
STAR WARS

VORNSKR PACK



Inner Demons

by Robert J Rodgers

Tierfon Station

"She's something special," Lieutenant Perfo Kryll said, nodding to the expanse of wilderness that stretched out before the viewport of the XL-980 hovercraft. A quarter of the clear transparasteel viewport was occupied by a magnification of the surrounding land-and a lone figure creeping slowly through the lush green underbrush of Tierfon Station.

The planet was small, and in the past was used as a temporary base of operations, but now, almost four months after the fall of Emperor Palpatine at the Battle of Endor, it had become a full-fledged military complex, with construction droids working around the clock to expand the modest facilities. Beside him, Lieutenant Nizzel Bonn'Sha, a rising star in the New Republic military, took a sip of coffee from an oversized blue mug that proudly displayed the New Republic starburst in gold.

"Yes, I've always had a soft place in my heart for the wilderness as well," Bonn'Sha replied, nodding.

Glancing sideways, Perfo didn't let his smile slip. "I wasn't referring to the terrain," he pointed at the lone figure on the screen. "I meant her."

"Oh," Bonn'Sha remained silent a moment. "You think so?" he finally asked, leaning against the console and squinting at the magnification.

"You don't?" Perfo said, crossing his arms and turning to Bonn'Sha. Bonn'Sha, a Bothan, tilted his black furred head to the side and brought the mug up to his muzzle, taking another sip. Leveling his icy blue eyes at Perfo, he finally shrugged.

"Private Sa'Mondaley certainly has some ability. However, that's not what has held her back. It's her attitude. She has a problem with authority." Bonn'Sha leaned over the console and tapped away at a keyboard set into the dull matte black of the hovercrafts cockpit. Instantly, a translucent overlay of Private Vahri Sa'Mondaley's datafile filled half of the viewport. Several commendations and one medal of valor scrolled up the screen, eventually replaced with a picture of a tanned female with high arcing eyebrows, an almost non-existent nose and full rounded lips. An elaborate gold and blue tattoo scrawled beneath piercing golden eyes, angling toward long pointed ears while thin dusk-colored hair fell from her head, landing flayed about her shoulders. In an instant the image decreased in size, and a listing of violations and infractions appeared to its left.

Perfo smiled and retrieved his own mug from the console. "We all have a problem with authority. If we didn't Palpatine would still be calling the shots." He took a long draw of the hot bitter liquid and flicked his tongue against his thick black moustache, intercepting a lone droplet of coffee before it could escape and soil his drab green jumpsuit.

Snorting, Bonn'Sha shook his head back and forth. "Look, Kryll. Don't think I don't appreciate you accepting the transfer for Private Sa'Mondaley, although from what I understand the higher ups had a hand in it being done so-quickly. I just want you to know what you are getting yourself into before you bring her into Vornskr Pack. She may fit in well with you, but my experience has left me thinking she would be better off back on her home planet sloughing through her OWN underbrush. She's simply not New Republic caliber."

Perfo turned back to the display and recalled the commendations. "High honors in the Battle of Six Cities, the Weyland-Yutani Conflict on Privus Prime and a recipient of the Hudson Cross of Valor," he cocked an eye at Bonn'Sha. "If that's not New Republic caliber maybe I should turn in my own stripes right now."

Rising from the console, the Bothan rapped a sharp claw on the keyboard and the display disappeared. Perfo could tell Bonn'Sha was getting irritated, but hid it well: military through and through.

"I just thought we should talk. I know the brass has an operation in the pipeline for Private Sa'Mondaley or they wouldn't be keeping her around. Likely something to do with that rock she comes from. I hope she works out for you. But myself, The 450 Rangers and the two soldiers she put in the infirmary expect you will have your hands full."

"I think we'll be alright. I appreciate the concern though."

Bonn'Sha shrugged. "Just common courtesy Kryll. You know," he leaned back, "if you just took one of the promotions they throw at you every few months, you wouldn't have to micromanage these grunts all the time. You could just head up a company and let your underlings do all of the little things."

"I like doing the little things," Perfo smiled, winking.

"I don't get it. You're sharp, and they've been trying to kick you upstairs for a while, yet you continue to dirty your hands at squad level."

"I just want to make sure more qualified and experienced grunts like yourself get their chance in the limelight," Perfo slapped the Bothan's shoulder. He was right though, Perfo knew he couldn't dodge the promotion forever- sooner or later, the higher ups were going to move him out of Vornskr Pack; it wasn't a matter of if, it was a matter of when. "Plus, I like getting my hands dirty out there in the field. There are still plenty of ops to be assigned to."

"Speaking of operations...scuttlebutt is that you are going to be paired up with Sergeant Qualto's Black Light unit."

Smiling, Perfo threw Bonn'Sha a narrow glance. "You know I can't discuss mission ops with you..." but the Bothan was already waving the inquiry off.

"Nevermind. But look Kryll," Bonn'Sha turned serious and lowered his voice, pointless, Perfo thought since they were the only ones on the hovercraft, but he took the gesture seriously. "You watch yourself around Qualto and his people."

"Is there a reason I need to?"

Bonn'Sha eyes grew wide. "Didn't you hear? About the Trevas Waystation incident?"

Shaking his head, Perfo returned his mug to the console. "No, should I have?"

"Drek. This is what you get for locking yourself away in your ivory tower instead of visiting the officers lounge now and again."

Perfo chuckled. "Ivory tower? Just two months ago it was a maintenance closet."

"The Trevas Waystation was an outpost located on the planet Qestik II, off the Perlemian Trade Route, right past Felucia out near the edge of wild space," Bonn'Sha began, ignoring Perfo's attempt at levity. "Intel came across that it was a cover for an Imperial R&D group who were developing some new sort of bio-weapon. Qualto's Black Light was sent in to scout out the location, and find out what the truth was. A few weeks passed without word from Qualto. Finally, two weeks after they were overdue to report back, a scout team was sent to Trevas. They found a bloodbath. Families, at least a dozen, with kids, were found massacred. No sign of Black Light, and, maybe more importantly, no evidence whatsoever that it was an Imperial R&D outpost. "

The temperature seemed to drop in the cockpit and Perfo stared hard at the Bothan, his new recruit and the viewport forgotten. "So, when did Qualto show back up?"

Taking a deep draw from his mug, Bonn'Sha returned it to the console and leaned back. "A week later. Claimed they never made it to Trevas Waystation. Said they had a hyperdrive malfunction that left them dead in space. He also claimed after a few days two of his men contracted some sort of hysteria and tried to attack the rest of the team and were killed in a firefight. That's why it took so long for them to get back."

"It sounds...odd. But not unlikely," Perfo said, glancing sideways at the figure still creeping through the forest.

"True. The situation becomes a bit more complicated. You see, when the two Black Light corpses were examined by the analysis droids in the medlab back on Home One, they not only found no evidence of a chemical imbalance in their brains, they also found traces of a mineral known as Sofium Doride in their system."

Perfo sat silently and shrugged.

"Sofium Doride is only found on ten planets in the known galaxy."

"And Qestik II is one of those planets," Perfo finished, the hair on the back of his neck standing at attention.

Silence filled the cockpit and both regarded each other for a moment. Bonn'Sha finally broke the silence, glancing back at the viewport. "No formal charges were brought against Qualto- and that's led to some serious speculation. But from what I've gathered, he and Black Light are more mercenary than military. Just some bloodthirsty thugs with a rank; For my two creds, I think they found something they wanted on Qestik II and decided to take it-and if they had to slaughter families to get it-well, so be it."

"But why? What could be so valuable that they would slaughter a dozen families?"

"Could have been anything Kryll. There is a hot black market out there for weapons, gear, everything since the Empire fell and supply routes have been disrupted," Bonn'Sha shrugged. "It's a sweet deal, they get New Republic backing and gear, and get to roll around the galaxy stripping it clean and selling it back to others. Profitable and hard to prove, as long as you don't leave any witnesses alive."

"But why would the New Republic keep them around with these kinds of accusations?"

"Lack of tangible proof, the New Republic goes out and cuts them off without hard evidence it looks like a Sith Hunt. Plus," Bonn'sha leaned over and began firing up the hovercrafts engines, "don't forget Kryll, the New Republic is still in its infancy. They are taking any helping hands that are offered to them, sometimes with no questions asked. Sometimes though, those hands wind up being attached to a bloodthirsty Rancor."

"You're keeping me from hand-to-hand, Glick is down there waiting for me now," Sergeant Deuce El'Kar said, leaning back in the rigid steel chair situated in front of Perfo's desk. Her aqua colored skin looked sickly in the dim overhead lights, but she wore an easy smile and carried a mischievous glimmer in her eyes that always brightened his disposition. She glanced around the small office. Perfo was still getting things in order and was a bit embarrassed by the stark blank walls and boxes of knick-knacks parked on the floor.

"I think Private Glick can wait. How is his training coming along anyway?" he asked his second-in-command.

Involuntary twitching, her lekku-a pair of thick tentacles that fell from the rear of her head down about the shoulders of her black flightsuit, told Perfo all he needed to know, though she filled him in anyway. "Not bad. He's still...learning. He's a good SpecTech but I think he's overcompensating a bit, but he's a technical wizard. If we could just adjust his personality to be less...annoying."

Leaning back, Perfo banged his rickety desk chair against the pre-fab durasteel wall behind him. He was mildly surprised it didn't fall away to reveal the comm station located in the adjacent room. "I think there are a few who could use that adjustment around here. Still, he got high marks in drop camp," Perfo said referring to the SpecForce entrance program designed to weed out SpecForce soldiers from those deemed not quite "ready" for SpecForce life. "Though I'll be honest, at his age I have NO idea how he didn't wash out."

"No offense sir, but Drop Camp isn't what it used to be. Since the Alliance..."

"New Republic," Perfo corrected.

"Whatever. Since this 'government' has started kissing the six of every second rate planet who wants to join up, they've gotten more and more lax on who they are labeling as 'SpecForce' these days. Some of the jokers I've seen weave their way through here since we've become a major military outpost is downright insulting, all because their parents sit on one council or another and they want the novelty of claiming their kid is in the New Republic SpecForces. Add to that NRI sticking their fingers into the mix more and more..."

"NRI" stood for "New Republic Intelligence," a branch of the new government that, now that the Empire had been defeated, was getting more and more involved with New Republic Military affairs. Before the two branches of the Alliance had worked hand in hand, but now, it seemed NRI was calling the shots in military affairs more often than not.

Perfo nodded. "Noted. With Jax going missing there are more NRI spooks running around here than a herd of Nerfs on an open plain."

"Yeah, makes me wonder who's really calling the shots upstairs these days," Deuce shook her head.

"Really? Sounds like you still care."

"Of course I care," Deuce said, cocking her eyebrow.

"Even for a short timer?"

The Twi'lek rolled her green eyes skyward and sighed. "Dammit Perfo, I don't want to get in to this again."

It was still a sore issue between them, but not one he could ignore, even if they hadn't discussed it in months. Deuce was romantically involved with a man named A'sok Thurgood, a hacker on a Special Operations team called Raptor Squad. A few months back she'd entertained the idea of quitting Vornskr Pack and leaving to start a life with Thurgood. Time, duty and some problems had separated the two, but Deuce had made it known that she still had every intention of leaving and pursuing a civilian life once they were able to meet back up and reconcile. It burned through Perfo, who was torn between wanting to see her happy and hating to see such a fine soldier leaving when the New Republic needed her most.

"What's to get into?" he said. "You haven't talked to him in. what? Two, Three months? And even then he was floating in a tank of bacta, it's not like he was conscious to even have a conversation. You can't seriously be thinking of starting a life with someone who can't even be bothered to drop you a line."

"You know it's not up to him," she shook her head and leaned forward. "They go into ops sometimes as undercover and covert as we do-even more so. It's not like he can just jump up and call me from across the galaxy whenever he feels like it," she trailed off.

"Maybe not. But what kind of life do you think you will have? You're military Deuce, through and through, I just would hate to see you throw your career away for this guy just to realize a few months later it was a mistake."

"A mistake?" she narrowed her eyes and sat back. "You think I'm making some kind of mistake?"

"No, I mean, maybe, I..." Perfo shook his head. "I didn't mean it like that. You know I just want you to be happy Deuce, It's just," he shook his head. "I'm not making myself clear."

She crossed her arms and nodded. "Clear? No, not at all. Maybe you should have this discussion with Glick and Private Motash," she said, referring to the young pilot Glick was currently dating. "They've been an item for the last two months but you haven't said a word to them."

"That's fleeting," Perfo said.

"No, that's bad policy," Deuce said. "Glick is too young and easily distracted, and in our line of work that's liable to get someone killed. Especially if he has his head somewhere else and not on the op."

"Noted, but you know how it is Deuce," Perfo shook his head. "SpecForce soldiers don't live long, it's inevitable that two soldiers will hook up and become an item. Happens all the time."

"Are you hearing yourself?"

It was Perfo's turn to sigh. "I know, I know, it's hypocritical of me to let Glick and Crash date while giving you a hard way to go for doing the same thing-hell, at least your fella isn't on the same team," he shrugged, "I just worry about you, because I've never seen you so driven to pursue anything like this before. Anything, you know, non-military."

Deuce smiled and nodded.

"What?" Perfo asked.

"You," she said, "you've never seen me as anything other than a soldier, that's the problem."

"What? That's not true! I've known you your entire life, I..."

"Yeah, as a kid, or a soldier," Deuce shook her head and kicked a boot up onto his desk. "Don't be upset Perfo, it's alright. I was just a teenager when you and my brother were in the Fallen Angels together. All you saw of me was some lanky teen who used to hang around the motor pool or the little shadow who sat at the end of the table when you and the other guys would come over to my mothers for dinner."

"Your mother did make some tasty roasted Ling-Bird in heavy sauce," Perfo said, his stomach growling at the thought. "But you were never a shadow Deuce, even then you had your own distinct personality."

"Perfo, please," she shook her head, "that's the officer in you that wants to paint me out to be some sort of "diamond in the rough" that was just waiting for her untapped potential to come out." Her eyes went hard and her voice dropped. "The truth is I would still be that little shadow if Sadik hadn't been murdered by those Imperial dogs. And I would gladly go right back to being that if it meant I could get him back. But that's never going to happen." She balled her hand into a fist and grinded her knuckles against her leg. "Truth is, I wasn't anything more than a kid back then. You, my brother, the rest of the Fallen Angels, you never really saw me as more than Sadik's kid sister. Then..." she trailed off, her eyes going to the ground.

"I know, I left, we all did," Perfo said. When Sadik had been killed by the Empire for being a part of the Rebel Alliance underground, a death, among others, that had been pinned on Raptor Squad's CO, and his friend, Vic Palisades, several of the Fallen Angels fled Vol Kol, while others were imprisoned or outright murdered-along with their families.

Before they left, he and Palisades made it to Sadik's mother and sister and hid them among a Twi'lek warren in an underground dwelling far from Vol Kol's main city, Lazhan. Years later after he joined the Rebel Alliance himself and made contact with the Alliance contacts still operating on his home planet of Vol Kol, he was surprised to find Sadik's sister a member of the underground resistance-and wasted no time in recruiting her into Vornskr Pack.

"Yeah, you left," she smiled, looking up. Her eyes swam in a small film of liquid, though she held her emotions in check. "I've done my share for the Alliance Perfo, am I wrong to want to reap the rewards for helping free the galaxy? Am I wrong for not wanting to kill anymore? For not wanting to scrub away at the blood stains on my hands until my skin burns?"

His chest began to ache at her words and he felt like the worst possible scum for giving her such a hard time about a decision that he knew wasn't coming easily. "No," he stood and stepped over to her, kneeling. He took her hands in his and smiled, and for a moment they weren't soldiers, just friends. "No, you've fought and sacrificed more than anyone should ever have to Deuce. We fight and die so people can lead free lives and try to find happiness in the galaxy. If this is what you want, I'll stand behind you no matter what your decision- you've certainly earned it." Her hands gripped his tightly and she leaned over, embracing him. Beneath her tough exterior and corded muscle, she was the same fragile, vulnerable little girl he'd seen grow up back on Vol Kol.

"Thanks Perfo," she whispered in his ear, and he felt a cool droplet of a tear touch his neck and race down the contour of his throat as one of her lekku curled around and rubbed his back. Pulling away, he rubbed her chin with his thumb and smiled.

"Anytime. I would rather be a good friend who wants to see you happy before a good soldier who wants to see you stay." He rose and stepped back behind his desk. Taking a deep breath, he absently shuffled at a few datadiscs sitting on the desk. "Anyway, I didn't just pull you in here to talk love and happiness," he smiled, "I wanted to know if you'd heard anything about Black Light, Sergeant Qualto's unit."

Shrugging her shoulders, Deuce wiped her hand across her face and shrugged. "I've heard a few things, nothing of substance, mostly rumors. Why?"

"Maybe something, maybe nothing. We are running escort for them in our next mission and I like to know who I'm keeping company with. Scuttlebutt has revealed some ghost stories and I like to get facts before I start jumping at shadows."

"Request permission to speak off the record sir?" Deuce asked.

"You mean everything up to this point has been on the record?"

"I guess not," Deuce smiled. I HOPE not," sighing, she shook her head and turned serious. "Sir. I'm not one to hang a lot of credit on hearsay and I certainly don't invest much worth in rumors. But, I've seen soldiers from Black Light come through here once or twice and..."

"Yes?"

"There's just something not right about them. They are always in armor, most of the time, with their faces covered-in fact, I don't think I've ever seen any of their faces except for Qualto. I've never seen them in the mess and I've never seen them socializing with anyone outside of their unit," she trailed off and remained quiet.

Perfo shrugged. "Deuce, we've got a six-foot-six heavy weapons specialist who NONE of us have ever seen outside of his armor," he said, referring to Double Zero, Vornskr Pack's walking tower of armament.

"No, no it's different with DZ," she said shaking her head and waving off the comparison. "He's all about the weaponry, and, to be honest, given the modifications I've seen him make to some of our rifles and explosive charges, I don't blame him for living in his armor. I know it sounds irrational, but something about this Black Light just doesn't feel right."

"Well, we'll have three weeks to get tight and cozy with them, but I appreciate you giving me your assessment," he said.

"Anytime sir."

"You know, I'm going to miss this," he smiled.

"What?"

"Just, having you here. Having you a part of my team, my life, I guess."

"Maybe it's time for you to look at the future, YOUR future LT," Deuce shrugged.

"Yeah," he trailed off and shrugged. "Kinda hard though. It's not like we get a lot of ops to recon cantinas and brothels."

Deuce burst into laughter. "I don't think you are going to find that special someone in either of those places LT," she shook her head. "When you're ready you won't have to settle for any of those lower city skrags, you'll find someone deserving of you."

"Maybe, eventually," Perfo smiled.

"If there's nothing else Sir, I really should get back to Private Glick."

"Yeah, he's probably chomping at the bit to be beat up," Perfo checked his chrono. "Round up the team at nineteen hundred hours for the briefing, I want to make sure Private Angel has enough time to get there, she's got one more meeting with the base medic. Otherwise, you're dismissed. It's time for my meeting with Private Sa'Mondaley anyway."

In the process of rising, Deuce stopped. "You mean brass approved her transfer?"

"Affirmative. I met with Bonn'Sha this morning. We had her up on the North Ridge blowing off some steam after her altercation with Privates Sev'ik and Druxx. She'd been locked in the brig for a few weeks, I thought the fresh air might do her good."

Deuce rolled her eyes. "Bonn'Sha? He makes me want to turn his face into a crater. So damn full of himself it..."

"He's not a bad officer Deuce-hell, especially not for a Bothan," Perfo added. "He seemed to have some respect for Private Sa' Mondaley, but thought she would be a better fit for our team than his."

"You're a good judge of character Sir. I'm sure she will find a home with us."

Smiling Perfo nodded. "Thanks Sergeant. She should be outside in the hall actually, would you mind sending her in?"

* * *

Private Vahri Sa'Mondaley stood stone-still like a statue to the right of Lieutenant Perfo Kryll's office door.

Throughout the unremarkable durasteel hallway, the hum of air exchangers followed the clap of boots on polished duracrete as soldiers trotted back and forth-some for exercise, some because a brass higher up didn't like to wait for their caffeine or status reports. She ignored them-that's not to say she didn't notice them, she tried to notice everything-a lesson her dead father taught her in the war ravaged streets of Weesuna Major, the planet Mengali's main city. So far his teachings had kept her alive-and landed her in the misguided government known as the New Republic as a scout and field medic.

For the thousandth time since morning she questioned the wisdom the elders of Clan Mondaley had shown in sending her to the New Republic. She, along with ten other scouts had enlisted in the New Republic-then the Rebel Alliance- over a year ago as a way to secure its aid in stopping the encroaching Imperial presence on their planet. So far however, the New Republic had done nothing more than pay her lip service and bounce her around from one unit to the next. At least she was still alive, she reflected. The other nine scouts had perished in various operations the New Republic had sent them on throughout the galaxy.

She was the last.

And for all she knew, she could be the last Mengali in the galaxy. Between missions and training she'd had no contact with her home world in over a year. Over two hundred clans dotted the lush green planet, but for the past six decades the planet had been plunged into war-thanks to "Dahnsariks"- bloodthirsty clan leaders who, not content with their own parcel of Mengali, decided to invade and enslave their neighbors. Like a spreading wildfire, war consumed over half of the planet, plunging over three quarters of the clans into open warfare.

Greed and the discovery of a potentially lucrative new trade route near the planet escalated the violence, and with Mengali's location in the outer rim territories the planet had gone ignored by both sides in the galactic civil war-until now. Historically the isolation seemed to suit the more extreme Dahnsariks just fine-they were content to let their own clans kill each other year after year-they didn't need any help from outsiders.

Vahri took a moment to smooth her olive colored uniform and adjust the medpack nestled in the small of her back. She felt naked without her scout armor-a suit she'd taken off of a dead Clan Ji'karr soldier after killing her in a brutal vibroblade fight. Clan Ji'karr was one of several dozen clans who were courting favor with the Imperial remnants now making a home on her planet-promising the spoils of war in exchange for weapons and armor. The Empire had complied, and the result was a brutal shift in power away from Clan Mondaley and its allies, resulting in more deaths and considerable loss of land. More importantly, it resulted in the death of her father- a shaman and healer for Clan Mondaley.

