quickly destroy all three. After all, he couldn't engage the Jedi only to have the bounty hunter walk in during the fight. It was a risky plan he knew, but his Master always told him the only plan doomed to fail was the one you were too afraid to try. This was the first solo assignment his Master had given him and the young Sith apprentice viewed it as a test. Not only did he not want to fail his Master, Malorum wanted to impress the powerful Sith Lord.

Soon Malorum spotted Jazrel, walking calmly toward the building where the Jedi awaited. The man did not appear the least bit nervous or out of place. Jazrel strolled up to the door, pushed it open and walked inside.

Malorum knew now was the time to act. The dark clad Sith burst from the shadows and sprinted the short distance across the street. Instead of bursting through the door the bounty hunter had used, Malorum used the Force to assist him in leaping toward a dark second story window. As the Sith apprentice flew toward the closed window he reached out with a tendril of force power and raised the window just as he sailed through into the darkness beyond. Darth Malorum stealthily made his way across the dark room to the stairway and descended in complete silence. He could hear the bounty hunter addressing the Jedi and could not believe his fortune when he found the man, with his back toward him, standing at the foot of the stairs.

Master Karfu listened patiently as the bounty hunter explained his lack of success thus far in finding out the identity of those the Jedi sought.

"It is like they just popped off the edge of the galaxy, not a trace!"

Ryeth, standing next to his master, wore an expression of doubt. His expression soon changed to one of shock as an orange lightsaber blade erupted from the center of Jazrel's chest. The bounty hunter squirmed and went limp, but did not fall to the floor. As his head sagged onto his chest, the Jedi could see behind him a young man with a murderous glare in his eyes holding the now dead bounty hunter upright.

Darth Malorum smiled when he saw the look of horror not only in the Padawan's eyes but in the Jedi Master's eyes as well. The Jedi immediately produced their lightsabers and two emerald green blades flickered into being.

"What manner of demon are you?" cried the younger of the two Jedi.

Malorum swelled with dark pride. "Do you not know? I am a Sith Lord."

"No, that is impossible!" Replied the Padawan, nearly screaming. "The Sith were destroyed, I don't believe you!"

Darth Malorum could sense the churning of the young man's fear. Malorum's face cracked in a wicked grin. "Then don't."

With that, he pushed out with the Force, hurling the dead Bounty hunter straight at the Padawan. Foolishly, the young Jedi did not parry the improvised missile with his lightsaber. Instead, he held it out wide, apparently in an attempt to prevent cutting the already dead bounty hunter in half. He was repaid for his actions by the Force assisted full weight of the dead man crashing into him and toppling him backwards, crashing through the door and into the street.

Malorum did not have long to appreciate his brilliant use of his environment. Even as the dead bounty hunter flew through the air, Master

Karfu pushed out with the Force, slamming Malorum back onto the stairs. The Force blow felt to Malorum as if he had been smashed in the chest by a giant hammer. It was all the young Sith could do to get back to his feet as the Master Jedi sprang the entire length of the room, lightsaber held high. Darth Malorum parried the downward chop, bringing his own blade into a high horizontal block.

The contesting blades crackled and hissed as they came together. This maneuver brought Jedi and Sith face to face, beads of sweat sprouting as the warriors pressed their blades together for dominance. Out of the corner of his eye, Malorum could see the Padawan climb back through the door and start around to his right.

Master Karfu must have sensed the return of his Padawan, too. He spoke with confidence as he locked stares with the Sith. "You were foolish to come alone, Dark Lord."

A dark robed figure stepped from the shadows near the approaching Padawan. "Who says he came alone?"

Darth Iratus moved into view facing the dueling pair. Ryeth, positioned on the Sith Lord's right flank, saw an opening and rushed in.

Iratus, without even looking at the charging Padawan, raised his right arm out to his side and shot a crackling jet of force lightning into the young man's face.

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