

The Returning

The soft crunch of fallen leaves heralded the warrior's approach as he strode up the steep hillside. Having shed their summer coats, the trees overhead provided little shade from the first rays of golden sunlight peeking through the clouds. Instead their strained branches broke apart and separated the dawn, splintering and leaving fragmented patterns across the freshly cut grass. The bizarrely ethereal quality this gave seemed oddly fitting for today of all days, even if he couldn't help but feel the universe was making a poor joke at his expense.

Pausing briefly, Tarvitz lifted a hand to the low hanging branch of one hydenock, brushing his fingers against the bark. It was still in bloom despite the rapidly changing seasons, and flushed red with some inner strength. Shaking gently in the breeze, a few lonely leaves rained down about him, clinging to the cream fabric of his robe. He couldn't help but smile slightly at that. "Old man hydenock," as he had nicknamed it as a child, was often the last to accept the coming of winter. It was only one of a small handful of its kind dotted across the hillside but it had been the first his grandparents had been able to claim. One of a few which, while Nabooian grown, could still be identified with their lost home.

His heavy footfalls took on an echoing quality he moved on, joining the stone-cobbled path leading towards the hilltop. Snaking up the incline, it wound its way about ponds filled with wallowing fish and broad lilies, past rows of flowers of every colour. All remnants from a place which had become little more than a byword for annihilation. His family had sought to correct that as best they could, slowly restoring some small portion of it in their own small way.

As Tarvitz reached the top, he caught sight of the familiar shrine and the rough hewn stone sarcophagi which awaited there. They were, perhaps, a far cry from the beauty of hillside garden, but there was no more fitting a centerpiece to this place. Tarvitz had almost lost his life obtaining the raw materials used to craft them. First by almost wrecking his ship while hunting for a suitable asteroid, and then by risking multiple hull breaches lifting it free of Alderaan's debris field. It had been worth it. Empty though they might have been, they at least provided some token gesture of respect for those lost to time.

Tarvitz said nothing for a long while, simply standing and staring at them as he tried to think of the words to say, before nodding. He lowered himself to sit upon the stone path, his back to the resting place of his family, and with his hands placed upon his knees.

He did not feel like himself here, as the hearty fire which often fuelled his actions seemed to have abandoned him. Then again, Tarvitz hardly looked like his usual self. Bereft of armour plating or weaponry, and clad only in a simple woolen robe, he had done his best to present himself before his parents. Or at least their memory.

"It's finally happening," he said at length "The battle which will decide the fate of Clan Odan-Urr. I don't know what you would say to that, but I hope you'd think it was a cause worth fighting for. The other Defenders always did tell me it was a miracle that I've lived as long as I have. Perhaps the Force was saving me for this fight. If that's the case, it seems

right at least; challenging fate for a better future. You were always ones to do so, especially at the end.”

There was more silence. He looked down at his hands, trying to think of what else to add. Each was covered in horrific scars, calloused and warped almost beyond recognition. One was marred by an unnatural crease of flesh, from where the near miss of a corsair frigate's turbolaser had almost ripped the limb clean off. The other, even after all this time, still bore the burn markings from where he had been forced to drown a particularly tenacious Voxyn in molten lead. Neither wound had been taken in the name of glory or personal triumph, but to endure others had not suffered their fate. He might not have followed a trader's life, not their chosen profession, but he was at least making the galaxy a better place in his own small way. Eventually the silence was broken again with a slight cough.

“We've yet to find your ship. We're still searching, of course, for all that's worth.”

There was more silence. Tarvitz felt somewhat foolish now. After the hours spent travelling from the Lotus fleet back to Susevfi, the weeks preparing for this moment, he now found he had little to say. Even if they had occupied those stone boxes, his mother and father had gone beyond where his words might have reached them. Others had once joined him in remembering them but either they were long gone themselves or had left for greener pastures.

Tarvitz looked about as the gold of dawn began to fade with the rising sun. He could see fresh saplings of kriin trees starting to peek up through the undergrowth, and ladalum flowers shedding their petals for the coming winter. All this had been built in their name, with a plant for every member of their bloodline lost since the Empire had ended everything. Would they even have appreciated this though? Those he had been fortunate enough to know had always answered yes, but with some odd reluctance. Perhaps it just seemed petty to built such a monument to someone who had spent most of their lives among the stars, or to remember only a few of those lost. For every person they had attempted to memorialise here, there must have been a million other Alderaanians which had gone unremembered.

“I still try to visit there, you know,” Tarvitz eventually said, “The Core I mean, and the worlds you left messages of. The Saarai-kaar is still unwilling to let the galaxy learn more of our existence, but sooner or later she'll understand we need to keep a close watch on what happens there. Perhaps i'll get a chance to see them once this is all over but, well, it's a different place now. The rest of the galaxy seems to have forgotten much of its history, and half the planets you described no longer exist on any modern star chart. It's the same universe but it seems emptier than the one you promised.”

He sighed after a few moments, eventually reaching inside his robe and producing the the small capsule which had been nestled within his pocket. The items within clinked against one another he stood up, turned and approached the pair of coffins. There was no point in delaying this for any longer.

“For the memory of those we lost,” he began, voicing the ritualised speech he had repeated

so many times in years past “And we who continue with them in our hearts...”

Where words failed, where memories were absent, perhaps good intentions would suffice.