Thoughts of war, home and her late father disappeared the instant the stench of sweat and alcohol assaulted her nose. Underneath it she sensed something else-fear.

"Look who it is, the scrag...the useless...hic!"

Vahri stood motionless, focusing her eyes on the pair of drunk soldiers who slowly approached her from her left. Her gold eyes sized up both in an instant and dismissed them as harmless. Still, while not dangerous, they certainly had the potential to be foolish. The one speaking was a towering, overweight Advovse who appeared to have been poured into his tan fatigues, while his shorter partner was a black humanoid with silver eyes.

Remaining silent, Vahri tensed just enough to move-if need be. "Why don't you go have another drink? Or better yet, head on back to your bunk and get some sleep." Vahri offered, her voice coming out a low purr. She kept her eyes forward, not focused on anything or anyone in particular.

"You ain't my momma, so why don't you stow ya advice?" The Advovse slurred, balling both of his fists. "Shame what you did to my man Druxx, you try that crap with me and I woulda broke you in half," he said, dipping his wide head and leveling bulbous black eyes at her. Beads of sweat poured around the stubby horn

protruding from his scalp to pool beneath his neck and stain the front of his undershirt. They were just a meter away from her now, both flanking her.

"You get much closer and I'll give you the opportunity to try," Vahri said, her voice just loud enough to be heard by the two soldiers.

The black bulbs that passed for Advozse eyes grew wide. "Huh? You threatening me? You little shik? You making a threat to me?"

"I hope not, threats, verbal or otherwise are grounds for punishment," a strong female voice proclaimed.

All turned and spied Sergeant Deuce El'Kar standing with her hands on her hips in front of Kryll's office door. She was intently watching the Advozse, and Vahri noticed the soldier hadn't uncoiled his fists.

"This ain't none of your business, so why don't you shove off?" The Advozse slurred, turning his full attention to the lithe Twi'lek.

Deuce tapped a rank badge on the left side of her flight suit. "This piece of plastic makes it my business soldier. Now, I suggest you go find an empty bunk to curl up on before you do something stu..." But the Advozse was already in motion; too much drink coupled with a sub-par IQ drove him to attempt a haymaker. His fist shot out where Deuce's head was a mere microsecond before. Instead of connecting with a smooth Twi'lek profile he found his arm caught by the swift moving Sergeant. An audible "SNAP!" filled the corridor as Deuce twisted and Vahri watched in grim amusement as the Advozse clutched the limb that dropped useless to his side.

"DREK! OH FRAG! YOU...YOU..." the soldier stammered.

"YOU need to get yourself to the medbay. Pronto private," Deuce said, straightening to her full height. The Advozse dipped his head and took a deep breath.

"Yes Sir," he mumbled through pursed lips, and as he passed Vahri barely whispered, "I'm not done with you, Mengali trash."

Vahri watched the hulking Advozse stumble down the hallway and mentally logged his threat in the back off her mind. Another threat, another enemy in the New Republic and another reason to hate the government she voluntarily joined. She was aware Sergeant El'Kar was watching her, and slowly turned to the officer. "I didn't need the help, I can handle myself," she informed the Twi'lek.

Nodding Deuce crossed her arms. "So I've heard. But you're going to learn lone wolves don't last long in Vornskr Pack, Private. We watch out for each other."

"That seems to be the popular pastime in the New Republic...you watch out for each other but don't bother to look out for everyone else."

Sgt. El'kar narrowed her eyes. "Would you care to explain that sentiment, Private?"

"Sure. While the New Republic wastes time trying to sign treaties and kiss the hump of high profile planets, my people are getting slaughtered by Imperials every day. This 'New Republic' only seems worried about the planets that can fill their pocketbooks...not those lowly little planets on the edge of the outer rim."

In one move Deuce was in her face, the scent of sweat and a hint of body fragrance tingling her nose. "You think your home planet is the only one still trapped under the jackboot of the Empire? Take a friggin' number Private. MY home planet has been under Imperial rule for years, you can't even walk down the street without bumping into a stormtrooper. The New Republic is doing the best it can with what it's got, and some smart-mouthed Private who thinks her planet is so much more important than everyone else's is the LAST thing it needs!" Both stood staring at each other, neither giving an inch. Brilliant green eyes locked onto Vahri and she could feel the waves of aggression flowing from the Sergeant.

"I was just about to send the Private in, Sir," Deuce said, eyes still locked on Vahri. Without wavering she caught movement out of the corner of her eye.

"I see that. If you two are done introducing yourselves, I have a meeting with brass in a half an hour and I'd like to get my meeting with Private Sa'Mondaley out of the way," Lieutenant Kryll said from his office door.

Stepping back, Deuce nodded to Vahri. "Yes Sir."

Vahri turned to Lieutenant Kryll and saluted. He returned a crisp salute and waved her into his office as Sergeant El'Kar disappeared down the hallway.

Weaving her way around several boxes, she stood at attention, keeping her eyes straight ahead and focused on the wall directly behind the Lieutenants worn battered L-shaped desk. Dim overhead lightbars cast the room in a depressing light and the lack of windows and stench of antiseptic cleaning solution made it feel like a prison cell. She wondered how he could get any work done in such a dreary cube.

"At ease Private. Grab a seat,"

"I would rather stand sir," she replied.

The Lieutenant, who looked to be barely out of his twenties, leaned back in his rickety desk chair and fixed cold blue pupils on her. His thick black moustache twitched involuntarily and he absently scratched at the pink starburst of a long healed scar that stretched across his left cheek. "Yeah, but I don't feel like looking up for the next fifteen minutes. Now grab a seat. Consider it an order if it will make you feel any better."

"Yes sir," Vahri replied, taking the seat. She sat bolt upright, never taking her eyes off of the officer.

Taking a moment to lean over, Kryll tapped away at a small console set into the corner of his desk. A few seconds passed and Vahri watched as her file floated to life a dozen centimeters above the various datapads and file folders that cluttered the desktop. Leaning back, the Lieutenant tossed his gaze from the floating holo back to where she sat.

"Looks like you've done some moving around Private. In just over a year you've called no fewer than four units home."

Vahri remained silent, still focusing on the back wall.

Kryll continued. "And in that time you've racked up an impressive collection of commendations-and an equally impressive list of violations. So, when brass sends me orders to take you on, and give you a new home, I have to ask myself 'why would it be different in my unit?' you have any idea why?"

Vahri shrugged.

"Because, Private Sa'Mondaley," Kryll continued, "It's going to be different because you are at the end of your rope. Vornskr Pack is the last stop for you, according to the higher ups-If you can't fit in here, they don't think you can fit in anywhere. You enlisted because you and your fellow Mengali scouts wanted the New Republic to take notice of the massacre the Empire was helping to enact on your people. Right?"

For the first time Vahri locked eyes on the Lieutenant. "That's right Sir. Though it's not like anyone has noticed."

"Oh, but you made sure they would notice Private. The first thing you did was try to get their attention by sacrificing yourself in combat. In the first four months you racked up a laundry list of commendations for saving several of your fellow soldiers. Then, just a few months later, you wind up in the brig because you broke the jaw of one of those same men," Kryll leaned over and advanced the hologram and began reading:

"Then, for the next six months you bounced around, causing trouble and just being a pain in general. Except when it came to combat-in the field of fire you proved to be 'an invaluable commodity- a scout of exceptional ability and toughness-a true asset' it says, which explains why they didn't bounce your hump right out the door."

He stopped reading and leaned forward, placing his arms on his desk. "You know what I think Private? I think you got frustrated because for all of your hard work you were still being ignored. They gave you certificates and pieces of metal while your fellow clansmen on Mengali continued to be slaughtered without anyone paying a

damn bit of attention. So you figured if you were insubordinate enough someone might take notice, might give half a damn about you and what was happening back home."

Biting her lip, Vahri tried to keep her anger in check. Kryll wasn't an idiot like the other commanders she'd had—he'd done his homework and seemed to have a solid grasp of her situation—even if she wasn't ready to admit it out loud yet. "No one has noticed anything, Sir. The New Republic has ignored the plight of my planet for over a year, even after the Battle of Endor when it would have been easier to go in there and move on a depleted Imperial presence, so I don't see that changing now. They always seem to have other irons in fire, and by the time they get around to Mengali it will be a playground for Imperial larvae."

Kryll snickered and Vahri felt her face flush.

"Imperial larvae. I'll have to remember that," he said chuckling. Nodding, Kryll leaned back. "Well Private, contrary to what you may believe, you don't know everything. Truth is, the higher ups have decided we ARE going to get involved in what they are calling "The Mengali Situation". Vornskr Pack ships out in two days to escort a commando team whose sole assignment is to establish a New Republic presence among it's various anti-Imperial clans. Our assignment is to provide back up once on planet and to utilize YOUR experience with the planet and potential allies to make contact and stabilize the situation."

For the first time, Vahri was speechless. A low tremble made its way through her body but she kept it in check. "Sir?"

"That's correct Private. New Republic brass has gotten word that the remnants of the Empire plan to use Mengali as a staging area for strikes on some recently allied New Republic worlds in the Outer Rim. Strikes now made possible by the discovery of some new hyperspace lane. They figure if we can get in there and swing the tide now, it will benefit everyone down the road. The upside of course is that your people will be able to take back control of their planet."

"The upside? It sounds like the New Republic is willing to spill Mengali blood to further their own agenda," Vahri said with contempt. She knew it was too good to be true. Kryll watched her for a moment without saying a word, then leaned forward.

"Look Private—I know you've had a mad-on about how this whole Mengali situation has been treated ever since you arrived, and hell, after looking over your file, I don't really blame you. But right now you have a choice to make. Join Vornskr Pack and fight for what you believe in, or sit back and watch as more of your family and friends die at the hands of Imperial lapdogs. Is it ideal? Hell no, but most situations never are. I'm sure your people never wanted the Empire to come to your planet and get involved in your little home grown skirmishes, but they did. I bet if you look deep down inside, you would rather have not been born into a life filled with war and violence, but you were." He leaned back and fixed his icy stare on her. "Fact is, we don't get to pick and choose the life we are born into, all we can do is try to make the best of the situation and, when the opportunity presents itself, try to swing the favor our way. So, what's it going to be Private?"

Shaking now with rage, Vahri forced herself to calm down and acknowledge the truth of what Kryll had laid out before her. "I'm going to fight-Sir," she managed between clenched teeth.

"I thought so. Now, let's go meet the rest of your new team."

"Ain't no one gonna save you when I unleash Sullustan fury!" The wide eyed alien spat. Vahri watched as the short stout alien circled Deuce on the dingy blood stained mat that had been rolled out on a duracrete platform that jut into the forest from the rear of the station. It was nearing dusk and several portable lights had been erected around the area, attracting a small cloud of insects and a handful of soldiers.

"If it's the same kind of fury you released in the 'fresher last night after dinner Glick, then I'm in trouble," Deuce cracked, still standing casually, awaiting the small mouse-eared alien's onslaught.

To Vahri's right Perfo chuckled. Beside him two other beings had joined them on the trek through the facilities. The first was a sharp-eyed human with a hooked nose named Hobbie Novan who couldn't have been more than a year older than Vahri. He sported desert-patterned fatigues and an easy smile that led her to believe he had no worries in the world. To his right was a squat Gand findsman called Taan. Wearing a green jumpsuit similar to Vahri's, Taan's large bulbous alien head glittered beneath the portable lights while an atmospheric filter fit over his face, nestled beneath two multi-faceted- fist sized eyes. Beneath the fabric of the jumpsuit his body was lumpy, bulbous, as Gands sported a chitin outer covering to their bodies.

Opposite the group, on the mats far side, several individuals watched with mild interest. Perched on a cargo crate, dressed in a green camo jumpsuit sat a dog-faced Klatoonian with a black skullcap and thick fat cigarra hanging from his mouth. Off to his right, clad in glimmering black armor, was the motionless figure of the being known as Double Zero. Beneath the powerful white lights his suit glimmered like the scales of an onyx reptile, while two pinpoint of red light glowed from beneath a short rounded helmet. Little was known about Double Zero, but from the scuttlebutt Vahri had picked up around Tierfon, his reputation as a cold efficient killer was second to none.

On the ground, legs crossed leaning up against a small domed droid, sat a young girl who barely looked out of her teens. Vahri recognized her as a New Republic pilot that went by the nickname of "Crash". Her long red hair was tied back in twin ponytails while freckles covered her lower cheeks. She was wearing more makeup than regulation normally allowed, with thick pink blush and purple eye shadow that matched the color of her latex jumpsuit and glittering silver lipstick, evidence that being Vornskr Pack's pilot had it's privileges and she was able to get away with it-on her downtime at least. She was a recent transfer to the unit, since Vahri had worked with her several months prior in another Spec Forces group based out of the Janx Cluster-an asteroid belt a few lightyears from Tierfon Station that housed a score of New Republic bases. The droid situated behind her that was acting as a back support was known as "Rocket", an R-7 astromech droid whose body was painted in a pink and mauve color scheme to match Crash's jumpsuit. A dark inverted triangle set into his dome swiveled back and forth, watching the action on the mat with more interest than Crash, who spotted Vahri and offered a small wave. Vahri ignored her. Sitting off to the side on a tracker were three privates from other companies, cracking jokes and passing a cigarra back and forth.

Back on the mat, Private Glick was still circling, now directly behind Deuce, who'd traded in her olive fatigues for a silver singlet, showing off strong glistening thighs and shins that ended in a pair of black combat boots. Glick cracked his knuckles while his wide brown pupil-less eyes locked directly on the Twi'lek, and in a flash he shot a small stubby leg out, aimed at her calf. Like a blur, Deuce leapt vertically, spinning in midair and firing a heavy boot into Glick's chest. Letting out a wheeze, the Sullustan's small mouth opened in a silent scream as he fell backwards, landing on the mat with a "thud". The trio of privates let loose with laughter and catcalls, while the Klatoonian and Double Zero remained silent. Crash gasped and put a tiny hand to her mouth in horror and pulled herself from the droid and began making her way towards the prone soldier.

"Alright!" Hobbie pumped his fist victoriously.

"Care to explain your jubilation Corporal?" Perfo asked.

Nodding, Hobbie crossed his arms smiling. "Yep. I just inherited a months worth of Private Glicks pay, Sir."

From behind Vahri a lone clap echoed across the clearing. Everyone quieted down and turned to stare behind she and Perfo. Vahri did likewise and was surprised to see a muscular humanoid in black fatigues and a black long-sleeved shirt, clapping two leather-gloved hands together. He was slightly below average height, and wore goggles, even though it was almost dark and was shaved bald with an elaborate tribal tattoo slashing across the right side of his face. He couldn't be but a few years older than Kryll, though his darker complexion made it hard to determine an accurate age. Flanking him, two soldiers stood motionless their arms behind their back. No markings or rank designations covered their padded black armor, with the exception of a "1" marked and circled in what looked like bright red chalk on the leftmost soldier, designated "Zoobie" in white stencil on the other side of the armor's matte black chestplate; A "2" stood out on the chestplate of "Kriegs", the soldier on the right. Both wore identical helmets that concealed their faces-for Vahri the similarities to Stormtroopers was a bit too close. Her heightened sense of smell also picked up on pheromones being given off by the soldier on the left, but she was unable to place the species.

"Impressive!" the bald man said, a thin smile pulling at his lips. He stepped forward and offered a tight salute. "Sergeant Qualto."

Perfo returned the salute with a bit more shine. "I'm Lieutenant Kryll, these," he gestured to the Klatoonian and Double Zero who were approaching, "are Corporals Rontack and Double Zero." He nodded to Vahri, Hobbie and Taan, "Corporal Novan, Privates Taan, Sa'Mondaley, and Sargeant El'kar, and our pilot Private Motash are in the center of the mat while Private Glick is the one taking a nap on it."

Qualto nodded. "Zoobie and Kriegs" he said without turning around. "I thought we should get a chance to meet, seeing as how we are going to be taking a little trip together."

"Of course. I wasn't aware you had arrived, or we would have been there to welcome you," Perfo said.

Waving it off, Qualto shrugged. "Think nothing of it. We arrived early so we could go ahead and get prepped for this Op. The sooner we get out to whatever backwater hole they are sending us to the sooner we can wrap up and dust off."

The comment caused Vahris blood to surge. "Backwater hole??" she hissed.

"Private," Perfo said beside her. Before she could protest he was already addressing Qualto.

"Sergeant Qualto, our scout, Private Sa'Mondaley is from Mengali, the planet we have been assigned to escort you to."

At this Qualto said nothing, instead, he stepped past Vahri and gestured to Deuce, who was helping Glick from the ground. "Your Sergeant appears to be more than capable in hand to hand combat. Does she usually practice pounding on small Privates?"

Smirking, Deuce slapped Glick on the shoulder and turned to Qualto. "Why? Is that an invitation Sergeant?"

"Sergeant El'kar!" Perfo exclaimed, but Vahri could tell he was trying to choke back laughter. "That's enough!"

Qualto turned around, his lips pulled back into a small smile. "Cute. I see where your team gets their... 'unique' reputation from. I wonder how your Sergeant would fare against a more-sizeable-opponent."

"If you like, she and Corporal Hobbie spar regularly, I'm sure they would be happy to provide a demonstration," Perfo said. Hobbie was already shrugging off his jacket and working his neck muscles.

"Perhaps someone new, someone with a deeper pool of talent to pull from?" Qualto said.

"Hey!" Hobbie said, his disrobing coming to a halt.

"I was thinking, one of my people perhaps?" Qualto crossed his arms.

"I don't think this is the time or place for a competition," Perfo said, but Deuce was already bouncing on her toes and rolling her neck.

"Of course. I wouldn't want your Sergeant to be embarrassed," Qualto said. "It is, after all, a three week trip out to the backwater hole, and some of Black Light do have a problem with gloating."

"Embarrassed!?!?" Deuce said, opening her arms wide and throwing an incredulous glance at Perfo. Vahri could hear him let go with an audible sigh.

"Alright, alright. First one to get knocked to the ground loses, fair enough? The last thing we need is either of our people winding up in the infirmary and missing out on this op." Perfo said, rolling his eyes.

Qualto nodded his approval. "Of course."

Glancing at the two soldiers, Perfo seemed to size them both up. A beat later he looked back to Qualto. "Kriegs or Zoobie? You may want to pick your best, to give them a fighting chance."

"A fighting chance? I would say my least proficient could use the experience. Zoobie, you're on deck."

Stepping forward, the larger of the two Black Light soldiers began to strip away pieces of armor and place them methodically on the ground.

"Any way we can hurry this up? They built the Death Star in less time than this," Deuce shouted from the center of the mat, still bouncing on her toes.

Slowly, piece by piece, the armor fell away to reveal the powerful toned body of an azure colored female clad in a black ribbed half-top and pair of black shorts and matching combat boots. Corded muscle glistened with sweat as droplets raced from a tight white flattop, down her face where they dropped from her angular jaw.

Finally, placing her helmet delicately atop the stack of armor, she fixed a pair of white pupils on Deuce and stepped onto the mat. Both circled each other like predators, with Zoobie towering at least a foot above the Twi'lek. Vahri recognized Deuce's posture as a Kerestian fighting stance while Zoobie assumed a stance unlike any Vahri had ever seen. They had made two full circles before either made a move. The first was Zoobie, who dropped to the ground and executed what looked to be a standard leg sweep. Deuce easily vaulted over the attack, but Zoobie, her back to Deuce, regained her balance and fired a lightning fast kick into the Twi'leks midsection. Stumbling backwards, Deuce lost her balance but recovered, executing a handstand cartwheel that took her out of her opponents range.

Then it was on, with both spinning and kicking, firing jabs at such a pace that Vahri was having trouble keeping up. Out of the corner of her eye she watched as Perfo's brows furrowed in concern while Qualto maintained his tight thin-lipped smile. Both combatants went at it tooth and nail for what seemed like an hour. Finally, drenched in sweat, Deuce missed a block and one of Zoobie's strikes made it through the Twi'leks defenses. A fist landed squarely across Deuce's jaw and a loud "CRACK!" filled the silent evening. From Vahri's right she heard Hobbie curse under his breath. Stunned, Deuce tried to shake off the strike, but the Black Light soldier smelled blood and moved in for the kill. Hands moving faster than Vahri thought possible, Zoobie began hammering away at Deuce with several body shots, causing the Twi'lek to fight simply to keep standing. Finally, a solid blow to her nose caused blood to gush, staining the silver singlet and the entire lower half of her face. Zoobie stepped back, and as Perfo opened his mouth to speak, the azure colored female lifted into the air and delivered a spinning heel kick that caught Deuce in the jaw and sent her plunging backwards to the mat where she crumpled into a knot.

"Holy Sith! Deuce!" Hobbie shouted, sprinting towards her prone body.

Qualto once again clapped his hands, this time a bit louder. "That's enough Number One, collect your gear." Without a comment, Zoobie nodded, wiping away a trail of blood that pooled from the corner of a small smile. Stepping from the mat she silently began to re-equip herself.

Rontack and Glick were scrambling over to where Deuce had landed, but the Sergeant was already struggling to get to her feet, with Hobbie slipping his arm beneath her shoulder. "Damn, lucky shot..." she coughed, spraying saliva and blood across the mat. Bruises and cuts covered her once attractive face as she mopped away at the mask of blood that covered her jaw. Vahri felt a pang of sympathy for the Twi'lek but kept quiet.

"Private Sa'Mondaley, please check on Sarge to make sure she doesn't need medical attention," Perfo said, his eyes locked on Deuce who was shrugging off assistance from Rontack and Glick.

"Yes sir," Vahri replied, detaching the small med kit from her belt and crossing to where Deuce now stood. Ejecting a small antiseptic dispenser and gauze she approached Deuce, whose eyes were locked on Private Zoobie who was strapping on an abdominal plate.

"...telling you, she's augmented. I'm not sure how much, but no one can naturally move that fast. I'm guessing internal hardware along with jacked reflexes," she heard Deuce whispering to the others as she approached.

"Qualto said Zoobie was the least experienced of those two; maybe you got off light," Hobbie observed, shaking his head.

"Geez Sarge, she pounded you like a tent stake," Glick said, his voice edged with a sense of wonder. "Never seen nobody do that to the Sarge before..."

"Quiet Private!" Rontack said around his plug of cigarra in a gravelly baritone voice.

"She barely broke a sweat. And the whole time I could tell she was toying with me," Deuce said shaking her head. Preparing to administer the antiseptic, Deuce's hand shot up, grabbing Vahri's wrist. "I don't need anything Private, I'm fine," Deuce said, still watching her opponent.

Taken aback, Vahri's first instinct was to back up and leave, to let this angry Sergeant stand there and bleed till her hearts content-but deep inside, a voice long since dormant spoke up; it isn't right. It isn't right to turn away a fellow soldier in time of need. Her father's words, words she'd lived by even when it was to save the life of those that looked down on her or outright ignored her. The Mengali were a proud people, and her father had always been looked up to because of his compassion, a trait he tried to instill in his hot-tempered daughter.

"That may be true Sergeant, but do you want to take the chance that SHE doesn't have something coursing through her blood that might decide to make a home in one of these cuts?" Vahri replied, cocking her eyebrow.

Deuce remained silent for a moment. "I've got NO idea what that skrag has in her body. Good point Private, hit me with the antiseptic and whatever germ killer you got in your little bag of tricks."

Offering a smile, Vahri nodded. "Yes sir."

Hands tightening around the hilts of her vibro-swords like a vice, Angel Per'karr closed her lime colored eyes and slowly brought the weapons down to her side. Somewhere in the darkness of the forest eyes watched her, locked on her and sized her up, taking in her violet skin and the green fluorescent war markings that streaked her face. Almost imperceptible, she could hear the footfalls of the predator and smiled at its delusion. It was prey, and it was being lured in to its own death. Her hand twitched. In the humid darkness of the jungle, far away from the comfort and safety of Tierfon Station's military complex, doubt slithered into her mind like a slimy reptile and she realized this may have been a mistake. That perhaps, this once, she should have listened to the medics when they told her she may never be the same: "Not as fast, or as accurate" were the words they used and those words burned through her like acid.

Raised from birth in slavery, Angel had faced every opposition with a smile that hid a grim determination, including watching her parents murdered at the whim of a displeased crime lord. Then, when her master, a middle aged female Zelosian named Frevshak sent her off at the age of six to the Corporate Sector, where she was enrolled in the Guild of the Silver Mist-a training academy for assassins and killers, she took every lesson, every beating, every suffrage, with a smile and twinkle in her eye.

Ten years later she returned to Frevshak, a honed lethal weapon of vengeance. The middle aged Zelosian took one look at her with wide yellow eyes and curled her lips into a snarl. "Still too pretty to use as muscle, put her in the harem," she'd ordered her thugs. Still sporting a smile, Angel unsheathed her humming blades of death and minced the crime lord and her servants into indistinguishable piles of gore. Before anyone had known what had happened, she'd cut a path through the small town Frevshak lorded over and was on a freighter heading towards the outer rim.

Something nearby stirred, snapping a branch as it passed. Angel slowed her breathing and kept her weapons at her side. In her mind's eye she could still see the fireball that erupted before her during her last mission that planted chunks of metal in her skull, near her brain; some remained, lodged there forever. That she could be taken down by an unthinking, primitive explosive still puzzled her. She was quick, smart, she-

A roar tore through the jungle like rolling thunder as the fanged quadruped launched itself from the underbrush. Angel brought her blades up to slice the creature in half, but realized too late that she underestimated her attacker's quickness. Slamming into her chest, her armor took the brunt of the impact, but she still hit the ground hard, with the snarling Croata Beast on top of her. Pinned to the ground, Angel tried to free up her weapons, but was forced to use her forearms to block the beasts snapping maw. Teeth clamped around her bracers and she could smell the rank breath of the thing as warm saliva peppered her face.

Finally, with one mighty lunge, she was able to force the beast off to the side as she scrambled backwards. The Croata landed on its paws, and focused three eyeballs on Angel. Moonlight managed to find its way through the canopy of leaves overhead and glistened off of the razor sharp rows of fangs that filled its maw. Something warm ran down Angels arm and she realized that a few of those same fangs must have made their way through her armor, piercing her flesh.

Her heart pounding a staccato rhythm, doubt began to creep into Angels mind as she slowly backed towards a massive tree. She'd worked diligently over the past month in rehabilitation to hone her skills back where they were before the accident, but time and time again she always felt as if she was trying to move through a block of gelatin. Her body simply wasn't keeping up with her mind, and while she would still classify her skills as average, she knew that in the line of work she was in, average was as good a dead.

She saw the attack coming a second before the Croata launched itself again. Forcing herself sideways, she moved just as its wide head slammed hard into the tree. It fell back, stunned not a meter away and Angel wasted no time in plunging her vibrosword into its neck. A black geyser of blood erupted, catching moonlight as it spray across the small clearing, the beast letting out a shriek as it flailed about, it's claws glancing off of her armor in a shower of sparks.

One more cut of her blade and it fell silent, its body shuddering in the throes of death. The musty smell of blood drifted across the wind and Angel shut down her weapon, cleaning the blade on the soft grass. She would have to move, as other creatures would catch the scent and come looking for a free meal. Stumbling back onto the trail leading to the base, Angel returned her swords to the scabbards clamped to her back and retrieved a roll of gauze from her belt, creating a small ball that she jammed against the open wound on her arm.

"Stupid, stupid, stupid!" She lamented out loud. She'd hidden her problems from Vornskr Pack and as far as they knew she was in tip top shape. During practice with other opponents or against sparring droids she retained just enough of her edge to seem perfectly capable. But she knew better. She'd adjusted the droid's settings lower than usual, and she specifically hand picked opponents she knew she could take easily. The other times, when she really needed an edge, really needed to look like the old Angel the team knew and relied on, well, there was always her own dirty little secret, wasn't there?

Something buried deep in her brain, where the medics and 21-B droids couldn't get to was tripping her up, and try as she might, she began to think there wasn't a damn thing she could do about it. Then she remembered, then she revisited yet another part of her past she never thought she would need to revisit.

As she made her way along the dirt path, with the lights of the base looming in the distance, she removed her glove and gently caressed the trio of raised bumps on the side of her neck. It had been a long time since she'd used the drug known as "White Velocity" but she remembered vividly its effects. After escaping from Frevshak, she'd fallen prey to pirates who, after finding out the hard way that she was of little pleasure as a concubine, began entering her into pit fighting competitions as punishment.

Instead of pitting her against other fighters however, they put her up against rabid beasts. Her only chance at survival against the creatures was to augment herself. A pirate named Darian Jangs supplied her with the hand held hypodermics, and before every match she nestled the small instrument against her neck and injected the clear liquid into her body. Pain disappeared and everything seemed to slow down. She anticipated attacks before they came and was able to dance a deadly ballet of violence, coming out of almost all encounters untouched.

It took some work and some risks, but Angel hooked up with a soldier who made frequent trips between Tierfon and Nar Shadda and who had contacts on the black market, and she was now the proud owner of three dozen doses of White Velocity back in her bunk, more than enough to get her through the next few ops without anyone realizing that she wasn't quite as "quick" as she used to be.

Vornskr Pack was her family. They'd rescued her from those pirates and gave Angel her life back. Alone in the galaxy, she'd never had a family, but ever since Lieutenant Perfo allowed her into his group, she'd finally felt like she belonged. And if toting a Kowakian Monkey Lizard on her back was what she had to do to stay a part of this family, she would do it without hesitation.

"So how many soldiers make up Black Light?" Perfo asked. He and Qualto were traversing a narrow wooded path that circled the base, and, depending on which branch you took, wound deep into the Tierfon Station forest or back to the rear entrance of the base. Kriegs and Zoobie had peeled off and disappeared while Vornskr Pack had remained back at the mat. The night air clung to Perfo and he pushed back an advancing line of sweat into his hairline. He'd served and fought in all manner of conditions, but something about Tierfon Station evenings made his skin crawl.

"Fourteen, including myself." Qualto waved the number off as if it were insignificant. "I couldn't help but notice that you were missing a few team members back there. I was under the impression that Vornskr Pack was home to at least five female warriors- you seemed to be a couple short back there."

"That's correct. Our tech, Private Jen Zi is away on special assignment and Private Angel is currently recouping from a wound she suffered during our last trip out," Perfo said as he and Qualto stayed along the path that led away from the base.

"I trust she'll be alright? She's the Zeltron, correct?"

Perfo nodded, "Actually Angel's part Zeltron, part Lorradian".

"Really? What a fascinating combination," Qualto said, pushing his sleeves up. As he did so Perfo glimpsed a tattoo of a pair of red-winged avian coming together on the man's right forearm. The design was familiar-but Perfo couldn't place it.

"It's a shame she got injured, someone with so many talents sidelined like that," Qualto said.

"She'll be fine- they come no tougher than Angel."

Qualto snickered, his mouth turning into a smile. "Perhaps I should have had Zoobie wait for Private Angel to heal up instead of sending her after your Sergeant El'kar."

Perfo didn't return the smile. "Deuce is quite dangerous Sergeant. It's a good thing for both of us it was a simple sparring match. Nonetheless, congratulations on the victory."

"You aren't angry? That Sergeant El'Kar was so soundly defeated?"

"Should I be? We are lucky to have such fine soldiers in the New Republic. At least we are both on the same side," Perfo replied, keeping his tone even. Part of him was worried about Deuce-but it was the kind of concern a big brother had for a little sister. "I've known Sergeant El'Kar since she was barely out of her teens. She's been through a lot and this little exercise will only drive her to get stronger-faster."

They stopped when the woods fell away to reveal a small clearing overlooking a sharp drop. Stretching out before them was a deep valley, split by a winding river. Moonlight bathed everything in an ethereal glow.

"I respect that-tenacity," Qualto said, fishing a thin deathstick from his fatigues. Lighting and taking a deep breath, he cast his goggles upward at the white disc that hung low in the sky. Smoke drifted from his nostrils. "Your Sergeant El'Kar is a fine warrior. Strong, beautiful..." he threw a sideways glance at Perfo. "It's interesting-almost half of your team is made up of females. I heard you even had a female tech on your team."

Perfo shrugged. "Yeah, Jen Zi. She's a whiz at droid repair. Still," Perfo took a deep breath of the humid night air. "Female, male, whatever, as long as they get the job done."

Both stood in silence for a moment, enjoying a brief breeze that rustled through the high grass before Qualto spoke. "They do say females are the more dangerous of most species you know," he turned and smiled, "Do you enjoy it?"

"Enjoy? What?"

"Come Lieutenant, don't play ignorant. I'm talking about the ability to nod and see a beautiful warrior woman do whatever you command. Even when it involves taking a beating like your Sergeant took." Qualto shook his head. "That's power son, pure, undiluted power, hell, you see them go to those lengths for you, absorb that kind of punishment without a word, without a bit of reaction..."

Perfo tried to remain calm, but he was getting that cold feeling again. He knew some officers had skewed perceptions of their duties and the relationships with their soldiers-but those officers didn't last long. "I get no satisfaction out of seeing my Sergeant-and friend-injured. I don't know what kind of relationship you have with your people-but mine is obviously different."

"Is it?" Qualto shrugged and waved away a small cloud of insects that swarmed about his head.

"Yes, I think it is."

Qualto nodded. "Perhaps it is. Nonetheless, I see you and I have different views on the people that serve under us," he chuckled, taking a drag and letting the smoke roll from his nostrils. "I guess we should stick to discussions a bit more vanilla. The briefing I got on this Op stated you were in charge until we reached Mengali."

The orders were clear and Perfo knew them by heart, and he was anxious to turn the conversation in a more familiar direction-the last few minutes had set him on edge. "That's correct. Once we set down you and your people are to make contact with the heads of several Mengali clans, that's why Private Sa'Mondaley has been assigned to this mission. I suppose command thought..."

"Command doesn't think Kryll, they only assume. Hell, they assumed I would approve her transfer to Black Light-until I set them straight," Qualto said, taking another long drag.

Perfo stood silent for a moment. "What? No one told me about a previous transfer request."

"Of course they didn't. That Mengali wouldn't have fit in with my crew, so, when the orders came down for her transfer I made some calls," he shrugged his shoulders and turned, cracking a smile. "You get a washed up disciplinary case and I get spared the hassle of potty training some idealist who has trouble with authority. Works out for everyone."

Normally even tempered, Perfo found himself drawing up and planting a finger in Qualto's face. "Look Sergeant, I don't appreciate your attitude and I sure as hell don't appreciate your condescending remarks about one of MY people. You got a problem with Private Sa'Mondaley, you've got one with me. Now, are you going to show some damn respect or do I have to go over your head to brass about this?"

Moonlight glimmered off of Qualto's smooth skull as smoke drifted slowly from his nose. "And what do you think that's going to do Kryll? You really think you are going to get someone to rattle my cage? Boy, I've got more brass in my back pocket than a Wookiee has knots in his hair. You go run off and file your complaints-they'll wind up covering the bottom of a birdcage before they reach the desk of someone who gives a damn," pulling the small ember of deathstick from his mouth, Qualto flicked it out into the darkness where it disappeared over the cliff.

"We've only got to tolerate each other for a few weeks Kryll. You stay out of the Black Light's way, and we'll stay out of Vornskr Pack's way. Then, we'll set down on Mengali, and commence doing our job turning those backwards-ass nerfhumpers into efficient remorseless killers, and hopefully we'll never have to see, or work, together ever again."

"You'll refer to me as Lieutenant, and extend me the respect I deserve or, brass or not, you can find another way to get your hump across the galaxy, you got THAT Sergeant?" Perfo said, stepping forward and locking his eyes on the smaller man, who simply nodded.

"Good. Then this conversation is over." Perfo turned away, heading back up the path without another word. Inside, rage pounded at him wanting to be let loose but he choked it back. He was a soldier, a professional and there were ways of handling situations like this.

"It's a long trip to Mengali, just make sure your people keep themselves out of our way," Qualto called to him as he left the clearing and entered the dark tree line.

The Lyma

The Lyma cruised through the black of space like a shadow, its sloping hull redirecting light and the probes of any randomly stationed sensors placed along the remote hyperspace route. They were deep in the area of the galaxy still held in the clutch of Imperial remnants, and while the Empire had suffered a crushing defeat at the Battle of Endor, that didn't mean that there weren't still pockets of Imperial strength situated throughout the galaxy.

The medium sized freighter, shaped like almost like an avian beak, with an array of antennae and sensors jutting out from its rear, was coated with a developmental sensor shielding and was staying off of the main hyperspace routes, so the likelihood that they would encounter a random Imperial Border patrol was slim.

That still didn't calm Perfo's mind as he stepped out of the 'fresher from taking a hot liquid shower. Trying to ignore the uncomfortable cold of the durasteel corridor, he bundled his thick New Republic issued-robe around him and tucked his hygiene kit under his arm. The handle of a sonic toothbrush still dangled from his mouth as he trotted down the silent corridors to the fore of the freighter where Vornskr Pack had bunked up for the last ten days. Still another ten days out from their destination, they had barely heard or encountered Qualto or any of his unit, who chose to remain in the aft quarters of the freighter away from Perfo's team. It was just as well, he thought to himself as he took the brush from his mouth; they would have to work closely with Qualto once on Mengali, and sometimes those situations themselves can get a little tense. No need in another flare up before even setting foot on the planet.

"Preparing to exit hyperspace. Please brace yourselves in five...four..." Crash's high-pitched voice came across the ship's intercom system. Slowing to a stop Perfo veered to the side of the corridor and gripped a thin line of piping that ran along the bulkhead.

"Two...one...mark," Crash's voice finished and the Lyma shuddered momentarily as it made the transition from hyperspace to real space. They would be docking at Eldrick Outpost within the hour-the refueling depot was one of the few hidden spots in several systems sympathetic to the New Republic and willing to help. Its location varied, as the current owners always kept the station moving to avoid any unpleasant Imperial entanglements. Fortunately, the owner-operator, a portly Duro named Ciclix, always kept the New Republic military abreast of Eldrick Outpost's new location.

The rhythmic thump of footsteps echoed throughout the corridor. "Morning LT!" he heard Deuce call from behind. Without turning, he tossed a hand up.

"Sarge."

As he rounded a bend in the freighter, Deuce, clad in her silver tight-fitting singlet, began to keep pace next to him. "Great day for a jog, want to join me?"

"Maybe next time, I just got out of the fresher," Perfo tapped his hygiene bag nestled beneath his arm.

Still trotting and working her arms, Deuce smiled. "No problem Sir, this run wasn't so much for exercise as it was to scout out our guests."

"You're not still on that are you? Sergeant, for the sanity and safety of all involved, it might be best if we just let them be." To his right he noticed Deuce subconsciously pick at a scab that was still healing beneath her eye-courtesy of Private Zoobie.

"So, you telling me you still haven't talked to Freakshow?"

"Deuce..."

"Sorry, Sergeant Freakshow," she corrected.

"No, no I haven't spoken to Sergeant Qualto since we boarded," Perfo admitted. They reached a T-intersection. Left would take him to his quarters, right to the bridge. He stopped and turned to his Sergeant who still jogged in place, his curiosity getting the better of him. "So, you went to do some recon, huh? Anything to report?"

Stopping, Deuce stepped over to the bulkhead and leaned forward, placing her hands against its coarse surface and stretching out her back and hamstrings, her ample posterior flexing and tightening beneath the shimmering silver material. He quickly looked away; while their relationship was completely platonic, Deuce was stunningly beautiful and only a few years younger than him. He hadn't had a serious relationship in years and despite his best efforts to block it from his mind, he found himself looking at the women who surrounded him on a daily basis in ways other than commander-soldier. In the back of his mind the last conversation he had with Qualto echoed and he banished it-and any other thoughts of his fellow female soldiers-from his mind.

"Yeah, they don't like visitors. I swung by the port cargo hold and saw a handful of them sparring. All were in armor except for that Zoobie character and Kriegs. They were going tooth and nail-if I didn't know any better I would have thought they were fighting for real," she shrugged. "And maybe they were."

"Full contact?"

"Full contact, full speed LT, Kriegs finally got in a throat punch and put Zoobie on the ground, followed up by kneeling her in the back and twisting Zoobie's arm until she screamed. Didn't look like luck either-Kriegs seemed to have the situation under control. Not that they both weren't sporting busted lips and matching bruises."

Running a hand through his still wet flattop, Perfo whistled. "Wow. Kriegs must have some real skill to take down someone Zoobie's size. Wonder where Qualto picked him up at?"

"Her."

"Her?" Perfo cocked an eyebrow.

Nodding, Deuce sat on the Lyma's deck and began doing stretching exercises. "Yes sir. Kriegs is a female Ubese-at least that was what I was able to gather before they spotted me, and Kriegs 'respectfully' asked me to leave."

"Interesting. Well, so far it's been a nice quiet trip. I expect once we get refueled and stocked and on our way the remainder of the trip will be the same. Anyway, how is the team, they ready for the Op? I've had my face planted in Mengali protocol files and holomaps for the last few days-feels like I've abandoned them."

"They understand sir. It's not your place to babysit them. To answer your question, they are still getting used to Vahri. She seems to have built a shell around herself and doesn't have much interest in letting anyone in. Damndest behavior I've seen-especially from a medic. Usually those guys are pretty jovial," Deuce stopped and leaned back on her palms.

"Not everyone has something to be jovial about Deuce. We're still in the middle of a war. Hard to get or stay happy when your friends are dying a galaxy away."

"Lieutenant Kryll," Crash's voice exploded through the corridor, almost making Perfo jump out of his robe. He would have to talk to his pilot about that. "Please report to the bridge."

Both he and Deuce returned a quizzical glance and Perfo stepped across the corridor to a comm station located at the junction. Tapping a key for the bridge, Perfo leaned in towards the small box. "This is Perfo, what is it Private? I was about to head to my quarters."

There was a moment of silence. "Uhm, I...if you could just step in for a moment sir. I'll try not to keep you."

Perfo glanced at Deuce who rolled her eyes.

"I don't like the sound of that at all," she said.

"This trip just keeps getting more and more interesting," he replied, changing direction and making his way towards the cockpit.

Everything stood out in the Lyma's dull corridors. Her neck still itching from the last injection, Angel tried to block out the brighter colors and the visual and audible assault that White Velocity was known for, as every hiss of the pressure lines and hum of the life support hammered in her head. She'd just spent three hours

working through routines and perfecting her form in the forward cargo bay of the freighter, and her muscles were sore and screaming for a hot shower. She ignored the pain. Being half Lorradian and half Zeltron, she craved something more fulfilling than rest-she craved interaction. Prowling the hallways, the sweat on her body filling the air with pheromones and desire, she trembled with the thought of spending time with her teammates. Laughter, camaraderie, the fellowship only soldiers can experience, in some ways these were the only things that kept her tied to Vornskr Pack. She stopped just short of the entrance to the mess hall when she heard Glick's nasally Sullustan voice jabbering nonstop.

"I just don't understand why she's got to be like that. I mean, we're all friends here, right?" the Private announced out loud. "Why doesn't she like us?"

"Why don't you cool it Glick? Maybe Private Sa'Mondaley just doesn't like YOU," she heard Hobbie reply. Silently, she maneuvered into the doorway and glanced into the mess hall.

Almost half of Vornskr Pack took up the only table in the sizeable room. At the end the newest member, Vahri, sat by herself picking away at a mound of white uninspired foodstuff, while Rontack, bracketed by Hobbie and Taan with Glick on the opposite side, took up the far end. There were individual chairs scattered about, a few tipped over on their sides, but any other furniture had gone AWOL. Behind them, lining the wall were empty vending machines and a large walk in freezer that was home to seven cases of Arturian Ale-all spray painted with Hobbies name in large red letters-a pre-op tradition the Corporal held to.

The group-minus Vahri, sat passing time playing a game of cards and swapping cred chips. So far Taan had a stack several inches high in front of him, while Angel watched the others write out promissory notes for currency. She noticed Vahri lift her head slightly and gaze into the corridor. Glittering corneas locked on Angel for a moment, then went back to the lumpy gray mound of protein.

"How could you not like me? I'm a loveable guy!" Glick assured the others, who rolled their eyes and turned their attention back to their cards.

"How about you just shut up and deal?" Hobbie said.

"You know, it's like Angel!" Glick persisted. "She and I started not liking each other, remember that time she almost broke my arm? But in due time she's come to outright respect me!"

"No she hasn't," Angel said, stepping into the mess.

"Heya Angel! Looks like you suited up about ten days too early," Glick said, shoving a smoldering cigarra beneath his dewflaps.

Locking her eyes on Vahri, Angel ignored Glick and stopped at the end of the table. She'd only glimpsed the Mengali during the briefing and hadn't had the chance to introduce herself properly. The waves of emotion rolling off of the others made Angels skin tingle: nervousness, a bit of fear, and from Glick she could sense passion-no doubt for his mate, Crash, who piloted the Lyma. They had been an item for a while and Angel could smell her on the Sullustan regularly. But now, eyes locked onto Vahri's narrow black pupils amidst the flow of gold, she sensed something unusual: Anger, anger and a bit of caution. Of everyone in the mess, Vahri intrigued her the most and she felt herself drawn to the woman. Glancing from Vahri to Angel, Hobbie leaned back, folding his cards on the table. "So, Angel, why ARE you geared up when we are still over a week out from our drop?"

Finally, Angel turned her stare to Hobbie. "Just getting the feel for it again, Sir. My training armor isn't quite as reinforced as this suit is, so there is a slight weight difference. Plus I was testing the cloaking mechanism to make sure it was up to par," she lied. The truth was that the high collar of her gleaming black and yellow armor hid the injection marks on her neck, and concealed the involuntary trembling and muscle twitching that sometimes came upon her. Given that Double Zero lived in his armor, Angel could pull off wearing her gear most of the time without garnering too much attention. She didn't really need the earlier injection, but White Velocity was like any other drug-once you began taking it, you started to feel like you couldn't do without it. And she'd gone almost six days since her last injection and before her last hit she felt like she was living inside a bubble of gelatin.

"Aw, yeah! Do the cloaking thing, that rocks!" Glick exclaimed, almost knocking over Hobbie's glass of Ale.

"Watch it Private Dwarfnut!" Hobbie snapped. "You know how much this stuff goes for outside of the Arturian system?"

Ignoring Hobbie, Glick continued to plead. Finally, Taan's voice emerged from his breathing apparatus. "If Private Glick would be so kind to bet? Taan sees that you are offering to do laundry for a week and Taan always enjoys the creases Glick puts in his whites." Angel silently crossed over to where Vahri sat while Hobbie's laughter filled the room. Eyes locked, she dropped into the seat opposite of the Mengali, who kept Angel in her sights like an Imperial gunner.

"Can I help you?" Vahri asked, pushing her plate away.

"I hope so. You are the new team medic. If something happens to me again I want to know whose hands I'm putting my life into," Angel said, giving a warm smile. The Zeltron in her wanted desperately to reassure her new team mate and forge an understanding of trust-but her Lorrrian side, bred from a history of slavery and suspicion, tried to read Vahri's body language to anticipate a threat or spot a weakness-physically or emotionally.

Smirking, Vahri leaned back and crossed her arms. "You telling me if your life is on the line you are going to be choosy?"

Unmoving, Angel's mouth turned into a small smile, her eyes creeping across the drab olive jumpsuit and the bare patch above Vahri's right breast that normally sported a team logo. "You've got a problem with trust. You sit far from the others, you act like you don't care about anyone, yet you remain a medic. Are all Mengali like this? So contradictory?"

A small shift in scent, the rapid movement of deep black pupils-Angel detected agitation.

"Are all Zeltron's nosy and intrusive?" Vahri asked, leaning forward and practically spitting the words at the Angel.

"Most are, yes, it can be quite annoying, I assure you," Angel replied, continuing to smile.

"So I see. So, why are we having this conversation?" Vahri asked.

"Since when do teammates need a reason to have a conversation?" Angel asked, her smile never wavering. "I just didn't get a chance to speak to you much at the briefing and things moved so fast, I wanted to introduce myself, I'm Angel." She held her hand out but Vahri just stared at it.

"I see, I'm sorry if I bothered you," Angel dropped her hand and leaning back, felt her armor pull away from her neck, but before she could adjust it the Mengali's eyes locked on the spot where she administered her last dose of White Velocity. Lightning fast, Angel brought her hand up to absently scratch at her face, obscuring her neck, but it was too late. Vahri locked a suspicious gaze on her and Angel could sense a shift in the medic's attention. "I...didn't mean to bother your dinner. I'll be seeing you around," Angel said, standing.

Matching Angel's movement, Vahri stood and leaned close while the others threw curious glances their way. "Actually, I was done," she gave a small smile that never reached her eyes. "Let's go for a walk." She glanced at the now concealed injection on Angel's neck and returned a gaze that challenged her to refuse.

"Of...course," Angel said, turning and leading the way from the mess hall as Vahri followed, leaving a mound of untouched protein and the questioning stares of their teammates behind.

They walked in silence while navigating the mostly silent corridors. Finally, they found themselves in the starboard lounge, complete with drab blue carpeting on the floor and walls. Several worn sofas were turned towards the numerous square floor-to-ceiling windows with a table parked forgotten in a corner. Angel stood looking out into the black of space while Vahri dropped onto a sofa.

"So, what is it?" the medic asked behind her.

"What's what?" Angel asked, giving a short nervous laugh. She'd anticipated the question and decided to see if she could just dodge around it.

"The drug. Your chart didn't mention they had you on anything, so, I'll wager it's recreational."

"I'm not on any drug. I don't know what..." Angel began but in the reflection of the transparasteel viewport could see Vahri already shaking her head.

"Don't lie to me Angel. If you want my trust, you better drop the lies and games right now. In fact, you better be outright honest with me, because if you get injured and I go to administer something that doesn't mix with whatever you are on, then I'm not responsible..."

Turning suddenly, Angel's easygoing demeanor shifted, her eyes flashing with rage. "Oh frell you Mengali! What the frell do you care? I see how you treat everyone, like you can't be freaking bothered with us. What do you care if I'm on something or not?" Who was this angry rookie to tell HER how to live her life? She hadn't even bothered to introduce herself to the team and now she was trying to pry into Angel's personal business?

Eyes growing wide, Vahri froze for a moment, then, snarling, nodded. "You're right, frell you too you freaking junkie," she turned and was almost out of the room when she stopped. Angel watched as Vahri stood motionless for a moment, finally turning back around. "Angel, I'm...sorry. Look," the words seemed to be coming hard, and Angel could sense rage and compassion battling in the Mengali-compassion seemed to be winning out-but just barely." I'm not here to judge you. And if you want me to butt out, I can do that. But as your team medic, and as someone who doesn't want to see you hurt, just..." she paused. "I'm here to listen, and help if I can." Angel stood looking out the window at the stars, not speaking. The compassion rolling off of Vahri ate away at her anger and she felt herself loosen up, her rigid muscles relax a bit as the Zeltron in her embraced the concern, amplifying it into something greater than it was. The medic was sincere, and not the least bit comfortable with it.

Angel fidgeted with the tip of her scabbard that fell below her waist. "It's called Grippix Twelve," she said, eyes locking on the glimmer of a distant star.

"Grippix Twelve? I've heard of that, it's a performance-enhancer, pushers call it 'White Velocity' on the street. But why?"

"After I got out of bacta, the doctors said that there would still be tiny bits of metal left in my brain, where they couldn't get to them," Angel's hand slid across her black skullcap, directly above the scars crisscrossing her now bald head. "When I went back into the gym and picked my swords up again, I felt like I was moving in slow motion. I thought I was just rusty from being out of practice for almost a month, but the more and more I practiced, the more I realized there was something wrong...up here."

In the reflection of the viewport Vahri moved closer to Angel, eyes scanning the back of her head. "But I've seen you practice, you're quick, faster than..."

Laughing, Angel shook her head. "No, you saw White Velocity at work. I started taking it a few weeks before you came on board. I...I had experimented with it earlier in my life and I knew what it could do. I thought I had kicked the habit-and I had. But when I realized after working myself into exhaustion that my body wasn't keeping up with what my mind wanted to do, I needed some help."

"Angel, that's no reason to poison your body. I'm sure if you just talked to the Lieutenant..."

"NO!" Angel shouted, turning and grabbing Vahri by the shoulder. Her fingers dug in to Vahri's flesh but the medic didn't move or say a word. "Don't you understand?" If they find out I'm on something they'll get rid of me! Or worse..."

"Worse? What could be worse?"

Giving a small smile, Angel saw she was still gripping Vahri and let go, absently brushing at her shoulder-a brush that bordered on a caress. "Yeah, there's worse. They could keep me around, try to rehabilitate me."

"And that's worse?"

"Yeah, it is," Angel crossed over and dropped into the soft conforming cushions of a couch. "See...they will put me in a program, and they will convince me I'm alright, hell, they are good enough to convince anyone. That's what the New Republic does: they talk you into believing you can be bigger than yourself. Next thing you know, you are traveling along in a cocoon of security woven together by lies and propaganda and you think you

can do anything-destroy a death star, overthrow an Empire, hell, even get back to believing you are as good as you ever were."

Vahri sat across from Angel. "I'm sorry, but I still don't understand."

Angel fixed her with a steady gaze, almost whispering. "You think you're fine. You think you're alright. They convince you of it. Then, next thing you know, you're back out there...in the war. Your system is clean, and you're high on the lies they pumped you full of. Then the drek hits the fan, and all hell breaks loose. And guess what? You realize, too late, that they were wrong. That you aren't as fast as you once were, you aren't as sharp as you once were, and by taking you off of the drugs, by 'cleaning you up'- all they did was create an anchor that will weigh your team down. If you're lucky, you'll be the only one that dies...but chances are, someone, maybe several someone's, will die because you just weren't quick enough. Because some tiny bit of shrapnel still lodged in your brain has taken away the one thing you were good at, taken away the edge that made you who you were, leaving a useless shell that can only get by if she's on something." Tears were beginning to flow from the corners of her eyes, and she buried her face in the cups of her hands. She tried to stop the tears, but she couldn't. She'd sliced through a dozen stormtroopers while still wearing a smile on her face and a song in her heart, but now, faced with the shame of what she had to do now, to survive, she couldn't hold back the flood that poured from her eyes, and deep down she hated herself for it.

"Angel, there are other ways, to work through this. We can talk to Perfo, or..."

"Vahri," Angel looked up, dragging latex gloves across her face to wipe away the warm streaks that still ran from the corners of her eyes. "Please, don't tell anyone. No one knows, and I don't want them to know. The last thing this team needs is a charity case in the middle of a mission. If they have even one doubt about me, just one, they won't trust me and...I...I can't go back to being an outsider. I thought I finally found a home with this team, the day they rescued me from the pirate ship I was on. They gave me a home and they gave me respect. If I lose that," she trailed off.

Breathing deep, Vahri shook her head and remained silent for several minutes. Finally, she nodded, "All right Angel, but you can't continue to stay on this drug. It's got degenerative effects that will impact you even worse in the long run. The common side effects are even worse, hallucinations, paralysis, muscle spasms, altered depth perception," Vahri locked her eyes on Angel and she could see her own shimmering orbs reflected there. "After this op you and I are going to sit down and figure a way out of this mess, alright?"

A smile crept back on Angels face and she nodded, wiping away a stray tear. "Thanks Doc. Thanks for listening and for not ratting me out. I owe you one." Standing, Angel stepped over and reached down, clearing a violet colored strand of hair out of Vahri's face, her hand gently brushing against the smooth tanned skin. The medic drew back, instinctively, and Angel could sense confusion and uncertainty in the woman. Quietly padding from the lounge, Angel wondered if it was Vahri's emotions she sensed-or her own.

"What's the situation Private? Why haven't we docked?"

Turning in her chair, Crash's wide green eyes carried a look of confusion bordering on panic. "Don't know Sir. I've tried to raise them several times. There simply isn't any response," she said as she grinded her teeth on a wad of pink stim chew. The Captains chair was easily three sizes too large for Crash and she sat in it cross legged style, leaning forward in her pink and mauve colored latex jumpsuit to tap away at the controls. The lights were off, and in a small dish anchored to the console several scented candles burned away, filling the cockpit with the strong smell of fruit. The stickers of cartoon characters and fuzzy animals arrayed on the back of her chair never failed in causing Perfo to smile. The Lyma was the team's assigned mission ops freighter and Crash wasted no time in making herself at home once she joined up, turning the vessel into a unique reflection of it's new pilot.

"Calm down, I'm sure there is a perfectly sound reason," Perfo said, dropping his hygiene bag in the co-pilots seat on top of a purple stuffed lizard.

"Did you try standard New Republic comm frequencies as well?" Deuce asked, leaning against a console of blinking lights and ship readouts.

"Across the board Sir," Crash shook her head, causing a pair of tightly wound ponytails to sweep back and forth across her back. "Nothing. Not a peep."

"No S.O.S transmission?" Perfo asked, staring curiously at the five towers that rose like metallic monoliths from a plain created of massive half-spheres nestled against its underbelly.

"Negative. I made a drop here about six months back before I joined the 'Pack," Crash continued to fiddle with the carnival of flashing buttons and switches laid out before her, "they had a droid working the flight tower, so it's not like he would be taking a nap," she gestured to the tallest spear of durasteel that jut from the center of the platform, surrounded by the four smaller towers on the outlying edge of the massive disc.

"I take it the layout is still the same?" Perfo asked. "According to the briefing that central tower is ops, North Tower is residential housing, South Tower is Science and research..."

"Yes sir. East is entertainment, commerce as well as a few of the nicer hotels, and west, where we need to dock is what they call "Spacers Tower"...it's got places to bunk up on the cheap, apartments, a few cafes. This place was probably all the buzz three or four centuries years ago," Crash said, popping another stick of stim chew in her mouth and working it madly back and forth. "Now days they are lucky to have a thousand people on station at any given time. Heck, I walked for almost an hour and a half around the station once and didn't pass anything more than a lonely cleaning droid."

Perfo wasn't surprised. From what he'd read the Eldrick Outpost had changed hands so many times throughout the centuries that entire sections were left unfinished by owners who had as much luck completing projects as they did running refueling stations. Most of the commerce and activity it got these days was either from smugglers who were flying under the radar due to whatever contraband they were smuggling or financial support from the New Republic-for what THAT was worth. The station was closer now, and Perfo could see the pattern of docking lights that lined the edge of the platform. "They've still got electricity, and I can't spot any signs of combat or hull carbonizing."

"The power plant is self sustaining and completely automated Sir, so even if there's no one around, there is still power. It's housed down in one of those bulbs hanging from the underside of the station," Crash gestured with one hand while tapping away at an adjacent keyboard with the other.

"What's in the other spheres?" Deuce asked, leaning forward and gesturing to the half dozen bulbs that sprung from the bottom of the station.

"Gas, water, even fuel, or, well, there used to be fuel in some of them anyway. From what I heard they only keep one fueled up now for older ships that don't rely on ion drives-not that there are many of those around these days," she pointed to one bulb that was larger than the rest, hanging from the very center of the station. "See that big one, the one that still has its blue docking lights on? That's the only active fuel bulb, the others are used as storage and waste processing. But when the station was first built they kept them all topped off to fuel and restock capital class starships on the eastern half of the station-some almost as big as Star Destroy..." suddenly, Crash froze. Her eyes growing wide, "Maybe it was the Imps sir? Maybe they got here and killed everyone inside?"

"Unlikely," Deuce leaned back and crossed her arms. "If there were Imperials around they would already be on us like Chagra flies on podo," she turned to Perfo and he could see concern pulling her brow into a knot. "I got a bad feeling about this LT."

Perfo did as well but offered a lopsided grin instead. "Come on Sarge, if we ran away every time we had a bad feeling about something they would start calling us Pansy Pack," he scratched at the bush of goatee that had begun to spring from his chin. "Keep trying the comm, and in the meantime take us in to one of the docking bays. I'm going to raise our guests and let them know what's up."

Qualto locked his black goggles on the approaching station and said nothing for several minutes. Perfo had briefed his counterpart and after waiting for a response, finally followed the man's gaze. Closer now, Eldrick Outpost looked like any other deep space station far past it's prime-unremarkable and intact, as if nothing was amiss. But repeated attempts on all manner of comm frequencies raised nothing but static. Even the short-range general information beacon that transmitted nonstop station info, everything from restaurant advertisements to interior atmospheric conditions-was transmitting nothing but white noise.

"So, I guess the next step is to send someone up to the front door and knock?" Qualto said, sticking a cigarra in his mouth.

"Sir, there's no smoking on the bridge," Crash said in a timid voice, but the tanned Sergeant fired up the cigarra anyway.

"Lieutenant Kryll, refueling and restocking isn't my concern, training wannabe killers is," Qualto continued, leaning back and throwing a dismissive hand towards the viewport. "I'm sorry that some desk jockey fell asleep at his post, but that's not Black Light's concern. Since you are in charge until we get to Mengali, it's YOUR problem. So, deal with it in whatever manner you wish."

Irritated, Perfo reached up in a flash and plucked the smoldering cigarra from Qualto's mouth, crushing the burning cinder in his fist that still hovered mere inches from the man's face, white tendrils of smoke drifting from between his fingers. Crash's eyes grew wide while Deuce watched the exchange without emotion.

"Sergeant," Perfo tried to keep his tone even, "this IS your concern. We are still ten days out from Mengali. If this station is, for whatever reason, unable to provide us with fuel and supplies, then this op is in danger of being compromised and ALL of us are in danger of being stranded here, is that clear?"

Staring at Perfo's fist, Qualto's smirk disappeared and his face defaulted to an expressionless mask. "I would love to know what kind of junk heap it is we've wound up on. This ship is large enough to carry TWO MONTHS worth of fuel and supplies! What the hell is taking up all of that cargo space? Stuffed animals and lollipops?!?"

"JUNK HEAP!?!?" Crash exploded from her chair, her face going from pale to fiery red in an instant.

"Stand down Private," Deuce said in an emotionless voice. Trembling, Crash dropped back into her seat, tucking her now trembling hands beneath the pink latex armpit folds of her flight suit. "Junk heap?" she quietly muttered to herself.

"You can't just tape weapons and sensor scrambling gear to a starship hull and roll on out into Imp space," Perfo said, eyes still locked on Qualto. "The Lyma has enough weaponry, hidden compartments and reinforced plating to give us a fighting chance if we happen to come across a random Imperial patrol, which is damn possible given where we are at. OUR job is to get YOUR Black Light to Mengali safely and in one piece. The Lyma allows us to do that. Now," he tossed the wad of tabbac aside and crossed his arms, the acrid stench still hanging in the air. "You know our situation, and considering that we have no idea what we are walking into, I suggest you go back and alert your people that they may see some duty tossed their way before we even hit Mengali.

Qualto's eyebrows turned into peaks above his goggles. "Our orders didn't include..."

"YOUR ORDERS ARE COMING FROM ME," Perfo shouted. To his right Deuce's body went tense while Crash opened her mouth in shock. Perfo prided himself on keeping his cool, but he'd had enough of this conversation and as the outpost now filled the Lyma's viewport, he knew he didn't have the luxury of time to banter back and forth with this knuckle-dragger. "I'm the ranking officer in charge while you are on MY ship and until you and your people step off onto Mengali, then you are going to do as I say. You clear on that, Sergeant?"

Silence hung in the bridge like a shroud and slowly, Qualto pulled free another cigarra from his gear belt and stuck it-unlit- in his mouth. "Like transparasteel, Sir," he said around the thin brown stick. Without another word he turned and exited the bridge, the 'click' of a mini-torch following him out.

"Talk to me Crash," Perfo said into the thin microphone that wound from the inside of his combat helmet down his jaw line. He'd double-timed it back to his quarters to gear up while Deuce rounded up the rest of Vornskr Pack. All now stood, suited up, in the small sealed hallway leading to the Lyma's airlock. Through the airlocks small window he watched as a docking tube slowly extended from the space station towards the ship.

"I was able to send Rocket out to override the docking mechanism sir," she said as the R7 unit propelled itself from the Outpost's hull and back towards the ship. "Once the seal connects to the Lyma you will have to cross through the sleeve over to the station and burn through the access hatch. Unfortunately, it can only be opened from the inside."

"Of course," Hobbie cracked from the rear.

"Rontack, get that laser torch ready, Angel, you've got his six-everyone else, secure your gear and prepare to board," Perfo ordered as the Klatoonian and Private Angel passed him with Rontack producing a piece of equipment that looked like a long thin rifle attached to a backpack.

As the long dark sleeve closed over the exterior airlock, Perfo peered into the darkness beyond hoping to catch a glimpse of what lay ahead. He saw nothing.

"No lights in the docking sleeve Private?" he asked over his comm.

"Negative Sir. Rocket reported that, again, they are triggered from the inside manually."

"That makes no sense!" Hobbie's voice grumbled in Perfo's ear.

"Novan, stow that noise,' Deuce ordered.

"Yes Sir."

"Thank you Sergeant," Perfo said, glancing behind him. "Crash, that makes no sense," he said into his comm as the sleeve connected with the airlock. The hiss of oxygen filling the sleeve was accompanied by the safety indicator light on the console beside the octagonal door switching from red to green.

"Sir, have you ever been to the Eldrick Outpost?" Crash asked.

"Negative. Our Ops briefing didn't include breaking and entering a refueling depot in the middle of nowhere," he responded as Rontack dropped the faceplate on his helmet and toggled on his shoulder light. Triggering the Lyma's airlock, the thick door disappeared up into the ship and Rontack slowly edging into the docking sleeve. Behind him Angel unsheathed one of her swords from the scabbard on her back and gripped it tightly. On the outside chance something were to be waiting for them the last thing Perfo wanted was a stray blaster bolt to burn a hole through the docking sleeve and spacing his whole team. In his earpiece he heard what sounded like a sigh. "Is there a problem Private?" he asked, pushing thoughts of getting sucked into the cold of space out of his mind.

There was silence for a moment. "No Sir, just..." Crash's voice trailed off.

Crash had lived and breathed the life of a pilot since she was a child. From what Perfo could tell she'd seen more of the galaxy than pilots four times her age. When her file came up as a potential transfer into his unit just a few months back he reluctantly agreed to bring her on board. So far he was more than pleased with her ability as a pilot, a bit less so with her ability to handle unexpected trouble and her personal life. "Private, we are about to walk into drek-knows-what. You want to give us an idea of what has your normally vibrant tongue so tied?" Perfo snapped. Behind him Glick snickered, snapping his lips shut as Perfo turned around.

"No sir. It's just that I thought you had been here before. The Outpost is not laid out very well and, it's just, when you get through the decontamination chamber make sure you follow the bright red painted line that runs along the walls. It will lead you to an information center in the middle of the station. Remember," she repeated, "the BRIGHT red painted line."

"Are there other red lines on the wall we should ignore?" Perfo asked.

"About five or six at last count, Sir."

Perfo felt like banging his head against the Lyma's hull. Instead he turned to the rest of his team, arrayed behind him. "Look, this may be nothing but comm trouble, or there may be a group of pirates on the other side of this airlock. So, stay sharp and keep it tight people."

"Sir?" Glick piped up from beneath a helmet that was too large for his head.

"Private?" Perfo replied.

"I've been on this station before. Once," he said.

"Excellent, then you will be on point," Perfo waved him forward.

"Uhm, well, it was a few years ago. And the station may have changed since then," he stammered, slowly moving forward. Behind him Hobbie shook his head and grabbed the Sullustan by the arm, ushering him forward at a brisk clip.

"Lets go Private, don't matter if it's a week or a decade, you just get us to the bar and we'll all be solid," Hobbie said smiling. Depositing the smaller soldier in the airlock hatchway, Hobbie turned to Perfo and smiled. "All taken care of LT."

"Thank you Corporal. Now why don't you fall back in line-I'll be sure to let you know if I need help again," Perfo smiled, slapping the younger man on the helmet.

"Affirmative!" Hobbie smiled wide, displaying the wide gap between his two front teeth. Turning he trotted back where he took up position behind Deuce and in front of Taan, Vahri and Double Zero.

As Perfo turned back he watched as Rontack fired up the laser welder, silhouetting Glick in the airlock doorway amidst a strobe of flickering red light and smoke. A few minutes passed, when finally the loud "thud" of heavy metal falling to the ground echoed throughout the sleeve and into the Lyma.

Glick advanced past Angel and Rontack with the rest of the team directly behind, as they slowly made their way into Eldrick Outpost.



Eldrick Outpost

The smoke filled air in the docking sleeve was cold, and Vahri could feel tiny bumps standing at attention along her body as her sweaty palms tightened around her Sorosuub Uzilite 320 Blaster Rifle. She'd been in this situation before, infiltrating enemy bases or Imperial supply depots. But this time something was...different. She couldn't put her finger on it, but as she approached the scorched hole that awaited the team, it felt as if she was literally pushing against an unseen force just to move forward.

"Sergeant," she said as they advanced.

"What is it Private?" Deuce replied, still moving, not turning around. The Twi'lek was behind Perfo, toting a massive blaster rifle nearly as long as she was tall. With Double Zero behind her brandishing what could only be described as a small cannon she should have felt a bit safer-but she didn't.

"What is it Private?" Deuce said again, this time throwing a glance over her shoulder and looking past Hobbie and Taan.

Gritting her teeth, Vahri mentally pushed back the foreboding wave and shook her head forcing herself to advance. "Nothing Sergeant, forget I said anything."

Moving forward, Taan turned around and leaned close, his massive bulbous eyes hovering just inches from her face. "Pardon me Private Sa'Mondaley, but are you alright? You've appeared to have lost some coloration."

"I'm fine, just go, let's go," Vahri said, locking her eyes on the opening they were about to pass through. The Gand tilted his head and turned around, continuing forward. A moment later they passed into the decontamination chamber through the torched entryway. Stepping over the massive airlock door that now lay on the ground, Vornskr Pack found passed through a small walkway and, after triggering another inner door that slid silently up into the ceiling, found themselves in a white circular room with several gleaming steel rods running from the tiled ceiling's center down into metal grating, gleaming bright and scoured clean by years of being constantly blasted by disinfecting chemicals.

Nozzles sprouted down the length of each rod every meter. Light panels set into the walls flickered, casting the room in a pale white light.

Pressing his hand to his ear, Perfo spoke softly into his comm. while Vahri and the rest of the team took up position alongside the circular door opposite the airlock. A moment later Perfo turned to the team.

"Crash says we've got a pilots locker room through this door, then a lounge and then we'll be in the main concourse. Standard formation, when we hit the concourse we go to two teams. Deuce, I want you to take team two and try to find someone-anyone-on station, I'll take team one and head to operations. Private Glick, you're our point. Let's move."

Without a word Vornskr Pack advanced, passing through a dimly lit locker room lined with row after row of dingy metal lockers spacers could rent to stow their gear. A thin breeze chugged through several air ducts, causing open locker doors to rhythmically squeak back and forth. Several overhead flickering light panels caused a disorienting strobe; somewhere in the rear they could hear running water.

Without a word, Perfo motioned for Glick to go check it out. The small Sullustan disappeared as the team halted momentarily. Minutes later the sound stopped and Vahri found herself holding her breath. Glick rounded the corner shaking his head.

"Shower was running...there were a few containers of soap on the ground, but nothing else," he stared at Perfo with wide eyes. Nodding the Lieutenant gestured for Glick to continue.

Continuing through the locker room into the lounge, Vahri wasn't surprised to find it also deserted as the team fanned out, covering both sides. A dozen or so meters long, the lounge was home to several empty sofas, a few small tables and a viewport. A small plastic cup half-full of dingy brown liquid sat alone- a solitary reminder that at some point the space had been occupied.

Several datadiscs lay strewn around but a brief inspection showed them to be nothing more than periodicals and spacer magazines. A monitor that would normally broadcast station and docking information displayed nothing but the word "offline" in the corner of a black screen.

"Novan, the console," Perfo nodded to a flat panel set into a wall between two vending machines. Hobbie hustled over and, slinging his rifle began to tap away. A moment later he looked back over his shoulder, shaking his head.

"Sorry LT, it's dead. There's power, but it only allows me to send a request, and there ain't no one on the other end that wants to talk to my prettiness."

"Big surprise there," Angel said, still gripping her vibrosword.

"Alright, fall back in," Perfo said, turning back towards the closed door at the end of the room.

Stepping over to the cup, Vahri picked it up and took a brief sniff. "Lieutenant, this stuff must be weeks old...it's got a layer of bacteria floating on top."

"That don't mean nothing, hell, half the cups in Rontack's bunk has crap growing inside," Hobbie snickered, bringing his rifle back off of his shoulder.

"Noted Private," Perfo said, glancing at the cup. Vahri replaced it and the team moved on to the door to the concourse. As Glick approached, it slid open manually, causing the Sullustan to nearly leap out of his skin, bringing his rifle to bear and causing his dewflaps to tremble as he swept the area with his carbine. Everyone froze, aiming their weapons at the wide doorway, ready to unleash a wall of blaster bolts.

Nothing happened, save for the rush of stale smelling air that filled the room.

"Alright people, let's all just take a deep breath and relax," Perfo said, waving the teams ahead. Moving into the corridor, the teams split into two groups. Perfo, Glick Double Zero and Taan all pooled to the right of the doorway while Vahri, Deuce, Hobbie, Angel and Rontack gathered to the left.

The corridor was crafted like most space station corridors, from uninspired dull gray durasteel and a grated metal floor. Light panels curved from floor to the ceiling every five meters, providing pale blue illumination-from those that worked at least. Farther down the corridor Vahri could spot several areas that were bathed in shadow. Once everyone was in the corridor, they all stood staring at the opposite wall no more than ten meters away. Running horizontally and bracketed by various pipes and conduits both above and below, were over a dozen multicolored painted lines. All colors of the rainbow were represented, some several times each. Over top of this mess one fat red line dominated the others- mostly.

"What kind of Bantha-load is this man? Couldn't some jerk-wad at least TRY to scrub down these walls once a freaking century?" Hobbie said, staring in wonder at the spectrum of color. Taan produced a palm sized automapper while Double Zero covered the corridor, rhythmically sweeping his massive blaster carbine back and forth. Vahri liked to chart paths and maps and store the routes in her head, but after taking another look at the abstract weave of multicolored lines she produced her own automapper from the rear of her webbed harness.

"Sergeant, take your team to the South Tower-Crash says that's the science and research facilities, we're heading to the Central Tower and see if the turbolifts work and head up to Ops," and without another word Perfo's team, led by Taan, disappeared down the corridor.

"Alright people, no time like the present to get familiar with this heap. Sa'Mondaley, you're point, Rontack, you got our six, lets move," Deuce said, hoisting the massive rifle in one hand and waving everyone ahead. Moving silently, Vahri shouldered her rifle and advanced a handful of meters ahead of the group. Deuce followed, with Hobbie, Angel and finally Rontack bringing up the rear.

Despite the solitude, nothing seemed out of the ordinary and they proceeded at a cautious pace for several minutes. Doors opened into spacer's lounges similar to the one they passed through, but further inspection showed them all to be empty. Breathing deep, Vahri tried to pick out scents, food, waste, any odor that might indicate life. All she managed to smell was the stale cool recycled air of an old space station. After a while such places began to take on an unpleasant chemical scent-normally most beings never detected it, but Vahri could. With infrequent filter changes and the same air being pumped through the same ventilation ducts, you were almost better off sucking the cold vacuum of space into your lungs than the stuff that circulated through these dead corridors, she thought to herself.

"Lieutenant Kryll?" Vahri heard Crash in her headset. She froze and Deuce did as well, holding up her fist to halt the team. They were at a bend in the corridor and Vahri was little more than four meters away from the rest of the group.

"This is Perfo, go Crash," Perfo said.

"Rocket just informed me that there is a refueling line we can access. It's got a simple lock, not too complex. He thinks he can bypass it and then I just need to throw on a vac suit and manually bring the line over to the Lyma and start juicing her up," Crash sounded hesitant. "It will only take me a few hours and I figure we might as well, seeing as we are going to need fuel with or without someone's permission."

A moment of silence passed and Vahri could imagine Perfo weighing the truth of the statement. "Yeah, it's not like we can bunk here forever. Go ahead and get moving on that. And patch me through to Qualto's quarters, he's not answering his private comm."

"Yes Sir," Crash replied and a moment later the sharp tone of Sergeant Qualto came across the headset.

"Qualto here."

Vahri noticed Deuce's face curl in disgust while Hobbie made a rude gesture with his hands towards his headset.

"Sergeant, this is Kryll. My pilot thinks she can manually start to refuel the Lyma. However, since the rest of my team is on station, I need you to send one of your men to the docking sleeve and stand sentry, on the outside chance someone arrives or there are any-problems."

"I'll see if I can send someone down."

"That wasn't a request...Sergeant," Perfo snapped.

Silence hung on the channel and Vahri could hear the slightest sound-almost like someone letting air out of a tire. "Of course, Sir," Qualto said this last, his voice seething with sarcasm. "I'll send Private Frost, is that acceptable?"

"Affirmative. Kryll out."

Shaking her head, Deuce cursed something in Twi'lek and rolled her eyes

"Man, Sarge, I can't believe we need to babysit that group. The Republic must be dragging the bottom of the barrel to take on lowlife scum like that," Hobbie said, glancing at Vahri. "And we get to drop em' on YOUR planet. I think I would take my chances with the Imperials rather than have that riff-raff polluting the environment."

"Then you don't know my planet. My clan, and the fellow clans, need all of the help they can get. Black Light must be an asset or else the New Republic wouldn't be sending them," Vahri said.

"Whatever," Hobbie shrugged, "I hope they work out Vahri, but from what I've seen..."

"You two can continue this political discussion on your own time," Deuce interrupted. "Right now the military is paying you to play soldier, not senator, and we still have a station to check. Private?" she gestured Vahri back down the hallway.

Nodding Vahri continued. As they continued they came across items left strewn about on the floor-containers of food, broken datapads, even a few stuffed toys. Finally, after an hour of encountering nothing but loose items and the occasional hiss of a pipe releasing a plume of steam into the air, they came face to face with a large wall of patchwork durasteel plating that sealed off the end of the corridor.

The words "Construction-Phase 12, No Entry Beyond This Point," was stenciled in red meter-tall letters across its face, with yellow and black hazard strips ringing the octagonal barrier.

"End of the line Sergeant," Vahri said, turning around. Deuce had already advanced and stepped forward, her hand running along the weld seams that crisscrossed the wall.

"Looks that way," she said nodding.

"Hey, why don't we just get Rontack to blow it? A few cords of det-tape and BAM!" Hobbie said, flashing a wide gap-toothed smile and mimicking an explosion with his hand.

"Yeah, that's brilliant Sir. I'm sure the admins of this station wouldn't mind that at all," Angel said, sheathing her blade and crossing her arms.

"Oh, like they would notice..." Hobbie said, gesturing to the abandoned corridor.

Almost inaudibly, something caught Vahri's attention. The slightest whirl of sound, like a motor, was coming down the hallway. "Wait," she said, turning her head. The rest of the group, now arrayed in a semi-circle, fell silent.

A moment later, Deuce nodded. "I hear it, it's coming this way," she said, shouldering her rifle and aiming it down the way they came.

Around the corner, at breakneck speed, a small black box skid on tiny wheels. No longer than half a meter and shorter than Vahri's boot, the small droid raced towards them, its speed increasing.

"What the hell?" Hobbie looked puzzled. "It's a mouse droid! Hey little fella, you get lost?"

Not stopping, the droid angled in and slammed full speed into Hobbie's combat boot. "Hey! What's your malfunction!?" he exclaimed, as the small droid backed up a few meters, then sped ahead again, hitting the armored toe. It repeated this process three more times.

"Probably gone buggy or something, these droids get twitchy if they aren't memory wiped every few months," Deuce said, smiling.

"He's scuffing up my boots. Beat it, tin can," Hobbie said, and with one mighty kick sent the small droid airborne, where it released a high pitched whistle and crashed onto its side, its wheels still spinning in place. "There, that will teach you not to mess with the might of the New Republic Military you backwards little..." but Hobbie was cut off by another sound similar to the mouse droid but amplified. All watched in amazement as seven mouse droids sped around the corner at breakneck speed, forming themselves into a v-wedge aimed straight for Hobbie. In a flash Hobbie brought his blaster rifle to bear and began firing. "YEAH!!! YOU WANT THIS HERE? COME GET SOME GREEN PAIN YOU LITTLE PUNKS!" He screamed as the rest of the team backed up away from the carnage. Green blaster bolts roared from the rifle, lighting up the corridor and slamming into the tiny droids- incinerating some, and blasting others into molten scrap and components that clattered about the metal grating, dropping into the ventilation ducts below. Finally, after almost thirty seconds of firing, Hobbie stopped. All stood peering at the scorched deck and tiny junkyard of metal chassis and smoking droid components that littered the hall, coughing sparks and circuitry into the air.

Smiling, Hobbie turned back to the group, who stared back at him in wonder. "What?" he said shrugging, "They were coming after me! You saw!"

"Corporal, if we have to reimburse this station for these pieces of scrap, the LT is going to hang you up by your..." Deuce began but Perfo's voice in their headsets stopped her.

"Sergeant, what's your status?"

"Uh, we were heading to the South Tower but ran into some construction sir, we're going to have to find another way in."

"Copy. You encountered anyone?"

Deuce looked at Hobbie and silently mouthed something angrily, causing him to hold up his hands and mouth something back. "Negative sir, unless you count some mouse droids that seemed to be in need of some new programming, but Corporal Novan took care of that 'threat', so we won't have to worry about them anymore."

"Mouse droids? Threat? Never mind. We couldn't find a route to Ops. We hit some sort of weld job as well, but it didn't look like construction though...it looked like someone threw it up not too long back. A patch job. Anyway, the turbolifts we found were inoperable, so we've set up position in an auxiliary security sub-station in the base of the central tower. I'll have Taan send over the automap file and you can rendezvous with us there."

"Roger that," Deuce said. Then, to Hobbie, "You think if we come up on any more droids you can refrain from blasting them to slag?"

"Oh, what? What kind of valuable information does a mouse droid have? What? Was it going to tell us how many times it scrubbed the fresher today? And it attacked me! You saw! Rontack, you saw didn't you?" Hobbie pleaded as Vahri walked past and took up point. Her automap beeped and she began following the file Glick was sending over. Turning she waited for the others to fall in.

"I think they should take away that rifle and give you a wooden stick Sir," Angel said, a smirk pulling at her mouth.

"You know, I outrank you," Hobbie said, cocking his eyebrow.

"And that fact has caused me many sleepless nights, Sir," Angel replied.

"Lets go, Novan, just calm down and try not to shoot anything else that's not shooting back, ok?" Deuce said, motioning for Vahri to continue.

"I don't think they should give you a wooden stick," Rontack said, slapping Hobbie on the shoulder.

"Thanks man," Hobbie nodded, advancing.

"They should give you a slingshot," Rontack said from the rear of the group. A pair of female snickers followed.

"Shut up Rontack," Hobbie snapped, kicking away a small droid bit that still smoldered on the floor as the group began their long journey to rendezvous with Team One.

* * *

Nestled near the octagonal blast door of security sub-station thirteen, Angel tried to regulate her breathing and act as if everything were normal. In truth she could feel beads of sweat forming below her earlobes and across her brow, and beneath the abdominal plates of her armor her muscles were jerking and twitching like a smuggler at an Imperial customs check. Vornskr Pack, with the exception of Crash and Rocket, were spread out in the small room. Hobbie was set up at a terminal, trying to bring up records and information off of the stations database while Perfo, Deuce and Rontack peered over his shoulder. Glick was working on bringing up schematics at a table console that basked the entire room in a bluish light while Taan and Double Zero stood guard outside in the hallway. To her right Vahri stood on the opposite side of the door, watching Angel's every movement and saying nothing. Angel nodded, offering Vahri a small smile. It wasn't returned.

"Weirdest thing-looks like all of the lifeboats have been jettisoned," Hobbie said, tapping away at the console. Angel could only see him from the side, but his goofy grin was replaced with a confused scowl.

"Why is that weird?" Perfo asked, leaning closer to the glowing screen. "Maybe they had a good reason to bug off of the station, maybe an Imperial patrol found them."

Shaking his head, Hobbie began tapping at several keys. "No...the jettisoning isn't weird, it's weird that it didn't happen at the same time."

"What?" Deuce asked, also leaning in.

"Yeah, look," Hobbie tapped the screen, "thirty lifeboats took off within a half an hour of each other on this date, about six weeks ago. Then," his fingers tapped away at the keyboard, "the remaining twenty were jettisoned almost six hours later-empty."

Something gnawed at Angel's stomach and she felt her shoulders begin to knot up. If she didn't get a chance to work her muscles soon, the White Velocity in her system would start to cause contractions. Silently, she began to twist, hoping to loosen herself up.

"That makes no sense. This station is in the middle of nowhere, these lifeboats were Cire-Shydeen 88-40's" Deuce said. "They call them 'Coffin Rockets'-they have no hyperspace capabilities and unless you are in a populated system, your chances of getting picked up is slim and zip."

"So what good are they on a space station?" Hobbie asked.

"Beats dying when a reactor core blows," Deuce shrugged. They can get you to a safe distance, but not much else. They're cheap, which ups their appeal when you are operating on a shoestring budget like this operation seems to be."

"Cheap or not, it doesn't explain why someone would jettison twenty empty escape pods," Perfo said. Is there any way you can access the Ops logs from here?"

Shrugging, Hobbie leaned back and popped a stick of stimchew in his mouth. "Possibly, but it will take some time. I'll have to find a workaround to access those files. A lot of stations keep their admin and ops database lines separate from the station's operating system to avoid hacking and intrusion. We might have to find a way to manually jack into one of those database lines from a remote location."

"Right," Perfo nodded. "Private Glick, find me the schematics of the database lines that run through the station."

"Already on it sir," Glick said from the map table set off to the right of the console.

"Good, lets try to get these security cameras online, I don't like being blind," Perfo reached up and toggled his helmet mic on. "Crash, you copy?"

A moment later Angel's ear piece was filled with Crash's nasally whine. "Here sir! Just attached the refueling line and we are up to about fifteen percent right now. I've got Rocket working on filtering out the waste collection unit and topping off the life support reservoir."

"Copy that. Good work," Perfo said leaning back. Angel could feel his relief from across the room. Ever since the group had come on station everyone had been nervous and jittery, at least getting the Lyma fueled and ready to go was a bright point.

"Thanks sir. I'm back on the Lyma now, heading towards the airlock. I heard something odd a moment ago and wanted to check it out."

"Odd?" Perfo's face curled in confusion.

"Yes sir, sounded like metal grinding. I'm sure it's nothing, but I just wanted to check with Private Frost to see if..." Crash trailed off and everyone in the substation exchanged glances.

"Crash? Private Motash? You there? We lost your signal," Perfo tapped at his headset. On the other end, somewhere in the Lyma, a faint whimper crept across the line.

"Suh...sir. It's Frost, something...something's happened...to...to her...oh God..."

"Crash!?!?" Perfo shouted into his comm. Angel felt her heart stop and her breath lodge in her throat, across from her, Vahri was looking into space, eyes focused on something distant no one but her could see.

"Buh...blood. Everywhere, sir, my God, something just ripped, body parts are...everywhere..."

"Crash! Get out of there! You hear me?!?" Perfo was screaming now, and in motion, snatching his rifle from the console and gesturing to Angel, Glick and Vahri to follow. Angel's hand was already hitting the entry button, causing the door to slide apart with a hiss.

Angel was almost through the door when they heard the scream.

Ripping across the comm. line, causing even the hardest of Vornskr Pack to wince, Crash's shriek lasted for mere seconds, causing everyone in the room to freeze. As if someone flipped a switch, the shrieking stopped, and was replaced with a hacking, gurgling noise.

"NO! CRASH!" Glick shouted, and, leaving his helmet and weapon behind, flew past Angel and into the hallway where he disappeared out of sight.

"PRIVATE!" Perfo screamed. "Deuce, cover the station! DZ, you're with us!" Perfo shouted as Angel and Vahri fell in behind him and they all began the long sprint towards the Lyma.

White Velocity tore through her veins and Angel felt herself pulling away from the group as she unsheathed her blades and triggered them to life. It took everything she had to block out the waves of panic and fear that hammered at her from her fellow soldiers, a task made even more difficult by the narcotics pumping through her system. Up ahead in the dim silent corridor she spotted Glick's backside as the small Sullustan propelled himself forward on short stubby legs by will and fear alone. She pulled even and passed him, leaving him gasping and panting in her wake. It wouldn't matter she thought to herself, even running top speed it would still be at least ten minutes before she reached the ship-and Crash.

Heart thudding in her chest like a shockboxer working on a heavy bag, Angel's feet carried her through the decontamination chamber and into the airlock. Every sense was on edge, her sword's hilts dripping with sweat that now pumped in streams down her body. Up ahead, two Black Light soldiers stood silhouetted in the pale white light of the Lyma's airlock, unmoving, with their weapons at the ready. On her way down she'd heard Perfo comm Qualto directly, and inform him of the situation. Qualto said little, telling Perfo he would take a unit down to investigate.

"Out of the way!" She shouted, her hands trembling.

The guards remained unmoving, and Angel pulled up at the last second, to avoid tearing through them.

"Move!" she repeated, bringing her weapons to their side. The guards, clad in identical armor and practically the mirror image of one another remained impassive. One had the name "Chanorce" stenciled over the right breast, the other "Porik."

"Porik, Chanorce, stand down," she heard Qualto say from somewhere behind the two warriors. In unison, both stepped aside and for one brief moment, Angel wished they hadn't.

Sprawled on the ground, body twisted in angles it was never meant to, lay the prone figure of Private Frost. She'd been female, Angel noticed; pieces of her armor and body parts lay immersed in a small lake of crimson, while lying useless to the side was what used to be a helmet- now nothing more than dented scrap. Dead black eyes stared at Angel while the soldier, an Advovse she could tell now, mouthed a silent scream.

"Your pilot is up around the corner, looks like she didn't get much farther before she went down," Qualto murmured. He was crouched over the body, while two more Black Light soldiers stood by with weapons at the ready. Eyes still locked on the horrid display of gore in the entryway, Angel briefly glanced slash marks across the body and the lack of any cauterization- someone, or something simply sliced Private Frost to death. As she made her way into the adjacent corridor, her Zeltronian instincts caused her stop and turn around.

She detected no sense of loss from Qualto.

The leader of Black Light crouched over Frost's body, not touching it, but simply scanning it with his black goggles while a light sheen of sweat glinted off of his polished head. The lack of emotion caught Angel off guard and she forced it from her mind, filing it away as something she would address with Perfo later. Slowly, she advanced, rounding the corner and entering the Lyma's corridor.

What used to be Vornskr Packs young pilot lie along the side of the corridor; latex and flesh, drenched in blood lay in a crumpled heap, glistening in the pale light. Angel's breath left her and she slowly stepped over to the body, spying a pair of Black Light soldiers standing watch at the end of the corridor nearest the cockpit. Forcing herself to breathe Angel knelt, fighting back tears that threatened to overtake her. Crash was face down, her tiny outstretched hand still clutching a hold-out blaster, a weapon capable of delivering no more than ten shots at the most. Angel glanced at the charge meter on the side-full; She hadn't even gotten off one shot.

Commotion pulled Angel's attention away and she heard private Glick shouting from the airlock entrance. Moving swiftly, she sprinted to a gear rack lining the wall and removed a camo parka that hung alongside other various jackets and ponchos. Returning to Crash's corpse, she was just able to cover the body when Glick skittered to a stop in the corridor. Glancing around with wide eyes, he locked on Angel, then on the mound of camouflage and the pool of blood that ran in small streams down the corridors gutter.

"No...no," the Sullustan stammered, slowly approaching Angel.

"Glick, please, don't come closer, you don't want..." she tried to reason, knowing it was futile.

"GET AWAY!" he shouted, making a move for the parka. Angel intercepted him and, realizing there was no other way to stop him, tripped him to the ground where she fell atop of him, pinning him to the cold deck. She tried to maneuver so that they fell away from the body, but miscalculated and wound up holding him so that all he could stare at was the lifeless pile that used to be his lover.

Greif, despair and pain rose from him in waves, and despite her attempts, Angel couldn't block it out. He'd begun to blubber, and Angel found herself weeping along with him as they both stared helplessly at the unmoving body of their teammate, unceremoniously dumped into the gutter like discarded trash.

"Let him up Private," Perfo said, handing off his rifle to Double Zero.

Moving past him, Vahri was already kneeling near Crash's body, her medpac in her hand. Perfo tried to take everything in at once: the Black Light soldiers stationed nearby, the blood spatter that now decorated the wall of the corridor, the motionless heap that bulged beneath the parka. And now, as Angel stood, Private Glick-who lay useless on the ground, weeping. Stepping over, Perfo offered a hand. "Come on Glick, get up."

Private Glick remained motionless, his face still locked on the body of his former lover and teammate. As Vahri gently pulled the parka back, Perfo noticed Glick begin to tremble. "Come on Private, lets get up," Perfo went to place a hand beneath Glick's shoulder but the Sullustan clamped his arms together, preventing any assistance while he continued to blubber.

Turning his hand into a knife-edge, Perfo drilled his fingers into the small crease between Glick's body and arm and clamped a vice like grip around his arm. With little effort, Perfo hauled Glick from the ground and spun him so they were face to face.

"PRIVATE!" Perfo shouted, giving the Sullustan a shake. It appeared to bring Glick out of his mourning and the blubbing stopped. He dropped his voice and peered intently into the Private's large round eyes. "We have hostiles in the area. So, get your ass over to DZ and compile a list of what he needs from the armory to secure the substation. NOW!" Perfo ordered the young man, giving him a powerful shove that sent him stumbling towards the adjacent corridor. Glick stopped, glanced once more at Crash's body, then back at Perfo as if he were going to say something. Perfo crossed his arms and leveled a gaze at the younger soldier that would melt durasteel and without another sound Glick retreated down the hallway and out of sight.

"Sir, he was just..." Angel began but Perfo turned his stare on her and she clamped her mouth shut.

Inside, Perfo felt empty, like he always did when he lost a soldier. But the Lieutenant in him knew there was time for mourning and time for action, and right now he couldn't afford to have an impromptu funeral in the middle of the corridor with unknown hostiles still running around. "I know Angel, but I need him to be a soldier now, not a liability." Stepping over to kneel beside his new medic, Perfo tried to block out his own feelings for his quirky young pilot and examine what he could of the body. It was a total mess and he looked away, finding a spot on the floor to focus on.

"What happened here Vahri?" he asked quietly.

Golden eyes fixed on the body, Perfo watched as the Mengali's nostrils twitched and she tilted her head ever so slightly. Finally, she turned to him. "There's a stench of death here. Not just Motash's, there is the smell of decay, of dead flesh, long dead...weeks maybe."

"Weeks?" Perfo shook his head. "What happened to Crash? What-who did this?"

Vahri silently put away her med pack and motioned to the body. "She struggled, but not for long. See the lacerations on her arms? She was trying to defend herself when something attacked her. Given the position and severity, she dropped her guard in pain and that's when her attackers went for the kill."

"Attackers? More than one?"

"Yes Sir. Or one very skilled individual who is adept at using various weapons simultaneously. I'm not sure, but by the look of these wounds," Vahri shook her head, "I can't tell for certain."

"Sir, her weapon is still at full charge. Whatever hit her must have been fast, I doubt she ever saw it coming," Angel said, standing far enough away so as not to crowd Vahri. Biting his lip, Perfo ran through the

possibilities in his mind. Pirates? Mercenaries? Slavers? He had no idea, and the abandonment of the station still posed a mystery. But, mystery or not, two New Republic soldiers had died, horribly. Removing his helmet, Perfo ran a hand through his spiked hair and tried to shake some of the sweat out. The docking sleeve was frigid, but the ship was stuffy-hot and the smell of blood was beginning to settle in his throat.

A high pitched squeal practically jerked him out of his skin and he spun in time to see the pink and mauve domed body of Rocket speeding down the corridor. In one swift movement, Double Zero repositioned himself and the droid slammed into his tree-trunk leg, coming to a dead stop. Perfo wasted no time in going over to the droid.

"Rocket, you don't need to see this," he said, placing a hand on the polished silver dome. The droid's triangular "eye" locked on Perfo and Rocket emitted a low whine. Having limited experience with droid-speak, Perfo still knew enough to know that Rocket was inquiring how bad the situation was.

"There's nothing anyone can do for Crash now. But I need you to suck it up, and put it out of your mind-er, memory core. We still need to make sure the Lyra is refueled, and the life support is restocked. We still have a job to do and we need the ship ready to go." He was answered by another lowly whine but nodded and slapped the top of the R7's dome. "Rocket, you're still Vornskr Pack and we need you. You can do it. Just be careful and watch out-we don't know what we are dealing with, so if you see ANYTHING out of the ordinary, you comm us and you hang back, ok?" This time he was answered with a few deliberate beeps and the R7 turned, slowly heading back from the way it came. Only once it stopped, swiveling its dome around for one last look at its former owner and partner, then it was gone.

"You handled the droid better than you handled your Private Glick," Qualto said from behind him. Turning, Perfo noticed the man was expressionless, still sporting goggles and a stick of tabacc in his mouth. "That boy went scurrying down the corridor like he had Vader on his six."

"Glick is a soldier and trained to deal with death and loss. Rocket and Crash were like one unit," Perfo replied.

"Right, and one is flesh and blood, the other is a tub of machined parts. Interesting to see which you farm your sympathy out to."

"I don't need a psyche exam from the likes of you, not now Qualto," Perfo said. Rage and anger threatened to surface but he held them at bay.

"So what are we up against? Have you found out what the hell is going on in this station?" Qualto asked, perching himself atop a cargo container. "One of my people is lying in pieces in the frelling airlock. Now I want answers Kryll..."

"We BOTH want answers! You aren't the only one who's lost someone!" Perfo glanced down the corridor where Crash still lay. "Private Novan is scouring security logs now, but it appears most of the stations occupants hopped aboard some lifeboats and sent themselves into space over a month ago. No idea why." Perfo then relayed the information about the remaining lifeboats being jettisoned.

Qualto listened with no emotion, finally shrugging. "Odd. Still, if your R7 can get us refueled, we can be on our way and still arrive at Mengali on schedule."

"I'm aware of that Sergeant, but I think right now we need to focus on what the hell just happened here. Someone has killed two good soldiers and I'll be damned if I'm going to just leave without finding out who and why," Perfo turned and nodded to Angel and Vahri. "You two, get a medcart and get Crash and Private Frost to the infirmary and put their remains in stasis."

"Negative," Qualto said beside him.

"Excuse me?" Perfo locked his stare on the man and stepped closer. "I didn't catch that."

"Black Light takes care of its own, Kryll. We'll handle Private Frost's remains, in fact, we already have, Sir," Qualto said, turning away.

"Sergeant," Perfo snapped, he was about to tear Qualto a new orifice when his comm went off. Jamming his helmet back on his head he toggled the mic open. "Perfo, go."

"LT, its Deuce. What's the situation?"

Sighing, Perfo dropped onto the cargo crate. "We've lost Crash and Private Frost. Attackers unknown, motive unknown. Hell, we still need to check the ship, whoever did this could be sitting in the freaking mess having a sandwich."

There was several seconds of silence, then Deuce came back across the comm, and Perfo could tell she was fighting back a world of emotions. "Copy that sir. When you're done with, when you're finished on the Lyma, you may want to double time it back to the Substation."

"It's still a mess down here Deuce, any particular reason why we need to hurry?"

"Yes Sir. We found survivors."

Standing back in the substation, Perfo leaned in over Hobbies shoulder and narrowed his eyes on the small monitor. The image was dim, and showed a shadowy medbay with ten horizontal tubes marching across one side. All were dark except for the last three, which emitted a faint blue glow.

"Zoom in Hobbie," Deuce said to Perfo's right. Complying, the camera zoomed in and tracked over to the innermost of the illuminated tubes. As the image adjusted into focus Perfo could see the faint outline of what appeared to be the profile of a humanoid male.

"Hasmik, Lucius," Deuce said, dropping into the chair alongside Hobbie and staring up at Perfo. "His wife Foyra and daughter Jeeble are occupying the other two stasis tubes."

Perfo leaned against the back of Hobbies chair while the camera zoomed back out, snaking his fingers under his helmet and rubbing his temples. "And we're sure they're alive?"

"Affirmative LT, show him the log Novan," Deuce said.

"Yes sir," Hobbie replied. "I was able to access the medlab system, apparently it's on a separate dataline from ops and admin. According to the physicians log it looks like they were put in stasis about eight weeks back pending a cargo shipment of meds that was supposed to eliminate a virus they'd contracted from a bad batch of Corellian Stringfish," Hobbie said. Leaning in and tapping a key as the image of the medbay switched to a scrolling medical file, "looks like a nasty one, so they put 'em on ice to keep them from suffering."

"So, they just got sick and someone stuck them in a stasis tube and what? Left them?" Perfo rolled his eyes.

"Apparently. Those stasis tubes are fully automated. The subject is kept suspended in bacta, and a shot of protein is injected once a week, then the tube recycles the waste, turns it back into protein and the cycle repeats," Deuce gently caressed one of her aqua lekku as it curled up beneath her throat.

"Tasty," Hobbie curled his face into a mask of disgust.

"Nope, efficient. They could probably live for a year on the same amount of protein you get out of a fizz can," Deuce said. "So, where's Vahri and Angel? They going to join us?" Deuce asked.

Perfo had filled in the rest of the team upon his return with Private Glick. So far the young Sullustan had clammed up and Perfo put him back to work on finding a potential Ops Tower database line. Through the transparasteel viewport he could spy Double Zero and Taan assembling an E-Web heavy repeating blaster in the hallway. "They'll be along shortly. Qualto had his people scouring the Lyma for intruders, but last check they'd found nothing. Not a trace of anything."

"LT, I hate to ask, but what happened to Crash?" Hobbie asked.

Before Perfo could speak, a tiny whisper filled the small station. "Something cut her. Something cut through her, took her beauty away, took everything," Glick spoke, looking down at the table mapper, but Perfo could tell he wasn't paying any attention to the glowing layout. "She barely had a chance to scream." Stepping over, Perfo put his hand on the Private's shoulder and gently turned him around.

"Glick, look, we need to know what the hell is going on here and who is out there moving against us, so get to work on this mapper so we can find Crash's killer and get some payback, alright?" Perfo squeezed Glick's shoulder and stared hard at him.

"Yes Sir. I'm sorry, just, seeing what was left of her like that..."

"I know. We all cared about Crash. That's why we are going to find out who did this and bring them to justice," Perfo said.

"Might make us late for Mengali. Might make us short if we lose anyone else," Deuce said, leaning on the table and locking her eyes on Perfo.

"I know Sergeant, but that's a risk I'm willing to take. Plus," Perfo gestured around him, "this is supposed to be a SAFE haven for New Republic sympathizers. We can't just take off and leave someone on here to kill again. Our job is to save lives and that's what we are going to do."

"It's a BIG station sir. They could be hiding anywhere," Deuce said.

"That's why it's important we get the security camera feeds up and working and get a layout of this place so we know where to look," Perfo tapped the map table and nodded to Glick. "So let's move people."

The doors hissed apart and instinctively everyone froze. Angel led the way, her helmet tucked beneath one arm while Vahri followed. Both looked tired and offered a half-hearted salute to Perfo before dropping into a pair of stools pulled up against the mapper.

"Not a thing on the Lyma sir," Angel said, pulling a thin canteen from her belt. She took a draw and offered it to Vahri who waved it away. "We went over every inch of that ship with Qualto's people. Wasn't a lot of cargo brought on board except the arms and gear for the Mengali, and that was locked up tight."

"That's some relief," Perfo said.

"We did as you ordered, everyone exited and once Rocket sealed the airlock we retracted the docking sleeve. Nothing gets on the Lyma now unless they are able to hold their breath a long time and break the security codes," Vahri said.

"Sir..." Glick said, eyes locked on the table. "I think I found a database line."

"Good work soldier, where is it?" Perfo asked, following Glick's gaze. The Sullustan traced a line across the table that Perfo could tell was somewhere below their current location.

"About forty five levels below us and through engineering," Glick said tapping the table. "Straight down this access chute. Every other way is either welded shut or inaccessible from our current location."

"Gonna be a long climb down," Deuce said shaking her head. "I'll go LT."

Leaning back and twisting, Perfo tried to work out a muscle spasm that was holding up in his left shoulder, he was about to speak when the door hissed apart again and Qualto entered, bracketed by Kriegs and Zoobie. Perfo could see other Black Light soldiers setting up sentry positions in the hallway adjacent to Double Zero and Taan.

Zoobie was fully armored while Kriegs carried her helmet under her arm. Her deep indigo eyes locked on him with her mouth curled into what Perfo could only interpret as distaste. Deuce had been right, Kriegs was an Ubese—a race from a harsh, irradiated wasteland of a planet where life was painful and short. When encountered off of their homeworld, they were more often than not avoided—if possible. It was the first time he'd ever seen Kriegs face and he noticed a ring and long studded chain fell from the right nostril of her almost non-existent nose, curling into the darkness of her flat black shoulder length hair. A glaring red encircled "1" stood out on her chest as the most colorful thing about Kriegs. He noticed the juxtaposition in numbering, Zoobie was now sporting a "2".

"Excellent, you're here." Perfo leaned back. "You will save me having to tell this several times. He then relayed the information about the Ops Tower and the patients. Qualto took it all in without speaking.

"Are we going to retrieve them? We simply can't leave them here," Vahri said, eyes bouncing between Deuce and Perfo.

"Sergeant El'Kar and I have already been through this. To answer your question, yes, we are going to rescue them," Perfo replied. "They are New Republic citizens on a station sympathetic to our government. Now, the station is huge, so we are going to have to get the security cameras and datalogs online to find out what happened here and who killed our people so we know what we are up against."

"Excuse me, SIR," Qualto said, leaning across the mapper so that the faint blue light cast his goggles in shadow. "We aren't sector rangers, nor are we a search and rescue unit. Fiddling around on this station is going to eat up valuable time and make us late for Mengali. We do have a schedule to keep."

"Frell your schedule! We had one of our people DIE!" Angel snapped, jamming a finger in his direction.

"As did I. But Frost would have wanted us to go on with our mission, nonetheless," Qualto said.

"Really? Would she have also wanted you to leave a family of three floating in stasis until they died of malnutrition or something killed them?" Vahri interjected.

Qualto crossed his arms. "If it meant our mission was fulfilled, then yes."

"Then she was a BITCH!" Angel snapped, drawing near Qualto. To his right, Zoobie moved in and was within arms reach when Perfo appeared between the two privates, using his body as a barrier.

"Alright," he said with a cold detached voice. Everyone stopped and focused on him. "I will NOT have this on my watch. If you want to fight, then you can all do it in a New Republic brig. But you are NOT going to do it here, now. Is that clear?" Both nodded their understanding and retreated a few steps.

"Deuce, get everyone in here," Perfo said, casting his eyes about the room. A moment later the small substation was packed with all of the Black Light and Vornskr Pack.

"Now," Perfo continued when all were settled, "We've all lost friends, and I know that burns inside. And it hurts. But we're soldiers and our job is to save lives and eliminate threats, and right now whoever killed our comrades is on this station, somewhere. So," he pointed to the map table, "we are going to split into two teams. The first team will head to the lower levels and hack into the admin database line so we can access the security logs and hopefully find out what the hell happened and what we are up against," he shook his head and leaned back. "The fact is this- this damn station is just too big for our teams to scour effectively, and we DO have a mission pending," he looked at Double Zero. Hobbie?"

"Sir?" Hobbie looked up.

"We get the comm. lines up and running, can you set an emergency proximity beacon to warn away approaching ships? So no one docks here?"

"Should be able to, yeah," Hobbie nodded.

"Good, that's objective number one. Next," he ignored Qualto who sat grinding his jaw together, saying nothing, "we send out team two to find a way into the Science and Medical tower, because that family of three down there needs our help. We get them, we set up that beacon and then we get off this station and we head back to New Republic space, I put in some calls, we get three or four platoons and we come back here and scour this place from top to bottom."

"What about OUR mission?" Qualto said, gesturing to the Black Light soldiers.

"You get another team assigned to take you to Mengali."

"Your hump will land in the fire for this Kryll," he snarled.

"Maybe, but that's a risk I'm willing to take. Finally, I want you ALL to be on guard. You come up against ANYTHING out of the ordinary, you report in for backup. Are there any questions about what we are going to do?" Perfo looked directly at Qualto and cocked an eyebrow challenging the man to argue. To his surprise, Qualto began to smile.

"Not at all Lieutenant! In fact, I will be happy to take Black Light and search for a way into the Science tower," Qualto said, jamming a new cigarra into his mouth.

Nodding, Perfo crossed his arms and began circling the mapper table. "I appreciate that Sergeant."

"Of course. Teamwork is what Black Light is all about," Qualto said, his voice dripping with sarcasm. It almost made Perfo sick, and he felt more and more like he was talking to a Coruscant street performer every time his counterpart opened his mouth.

"That's excellent to hear, because teamwork is exactly what we are going to need to accomplish our objectives. That being said, the teams will be staffed by both Black Light and Vornskr Pack, while you and I monitor from here."

Qualto's smile never faltered, but his response was passed through clenched teeth. "But Sir, I thought..."

"You don't think Qualto. You obey orders. Clear?" Perfo said, stopping and turning to face him. "Or do you and I need to go and have a private talk?"

Tension filled the room like gas and Perfo believed he could almost feel it, closing around him and around everyone else. Finally, Qualto gave a curt nod.

"Your show Kryll. But if I lose another of my soldiers, there will be hell to pay."

"You, and your soldiers, follow my orders and no one will lose their lives," Perfo said.

Smirking, Qualto leaned towards Perfo, pulling his cigarra from his mouth. "That right? I sure as hell hope so Kryll, because as of right now you are zero for two."

* * *

Far below Vahri, in the darkness, something moved. She heard the flap of wings, then, as she instinctively tightened her grip on the crusty rung of the access ladder, flinched as something brushed past her cheek, pulling free several strands of hair.

"Dammit! Don't they spray for those things!" she heard Hobbie exclaim somewhere above her. His voice bounced throughout the darkened access shaft as his helmet light twisted erratically, illuminating worn durasteel aged with rust and neglect. They were already twenty minutes into a steep descent and Vahri's arms, not weak by any measure, had begun showing the first signs of fatigue.

"Novan! Save it! According to Glick's schematics we still have another fifteen levels to go before we reach access hatch 47-B. Until then I don't want to hear a peep out of you," Deuce said from below. Vahri was stuck in the middle of "Team Two", which consisted of Deuce, Hobbie, Rontack, Double Zero and four of Qualto's people, Privates Porik, Shog-ul'sii, Chanorce and Elfingtor. They said nothing to the rest of them, though Vahri suspected they communicated between themselves on a private channel in their sealed helmets.

She'd thought about expressing her apprehension to Perfo regarding his plan, but she knew better than to speak up during his interaction with Qualto. The truth of it was, that the station was huge, and even by bringing the security cameras online, it was unlikely they would find the killers. It was like trying to find a repulsor coil in an asteroid field-damned near impossible. And yet another delay in the Mengali Operation didn't thrill her, but there were lives at stake, and she couldn't turn her back on the family trapped in the stasis tubes. Still, she understood Perfo's intent and Crash's loss touched Vahri more than she was comfortable admitting. The girl was young, innocent and had a bright future ahead of her, a future that was snubbed out in a slicing frenzy of violence that reduced her to an unrecognizable pile of gore.

Setting her jaw, Vahri realized she was gripping the rungs with white knuckles. Easing up, she continued, trying to focus on the task at hand. Due to the shutdown of the turbolifts they were forced to use the long vertical shafts to get from floor to floor. In older stations they'd done away with stairs long ago as lifts were simply more reliable and practical, especially when visitors were navigating hundreds, if not thousands of levels. The downside was now evident, as her shoulders and biceps began burning with fatigue.

Finally, a dozen meters below, a series of beeps filled the shaft as an access hatch let out a mechanical click as it dilated, dumping faint blue light into the darkness. Shadows played against the shafts far wall as the

team began clambering from the access ladder into the tunnel. Finally, they were all arrayed, weapons at the ready.

"Alright people," Deuce said, unpacking her Longbow Rifle from her back harness. "We've got a quarter mile of hallways to get through until we reach the database junction box. So, stay sharp and watch your six. Everyone got that?"

Vornskr Pack nodded affirmation, while Black Light simply stood motionless, weapons at the ready.

Her brow coming together in a sharp peak, Deuce walked up to the nearest of the Black Light soldiers, Private Elfingtor, and looked up at the soldier who towered at least six inches above her. "Private, I asked if you copied what I just said?"

"I heard you," the soldier replied, the voice coming across as a raspy whisper through her mirrored helmets vocabulator.

"You heard me, Sergeant," Deuce corrected.

Elfingtor stood motionless, saying nothing. Passing off the Longbow to Double Zero, Deuce turned to the massive soldier, himself clad in black armor. "Corporal Double Zero, did YOU hear what I said?" Deuce asked.

"Affirmative Sergeant El'Kar," Double Zero responded, the rapid mechanical staccato of his voice rebounding off of the dingy walls of the corridor like the report of a heavy repeating blaster. "You ordered us to stay sharp and watch our six."

"Man, I never get used to that," she heard Hobbie whisper from behind her.

Deuce was pacing now, circling the statuesque Elfingtor. "Excellent Double Zero! Because, if nothing else, we ALL need to be on the same page. We have someone out there who has KILLED our comrades. If we were to come under fire, I need to know that I can trust EVERYONE on MY team. If not, well," Deuce stopped in front of Private Porik, "I might just have to send some people BACK up the shaft so they can sit in the substation while WE hunt for the killer of their teammate and friend. Is THAT clear to everyone?"

"What if we don't listen to you? Are you going to 'take us down' like you took down Zoobie?" Elfingtor asked- a mechanical snicker from the other Black Light soldiers followed.

"Oh! I understand now," Deuce said, her scowl turning into a faux smile. "You think because some meat puppet got a lucky shot that I'm not worthy to lead you on this op? Is that it? Well?" she was in front of Elfingtor now, looking up with both lekku sliding back and forth across her back, twitching.

"Something like that," Elfingtor said, leaning forward slightly.

Her movements a flash, Deuce fired two rapid shots into the softest part of Elfingtor's full body armor-just below the ribcage, and as she doubled over, Deuce was already moving, grabbing Elfingtor by the helmet and throwing the soldier head first into the unforgiving durasteel corridor. Something cracked, and the large soldier crumpled to the ground. Deuce was on top before anyone could move, jerking free the mirrored helmet and slinging it across the hallway.

Fiery red hair fell from Elfingtor's head and cascaded down around her shoulders as Deuce turned her over and stood up, placing a boot across the woman's neck. Elfingtor was a humanoid, with pale yellowish skin and a pair of pronounced brow ridges that ran vertically from her temples up along the contours of her skull.

"Cripes, does Qualto have any guys in his unit?" Hobbie said, popping a stick of stimchew into his mouth.

"Stop! Stop this madness!" Vahri exclaimed, stepping in front of Deuce and Elfingtor. "What the hell is wrong with you all? We're on the same team! We're all New Republic soldiers! What would make you think it's ok to turn on each other?"

Deuce looked up, her boot nestled against Elfingtor's neck and tossed Vahri a smirk. "That's choice coming from you Private. How many of your own team have you put in the infirmary?"

She was right, and Vahri almost threw her hands up and let the two finish each other off. But something pulled at her to resolve this- that if she gave up, none of them would make it out of this alive. "Sarge, please, let her

up," she replied, trying to reason. "You've proved your point, and I'm sure Private Elfingtor understands that you're in charge here and that we need to work together, yes?"

On the ground, Elfingtor, silver eyes locked like lasers on Deuce, spat a wad of blood on the ground as her hand encircled the top of Deuce's combat boot. "Yeah, I'm clear..Sir," she said through clenched teeth.

Slowly, Deuce removed her foot and offered a hand to Elfingtor. She refused it, instead rising on her own and retrieving her dented helmet, quickly replacing it and returning to stand with the rest of Black Light, who were now all standing at attention.

"Vahri is correct. We don't have to like each other, but unless we want to wind up victims, we sure as hell better learn to work together-for now at least. Are we all clear on THAT?" Deuce asked, retrieving her rifle.

This time, everyone, including Black Light, responded with a sharp, loud "Yes Sir!"

Mouth curling into a curt smile, Deuce nodded. "Good. Then let's leave this bit of unpleasant business to rot in this corridor and get to work. We've got a lot of ground to cover and someone out there has designs on turning us into bite sized pieces."

With Vahri back on point, they walked for what seemed like hours, maneuvering through corridors and in some instances, entirely deserted engineering levels. More climbing was needed, but it was through access hatches that led to lower levels, unlike the shaft crawl they had to endure earlier. Throughout, Vahri's unease continued to grow. Something was alive on the station, and had killed. At every turn she felt as if something or someone was watching the team's movements, but as they continued, they found no evidence of life. She was the first to smell the stench of decay. Stopping in a red lit narrow corridor of hissing machinery and drifting clouds of steam, Vahri slowly edged forward, scanning the massive pipes and thousands of feet of electrical line and wiring that hung from the high ceiling like jungle vines.

"Cripes! Smells like someone dropped a load of Bantha dung and mixed it with a stick," Hobbie said from somewhere near the rear of the group.

Advancing, she stopped when she spied a crumpled heap in the middle of the rusted grating. Weapon at the ready, she slowly advanced, eyes scanning the darkness overhead and the hundreds of nooks and crannies that surrounded her. Just a meter away, with the smell of rotting flesh almost unbearable, she knelt down and inspected what appeared to be a body.

Turning her weapon around and nudging the mass, she was horrified as it rolled over; the decomposing face of what used to be a middle aged humanoid with a single eye cavity pulling free of the grating-while leaving some of the gelatinous orb stuck to the crusty metal.

Parasites had been to work, and the skin literally crawled with them, moving and feasting on what was left of the corpse.

"Hora ner'lor," Vahri mumbled under her breath in Mengali. It was a curse her father taught her-one of the few, but she could think of nothing else to say to the rotting body.

"Looks like another victim of our mystery killer," Deuce said behind her. Vahri nodded and stood. Eyes still locked on the body.

"Perhaps. But I don't see marks that match what I saw on Crash or Frost. In fact," ignoring the gore and parasites, Vahri leaned in close and circled the body. "I can't find any cause of death."

"He fell," a gravelly voice said. Looking up, she saw Rontack had stepped up and was shining a glowrod overhead. In the gloom above, obscured by hanging wiring, she could see a catwalk, its safety railing severed and wrapped up in the jumble of wires, where it slowly swung back and forth.

Shaking her head, Deuce offered her own curse beneath her breath. "Hobbie? Comm Perfo and tell he we found another body."

"Affirmative," Hobbie replied, still near the rear of the group.

"But, why? Why would the killer not slice him up? If it had time to cut through the safety rail and push him, why not just cut him?" Deuce said, shaking her head and looking up at the tangle of wiring.

Turning the body ever so slightly, Vahri saw a bulge from beneath the shoulder of the orange and yellow jumpsuit. Producing a vibroblade, she thumbed the humming weapon to life and sliced the material open, fishing her fingers inside. They closed on something cold and hard, and slowly, she pulled free the object.

"What did you find Private?" Deuce asked, shifting her gaze from the catwalk to the body.

Holding up the object, Rontack redirected the light so it illuminated the blaster nestled in Vahri's hand. "Blaster Sir. DL-44, and, if I'm not mistaken," she ejected the power cell and nodded. "Fully charged."

Deuce leaned against the nearby railing, then, glancing at it and back up at the severed railing, pulled away and stood in the middle of the catwalk.

"Hey! I couldn't raise LT on the comm., must be something between us and the substation disrupting our signal. What's the sitch?" Hobbie said, sauntering forward. "GOOD NIGHT!" He froze upon seeing the corpse. "What the hell happened to this guy?"

"He fell," Rontack said, focusing the light on the victims face.

"He fell into a pile of ugly! What's that on its face?" Hobbie said, peering closer with squinted eyes.

"Flesh eating parasites, probably nesting and laying eggs as we speak. Don't get too close." Vahri said, stepping away.

"Uhm," Hobbie looked around, "We're still on a SPACE STATION right? Where the hell does this crap come from? Killers, flesh-eating parasites? These aren't the frelling moons of Yavin were on!" He said, shaking his head.

Ignoring him, Deuce began pacing. "He's armed. By the look of his uniform, he's a station tech. Probably knows this place like the back of his hand right? So how does he get into a fight and not get time to pull his weapon to defend himself, yet his attacker has time to slice the catwalk up and push him over instead of cutting him up? Why bother?"

Focusing on the catwalk above, Vahri squinted into the darkness. Gradually, she was able to pick out fine details about the railings, and as her eyes adjusted to the ambient light, she could make out small hardened bulbs of durasteel where the railings were severed from the catwalk. "Those railings weren't cut, they were melted through."

"Melted? Like with a laser torch?" Hobbie asked.

"Affirmative," Vahri nodded and turned her attention back to the team. Black Light had advanced, leaving Double Zero several meters back to cover their rear.

"The victim wouldn't have stood around waiting for the killer to cut through the railings. Which means..." Deuce said.

"He was ambushed," Vahri finished. "But for what purpose? Why ambush an apparently unarmed techie when you are armed with vibroblades you can use to cut through him like a week old protein bar?"

"Maybe it's not the same killer?" Hobbie said shrugging.

"Go on Novan," Deuce said, facing the younger man.

"Think about it Sarge. A cold hard killer geared up like you guys have described, someone who could go through Frost and Crash without them even getting a shot off. They wouldn't have any trouble with this guy," Hobbie shrugged. "But, someone else, someone who's only weapon might be a laser torch, say, wouldn't have the weapons available to slice n' dice. So they cut up the railing, and when Joe Schmoe here comes idling through the area, Bam! The catwalk snaps and he takes the plunge."

Deuce was pacing again, and Vahri noticed the Black Light soldiers had formed a protective perimeter around the group and was focusing on Deuce. "This guy weighs, or DID weigh, maybe a hundred pounds soaking wet. Hell Hobbie, YOU could have killed him bare-handed."

"Thanks Sarge," Hobbie rolled his eyes.

"Point is. Why go through the trouble of severing the railings? Why not just snap his neck or push him over?"

"Maybe the killer didn't have hands," Rontack offered up. He had his rifle pointed down, but Vahri could sense that at a moment notice he was ready to bring it to bear and unleash hell.

"What kind of killer doesn't have hands?" Deuce asked.

Glancing at his boots and eyes going wide, Hobbie looked back up at the team. "Droids. A lot of droids ain't got hands."

Silence fell across the group like a shroud. Finally, Deuce pointed at Elfingtor. "You, burn the body. Hobbie, you keep trying to get LT on the line and Private?" she locked her eyes on Vahri and gestured to the blast doors at the end of the catwalk they stood on. "Get us to the database line. We need to get this job done and get our asses back to base."

* * *

Studying the glowing blue hallways and conduits on the mapper table, Perfo cycled through several frequencies in his helmet, trying to raise either team and having no luck. "Team two, you copy? Deuce? Hobbie?" Frustrated, he stopped and dropped onto a stool, leaning across the table, trying to block out the pounding in his back. The muscle spasm had developed into a full-blown ache and his armor all of a sudden felt like it weighed a thousand pounds. Reaching for his mug of coffee, he realized it was empty and turned from the table for a refill.

Glick was still seated at the consoles, staring at the display screen that showed the darkened med bay; beside him, Private Add'ion, one of Qualto's people, sat tapping away diligently at another console, trying to make a remote connection to the communications line. Outside the viewport, he watched another pair of Black Lighters man the massive E-Web cannons that faced down both ends of the corridor. On the far side of the substation, Qualto and Kriegs were seated in chairs, pulled close and talking in low hushed tones. A brief movement caught Perfo's attention and he watched Krieg's reach up and slowly run thin pale fingers along the left side of Qualto's face. The Sergeant responded with a smile, and a murmur, and to Perfo's surprise, playfully flicked his tongue against Krieg's fingertips.

"Excuse me, Sergeant," Perfo said, glancing down into his empty cup. Out of the corner of his eye he watched Kriegs quickly return her pale hand to her black leather glove and Qualto's smile disappear. Both stood in unison.

"What is it?" Qualto said, his face returning to a rigid mask.

"I was just wondering if Zoobie had commed you by any chance. I haven't heard from Team two and wasn't sure if Zoobie was aware she needed to comm. me directly."

Smirking, Qualto dropped back into the chair. "I haven't heard anything. Although if we weren't hiding out here we could be down there with our teams right now, and not have to worry about playing radio tag."

Stepping over to the coffee machine, Perfo stuck his cup underneath the glistening nozzle and waited while hot brown liquid shot into its bottom. "I would like to be out there with my people as much as you Sergeant, but someone needs to stay here in case the station has more visitors, especially those of the Imperial kind," he took a sip of the steaming liquid and risked a small swallow that led a trail of pain and flavor down his throat.

The excuse was valid, but more importantly, he didn't trust Qualto or his people, and wanted the renegade Sergeant as close to him as possible-for now at least. "I would rather see a Destroyer coming from the other side of the system than be stuck in a fuel bubble and have a platoon of Stormies waiting for us when we got back."

Leaning back, Qualto glanced up at Kriegs. "What about you Number one? You think we should be stuck here in an office while our people crawl around looking for a way to reach some frozen colonists?"

"I think this is a huge waste of time," Kriegs looked back, clearly addressing Qualto and ignoring Perfo. "We have a mission on the other side of the galaxy we should get to. This is a pointless distraction," Kriegs said with a voice as harsh as her features.

Nodding Qualto's eyebrows peaked. "How very perceptive!"

Turning away, Perfo returned to the mapper table, and decided the best thing to do was to spend his energy scouring the schematics and trying to find something useful. Qualto and his people were insufferable, but right now there was nothing he could do about it.

He was examining a subbasement when he noticed Qualto standing across from him. The man had moved without making a sound and was now watching Perfo from behind dark goggles.

"Something I can help you with?" Perfo asked, glancing up.

"I think it's time we had a serious talk," Qualto said.

"I didn't think you were capable of that. Fine, I'm all ears, what?" Perfo said, leaning back and dropping on the hard cracked leather stool.

"We are already approaching six hours of being on this station. It's huge, and likely, the killers were some backwards-ass pirates or scavengers. Very possibly they had a ship waiting and are already gone. Thrillkillers, as it were. So, how much longer are we going to waste on this floating city before you realize what everyone already has—we aren't going to locate the assassins, that family down there isn't worth saving and we are doing nothing but burning time and energy peaking around every corner and doorway in this heap?"

"You know Qualto," Perfo took a mighty swallow of the hot liquid and relished the burn as it tore through his body. "We are going to spend as much damn time as I like. Because, unless something happens to me, I'm still in charge and you are still taking MY orders. I'm tired of this song and dance from you, I'm tired of you questioning every move I make and I'm tired of the way you and your people walk around here looking down your noses at the rest of us," Perfo was fuming now, and had come off of his stool and was leaning across the mapper table, just a meter from his counterpart. Behind Qualto, Kriegs rose and was now flanking her superior officer who was leaning back, arms folded across his chest.

"Now," Perfo continued, "I don't know what rock the New Republic found you under, or whose tail end you are waxing up on high to give you this 'untouchable' attitude, or what your agenda really is, but now, out here, in the middle of nowhere, with nothing around but Imperials and space dust, you had better straighten up and get on the same page of MY program, because if you don't, as soon as the teams get back, I'm going to jerk a knot in your ass and tie you to the back of the Lyma and tow your sorry carcass to the nearest New Republic planet, where you can cool your heels in a brig for the next few months!" Perfo was shaking, his eyes locked on his own reflection in Qualto's goggles.

"You sound like a broken record Kryll. Is this how you inspire loyalty in your troops?" Qualto said, himself leaning forward. "By threats and empty promises?"

"Sir," Glick said from the console.

A string of Gizerian curses, taught to him by his former commanding officer and friend Vic Palisades, froze on Perfo's tongue. Eyes still locked on his own distorted reflection in Qualto's eyewear, he redirected his attention. "What is it Private?"

"I've got a connection to the main admin database. Team two must have been able to hack in!" Glick showed the first sign of life in hours.

"Excellent Private. Can you access the security cameras yet?"

"Negative sir, but I've got access to security logs, camera logs, visitor and docking info, and here," Glick tapped the screen, "The Station Master's private logs."

Nodding, Perfo leaned back and stepped away from the table. "Good I want to see that. I'll help you sort through the material. At least ONE of the officers in this station should be doing something productive," Perfo said, turning away and joining Glick at the console.

"Station log, Volume one hundred and fourteen, log number seven hundred and twelve, or thirteen, hell I don't know," the flickering holo of the station manager declared. Projected from the circular display set in the console, Perfo studied the ghostly blue female torso as it continued, her face staring off into space with a pair of tired dead eyes.

"This is assistant Station Manager Captison. I doubt anyone will find this, but if you do, I pray for your safety. Station Manager Dozer Mcrosh was killed just over a week ago, and in that time over four dozen people have gone missing. I..." the woman, perhaps in her mid twenties, ran a hand through her closely cropped hair. "I've ordered everyone who was left to abandon the station, not that there were too many left. Scuttlebutt tends to move quick around here," she gave a sly smile like it was the punchline of a private joke and continued. "We had only a few spacers docked here in the first place, but when some of the station personnel started finding the remains..."

Hitting the pause Key, Perfo leaned in and inspected the woman's face.

"What is it? You know her?" Qualto asked from behind, his cigarra breath creeping up like nerve gas into Perfo's nostrils. He and Kriegs had stepped over once the holo had started, and were now watching along intently.

"Maybe. There was smuggler who used to run the Perlemian Trade Route named Paxzie Captison before the blockade. Ran medical supplies and foodstuffs, but dropped off the radar a while back," Perfo restarted the holographic entry.

"..they took off. They had enough room for their precious cargo, but refused to take any of us. Bastards," she snarled, but there seemed no real malice behind it- like it was too late for it to matter or that she would have done the exact same thing given the chance. "The two freighters we had docked here for station use, well, those were stolen by people we thought were our friends, but who only gave a monkey lizard's butt about saving their own lives. We still don't know much, other than what we saw on the video feed after the Senator was killed."

Perfo froze the entry again. "Glick, pull up the docking dossier and see if you can find an entry for a Senator, dating back about seven to eight weeks maybe." He restarted the holo.

"There are only three of us left. I saw that Mcrosh hadn't been updating this or keeping the logs current, he was the biggest packrat I've known, kept everything else but was too damn lazy to update this thing. Guess it really doesn't matter now," she shook her head and leaned back, bringing a bottle of whisky into view and taking a hard hit from it. "We're going to load into a station hopper and try to point it towards a hyperspace lane. Out here it's the only chance we have really. If we're lucky we might get in someone's way and cause them to drop out and rescue us. It's risky, I know, but staying on the 'Outpost is suicide with that thing running around, and I would rather get blasted into space dust than slaughtered like a Bantha. We sent out three parties of ten heavily armed men to catch it or kill it-none of them ever returned..."

"Sir, there's no entry for any sort of 'official' craft that docked here, but look," Glick pointed to the screen as Perfo paused the holo and turned to look, "there's an entry for a Torigor Class V shuttle, designated 'Celestial Carriage-6NH', port of origin unknown. Other than that, there's only a few other freighters..."

"That's it," Perfo leaned back. "That's our Senator."

"How can you be so sure?" Qualto asked from behind. "Look, there's at least ten other craft that docked here that week."

Turning in his chair, Perfo offered himself a smirk at Qualto's expense. "Oh, how do I know you ask? Well, allow me to enlighten you," Perfo tapped the numbers now flashing on the screen. "Months back, when the New Republic realized some of the Senators stuck in Imperial space might want to make contact in an effort to jump ship to our side, they set up a coding system for starships. That way, in case of an Imperial raid while en route, the ships would show up under a pseudonym. However," he crossed his arms and leaned back "if the New Republic came across them they would have to know they were the real deal. So, they designated undercover craft with matching letters in the first two names of the ship, and added the designation "NH".

"Sounds pointless and complicated," Kriegs said to Qualto, who nodded in agreement.

"Yes, it does."

Shrugging Perfo began scanning the other arrivals. "Maybe, but I'm sure it keeps some politicians kid moving up the ranks in the New Republic military."

"So, what does 'NH' stand for?" Glick asked.

"New Hope," Perfo replied. "Glick, can you cross reference the Celestial Carriage with a docking pad number and see if they were assigned any quarters here on station?"

A moment later, Glick nodded. "Affirmative Sir, Docking Pad Number Eight Seventeen, and before you ask, it's already deserted-I checked. However, they were assigned a suite in the Hotel Focus in the East tower, logged under the name "f, Ratlaa."

"Ratlaa? I don't know any Senator by the name of Ratlaa," Perfo said, leaning forward.

"There's probably a lot of people you don't know. It's a big galaxy Kryll," Qualto said, shoving a cigarra between his teeth.

"Anything attached to that hotel account Private? A cred line, room service, anything like that?" Perfo asked, linking his display up with the newly established admin database. A wealth of information began scrolling across his screen. A few functions weren't available, but he could imagine Novan hacking his way through the security measures and establishing a solid connection as he spoke. He might have to recommend him for another promotion after this.

"No sir, there-wait. There's something attached here. Looks like an encrypted file of some sort. Let me see if I can cut through," hands moving with speed, Perfo realized Glick was doing his best to occupy his mind. As long as he had something in front of himself to get his thoughts off Crash, he would be alright.

"Looks like a vid file sir, there's is a note attached. It says "McRosh, here is the footage. I've deleted it from our system, so there is no other copy of it, per your request. Gorimar." Glick shrugged. I noticed the name Gorimar in some of the Hotel Focus entries, I guess he was the manager.

"Good work Private. Bring up the footage," Perfo ordered, leaning back.

A moment later grainy video footage flickered to life on the monitor, showing a comfortable hotel suite, with the tinted color image panning back and forth. The suite was large, and illuminated by a low table with a dozen candles casting dim light and shadows throughout. Several pieces of furniture occupied the space, along with a massive wraparound grav couch and a floor to ceiling window that offered an unobstructed view of Eldrick Outpost's dark towers and the black of space beyond.

"Hmmm. Voyeurism, I might like this hotel," Qualto said, smirking. Perfo fought back the urge to slap the cigarra out of his mouth.

"Looks pretty standard, I don't, wait, there..." Glick pointed to the screen. The camera stopped at the movement in the room, and zoomed in, locking on a wide shot of a red Twi'lek female, clad in a nightgown, exiting an adjacent room and pacing back and forth. She was speaking into a comm., though no sound accompanied the file, and gesturing wildly with her free hand.

"She looks angry. Perhaps her dinner was late?" Qualto cracked. Behind him Kriegs snickered and Perfo threw them both a hard glance before returning to the footage.

"I can speed this up sir, doesn't look like much is going on," Glick said, hand moving towards the controls.

Movement in the corner of the screen caught Perfo's eye. "No, wait," he peered close as something long and angular unfolded itself from behind one of the sofas in the far darkened corner of the room. Ambient white light reflected off of its metallic-or leather-shell, revealing curves and the red glow where eyes should be on its smooth rounded head. With her back turned the Senator was oblivious, still focusing on her comm. call. Moving on thin legs, Perfo at first thought the creature was a droid, then noticed it looked too organic, it's movements too fluid to be mechanical. Whoever or whatever it was, was clad in black, its arms and legs longer than most humanoids, with a halo of wires encircling it's head, swaying silently with each movement. It was almost insect-like, Perfo thought, and watched in horror as thin blades telescoped from its fingers, catching dancing starlight across their edges.

The Senator never knew what hit her, and her flimsy negligee was no protection from the razor sharp talons her attacker wielded. From behind he heard Kriegs take a sharp breath and noticed Glick's hands starting to twitch. On the screen, violence and ferocity that would make even the hardest of soldiers wince played out

as the assassin moved in a morbid ballet, dismembering the woman and redecorating the suite in a shower of blood and bodyparts.

"Son of a bitch," Qualto murmured.

Perfo glanced to the side and saw Glick's mouth mumbling silently. Gently he reached over and pulled the private away from the console. "Go out and get some air son, I'll call you back in when I need you."

Without speaking Glick nodded and stepped away, disappearing through the substation doors.

Sighing, Perfo planted his face in his hands and drove his knuckles in his temples. Next to him Qualto dropped into Glick's seat and began fiddling with the keyboard.

"Hmph. I've seen this before," he heard Qualto say.

Looking up, Perfo looked over and was surprised that the Sergeant had zoomed in and was running several image enhancement filters on the still image of the killer. The close up revealed a humanoid, it's gaunt gray face lined with deep vertical slits, clad in a partial black facemask with a series of wires sprouting from his skull, where they fell down along his back. Red eyes, set into crimson sockets hovered above a mouth that was turned into a sinister smile, revealing rows of sharp pointed teeth. The remainder of his body was clad in a black leather bodysuit, now gleaming in a wash of red.

"Ugly bastard. So what is it?" Perfo asked as the image grew brighter and clearer.

Leaning forward while the fingers on his left hand still tapped away at the keyboard, Qualto pointed to several pieces of tech affixed to the killer's skull and shoulder. "Imperial Assassin. It's geared up with prototype armor and cybernetics-I saw some of it in use a while back. A company out of the Corp Sector was trying to unload a whole heap of cyberware on the Empire before they went out of business. This is some of their gear"

"I've never seen anything Imperial like that before. It looks like a rabid animal," Perfo said, eyes still locked on the screen.

"Yeah, well the armor and cyberware wasn't the only thing that was a prototype. The whole damn program was. It was named "The Red Coda Project" or some damn thing. I heard they scrapped it soon after because they couldn't control them."

"Why?" Perfo narrowed his eyes. The assassin image was almost clear now and something etched across its neck captured his attention.

"Remember I said the company that sold them the cybernetics was about to go out of business?"

"Yeah."

"Right. It's because their implants caused "irrational and unpredictable behavior" in test subjects. Some Imperial scientists thought that wasn't a big deal and that they could fix it. This was right after the first Death Star bit it, so the Empire was reeling and looking for any advantage they could get," Qualto leaned back and nodded at his handy work with a smile. "So, they get cybernetics on the cheap, wire up some sorry bastard to be a killing machine a 'Poof'! Instant assassin. No need for years of training or expensive high cost equipment. Worked out real well, till their Red Codas started going bat-nuts."

"Can you zoom in on its neck?" Perfo leaned in close, tapping at some sort of discoloration on the assassins skin as Qualto began to fiddle with the image. "How the hell do you know all of this anyway?"

Snickering, Qualto glanced sideways at him. "What do you think we do out there Kryll? Make handbaskets and sip wine all day? Information is power boy, and I'm all about power. Plus I've got some friends in NRI who keep me up to date. You would be surprised what a few cases of Corellian Brandy will get you."

"No, I wouldn't," Perfo said leaning towards the screen. "Frell," he felt his stomach flip-flop as the image cleared and sharpened. Scrawled on the assassin's throat, riding along the vertical bumps of gray flesh in intricate black Aurabesh letters, was the word "Soraloria".

"What? " Qualto peered close and read the word aloud. "Soraloria, what's that? A place? A title?"

Shaking his head, Perfo barely choked the words out. "It's a name. A female's name. A..." he leaned back and shook his head, glancing at Qualto, "a wife's name- a dead wife," Tapping the crazed face on the screen, Perfo let out a loud sigh. "I know who this is."

* * *

Fuel bulb #4 was enormous, and as Team One stepped onto the catwalk that circled the hemisphere, the first thing Angel noticed was the murky yellow haze that hung a dozen meters below. They had to climb down a dozen levels just to access the bulb, and now, standing inside the door, with several Black Light soldiers and Taan, Angel began to feel uncertainty and apprehension flowing from the team like a stench. High above, tubing easily six meters in diameter hung in massive loops, disappearing into the haze and illuminated by ambient light that happened to glint off of the moist coils. A small mist of condensation floated down, coating everything in a fine sheen of moisture.

Far below, what used to contain starship fuel now served as a concave city of sorts. Through breaks in the drifting fog, Angel spied cargo crates, containers and any other junk that was unable to find a home elsewhere on the station, towering as tall as a hundred meters in some spots. The caverns stretched the entire length of the massive globe that still carried the overpowering reek of fuel, eventually disappearing into darkness. In several areas, fires burned, creating small goutts of red flame that belched black smoke into the air. Hundreds of high-beam naked spotlights, jury rigged by some industrious tech, hung from the ceiling throughout-gently moving back and forth and causing shadows to slink and creep on their own amidst the towering cluster far below.

Staring over the edge of the catwalk, Angel spied the ladder they would need to climb to reach the bottom. Easily six hundred meters long, it curved like a snake along the bulbs belly, glistening in the darkness with a fine sheen of mist.

"And Hobbie said this was the most DIRECT way he found?" Angel asked out loud. Beside her Taan peered over the edge, gripping his rifle a bit tighter.

"Yes. He said that due to the welds and construction, and even some structural damage, this was the most direct-and safest-path to the Science lab."

"He also parks stimchew behind his ear when he's not chewing it," Angel shook her head and tried to spy the opposite end of the expanse, but to no avail. Far below, in a break in the haze, something moved, and Angel zeroed in on it. A trio of black orbs, trailing tentacles, soared along the top of a landfill, with one peeling off towards a towering geyser of flame. "What the hell are those things?"

"Extinguisher droids. They use them on some large salvage ships," Taan shrugged. "Fires break out all the time whenever a massive amount of junk and trash collects. Watch." The droid that had pulled off was now hovering near the pillar of flame, and in a moment, a white foam poured forth from one of its tentacles, beating the red glow into submission.

"Nice. It looks like they have their work cut out for them. I'm surprised this whole place doesn't blow," the stench and apprehension was working in tandem with her twitching muscles to make her sick. Cold sweat began to run from beneath her skintight skullcap and she forced herself to take a deep breath.

"What's the holdup Private?" she heard Zoobie bark from behind. Turning, Angel leaned back on the railing, crossing her legs. "Just getting a feel for the area, Sir." The trip down to the fuel bulb had been quiet and uneventful, with Taan and Angel pairing off for point duty. Black Light barely said a word, using military hand gestures and clipped speech to communicate with them. There were only four other Black Lighters besides Zoobie, but none of them had spoken a word to she or Taan.

"Why don't you get a feel by starting down the ladder? We've got an objective to complete and it doesn't include sightseeing," Zoobie said, gesturing to the split in the railing and the first rung of the ladder that peeked over its edge.

"I was thinking we might try to find a ladder that wasn't doused in slick fuel and moisture. There might be another way down towards the end of the catwalk," Angel said.

"You aren't here to think, you're here to obey orders. MY orders. The shortest distance from point to point is a straight line, and our exit is directly across from us. Now, you're our advance point, so move," Zoobie finished.

"Taan will follow you Angel," Taan said, shouldering his rifle.

"Thanks partner. Just make sure you watch your grip."

They'd been climbing for the better part of an hour, and were still only half way along in the descent. Hands gripping the slick rungs, the entire group moved cautiously, taking two breaks on several small platforms that were arrayed along the ladder. Now that they were below the haze they were able to see, basking in the light of flames and airborne toxins, that the city wasn't so much for storage as it was simply a massive junkyard, overrun with drifts of trash and waste.

Continuing on, sweat now poured from beneath Angel's helmet in buckets, causing her armor to rub and chafe every part of her body. Blocking it out, she focused on the remaining four hundred meters they had left to climb. Taan was immediately above her, with Black Light following: Zoobie at the top, then Nanch, Lofrite, To'Kleen and Nemok-Dur, according to the names stenciled on their chests. Glancing once again over her shoulder, Angel was wishing for a repulsor sled when a scream from above caused her muscles to freeze and her head to snap upwards.

From directly above, arms cart-wheeling to find purchase, a body plunged in freefall. Slamming into Taan, the soldier never stopped, and Angel watched in horror as both plummeted directly towards her. Gripping tight with her left hand, she swung aside to avoid getting hit by the writhing mass of confusion, and with the surge of adrenaline, everything suddenly slowed. Pivoting, she fired her right hand out like a rocket, locking a powerful vice grip on the wrist of the Gand findsman as he passed, swinging him back onto the ladder. The plummeting soldier was To'Kleen, Angel noticed as the body turned, drifting backwards, hands slipping from Taan's slick wet grip as he tried for one last grasp with his free arm. A moment later the soldier was gone, lost in the murky darkness between them and the fuel bulbs surface.

"Thank you Angel," Taan said, and she could feel him still shaking slightly beside her. The White Velocity was still pounding through her veins, activated by the sudden surge of adrenaline. She forced herself to fight it back, and slowly let go of his arm.

"No problem," she managed, trying to regulate her breathing.

"Keep moving," she heard from above. Looking up, Zoobie was leaning out from her rung and staring down at them through her armors mirrored visor. Without word the rest of the Black Light continued, and to prevent being overrun, Angel nodded and she and Taan began to descend, taking extra special care to check their grip.

They eventually reached the bottom and spread out. Almost a dozen meters away Angel located To'Kleens body, lying in a contorted mass and half buried in a mound of decaying foodstuff. A half dozen small animals, rotund creatures with slick bulbous bodies and long snouts had already found their evening meal, and were prying at the folds and creases of the black armor with unmatched vigor and high pitched squealing. The reddish glow of blaster fire lanced out from behind Angel, vaporizing two of the creatures upon contact. The others scattered, disappearing underneath mounds of twisted metal and starship components. Still firing, Zoobie advanced, tracing a line of shots into the mass of trash, where they ignited several more small fires. To Angel's surprise, To'Kleen's helmet turned in their direction, and the Black Lighter even managed to raise a forearm.

"To'Kleens alive! Get some light over here!" Angel said, advancing and working to free her medpack.

"Stay back, we've got this covered," Zoobie said, freezing Angel in her tracks. Assuming one of Black Light was the team medic, Angel cleared out of the way to give plenty of room. Turning, Zoobie gestured to the soldiers with some sort of hand signal Angel had never seen. Immediately, Lofrite moved to To'Kleen, stripping her of weapons and gear, and, once clear, Nanch stepped forward, and to Angels horror, leveled her weapon at To'Kleens body.

"What are you doing?!?" Angel screamed, turning to Zoobie.

Ignoring her, Zoobie unclipped a small cylinder from her belt and tapped several small red buttons. Without another word, she aimed it directly at To'Kleen and pressed a small red button. The prone Black Lighter shook

violently and then went still, her hand balling into a fist before falling lifelessly open. A moment later Nanch's weapon belched a stream of blue flame that covered and incinerated the trash mound and everything around it, including their former teammate.

"To'Kleen was alive! We could have saved her!" Angel screamed. Trembling, she didn't realize her hands were moving towards her weapons until Taan grabbed her, holding her back.

Pulling a pair of macrobinoculars from her belt, Zoobie removed her helmet and handed it off to Nemok-Dur, her sharp blue features showing no emotion. "Unlikely," she replied, scanning the horizon. "A fall of that height, she would have had internal bleeding, and several broken limbs at best, which we simply don't have the equipment or time to treat. She went from soldier to liability the moment her hands left the rung of that ladder."

"LIABILITY? What kind of sick stoopa are you? Do you care so little about life that you are willing to let one of your own people die?" Angel screamed.

Slowly, the binoculars came away from Zoobie's face, and her white pupils locked tight on Angel's own. "I care a great deal about life, Private. In fact, I care so much about the lives of the rest of this team, that I sacrificed one of my own so that we wouldn't be burdened in our trip through this inferno," she stepped up, towering above Angel, so that an occasional droplet of sweat fell from her white flattop, spattering against Angel's face. "At best, we would have had to strap her to one of my soldiers to carry her along. And what if we got into a firefight with the killer that's out here? What if we needed to move quickly? Who would take her? Who would sacrifice themselves? And then we would have two dead soldiers, not just one."

They stared in silence at each other and after a moment, Angel nodded. "I understand. Still, to let her lay there and kill her..."

"To'Kleen was a powerful warrior, and she will be missed. However, she was also Black Light, and was willing to sacrifice herself so that we could accomplish our mission. I suggest we all focus on that now," Zoobie said.

Angel bit back a string of curses and nodded. "Fine, I'll go collect the body."

"Negative, we don't shuttle our dead," Zoobie said. "We need a scout, not a funeral procession, now..."

"Sir, we've got movement, headed this way," Nanch said from behind Zoobie. Pointing into the distance, several black orbs were crossing the expanse towards the team, dipping and floating along the tops of the trash mounds. Lofrite and Nemok-Dur had already advanced and were leveling their weapons at the approaching droids.

"Those are just extinguisher droids, probably coming to put out your impromptu funeral pyre," Angel said, turning away from Zoobie and gesturing to the blaze that now puffed black smoke into the air. "We saw some of them at work earlier."

"Droids, or no, I..." Zoobie began, but a grinding gurgling noise caused everyone to pivot. Bursting forth from the chest of her armor, a tri-grip manipulator claw on a blood-slick tentacle elevated Zoobie like a ragdoll, arms flayed out to her side. Over her left shoulder, rising with just the slightest hiss of a repulsor engine, an ovoid extinguisher droid, easily two meters in diameter locked a central red glowing eye, ringed with smaller, dilating eyes, on the group.

"Gah...Bast..." Zoobie sputtered, a bloody mist spraying from her mouth as she looked down at the metallic gore-covered serpent that drifted back and forth from her chest.

To Angel's right someone began firing away from the group, screaming something about the other droids advancing, but she couldn't look away, couldn't pull her eyes away from the hovering blue woman and the glistening red spiked manipulator that supported her.

"Shoot it!" Someone screamed.

"I can't! I might hit her!" another answered.

In one gruesome motion, several tentacles, tipped with identical spiked manipulators, simultaneously curled into view, one taking Zoobie's rifle away while another clamped down on her face, where its pinchers began to

tighten. Arms moving on their own, Angel unsheathed her swords, but they remained frozen in her hands as a high-pitched whine filled the air. She recognized it a beat too late—a motor.

In a blur, the manipulator clamped over Zoobies face spun, rotating her head several times and causing her body to jerk madly as spine and vertebrae snapped and crumbled. The bloodied tentacle still protruding from her chest pulled free, swinging wide and showering Angel in a spray of blood. The droid drew back and threw Zoobies body by the head into the air, where it sailed lifelessly, disappearing into the bulb's murky haze.

Its red eyes glowing with no remorse or malice, the droid focused on Angel. Behind her, the sound of screaming, blaster fire and the mechanical whir of repulsor engines fell away as she stared, wide eyed at her adversary, gripping a pair of pitiful swords that wouldn't even make a nick in its hide. Gleaming armored metal, lightning fast movement and spiked tentacles were merely its tools-appendages. A perfect killer, its singular purpose to eliminate whatever was in its way, its lack of ethics, morals or remorse for its actions were its weapons, and as the adrenaline pulsed and chemicals tried as they might to make her move, she remained cemented to the ground as the massive killing machine loomed above her.

"No, not like this. I can't..." she stammered as the red glow from the droid's eye burned her retinas and her muscles refused to cooperate. She realized, now, too late, that the small sliver of metal still lodged in her brain from months back was what was going to kill her- the hovering nightmare now looming above her, its manipulators clicking in anticipation was just helping it finish the job. Suddenly, she was being thrown; from behind something had grabbed her and slung her to the side. Taan.

Moving with purpose, he shouldered his rifle and began pouring a stream of green blaster fire into the droid. Stunned, it retreated several meters, swinging several tentacles at the Gand, who also dodged back, still firing.

"Angel! Move!" his voice ripped through his breath mask, and in the brief moment he took to turn her way, the armored beast found its opening and struck. Disarming him, one pincer clamped about his throat and picked him up while the others methodically clamped down on his legs. In one last move of desperation, the Gand managed to pull free his sidearm and shove it into the glowing red eyeball, releasing several shots. It was a pointless gesture. Designed to withstand extreme heat and abuse, the blaster bolts dissipated harmlessly as its pincers locked on to both legs and arms, pulling apart in several directions. Angel just had enough time to turn her head away as the sound of Taan's torso hitting the ground filled her ears.

Forcing her body to move, she rose on unsteady legs as adrenaline and fear propelled her, across the mounds of trash and, scrambling, back towards the ladder. Screams filled the air as the sounds of blaster fire decreased, but she could feel it behind her, advancing. The murderous droid wasn't about to give up so easily.

Stumbling, the roar of blood pounding through her skull filled her ears, and, shoving her weapons back into their sheathes, Angel choked back tears, her hand moving to a small button on the inside of her forearm gauntlet. The ladder loomed ahead just a handful of meters away; still moving, she threw one last glance behind her. Two droids were almost on top of her, trailing glistening tentacles that were slowly beginning to curl into view, their sharp manipulators hungering for something soft to pierce.

Depressing the small hidden knob on the gauntlet, Angel's skin bristled with tiny bumps as her armor shimmered, then, in a wash of green electricity, took on the colors and textures of the reddish brown landfill she clambered across. The cloaking device made her one with her environment, with millions of tiny crystals absorbing and redirecting the light and environment surrounding her. Its internal circuitry also masked it from at least a dozen different kinds of sensors—she just prayed that her pursuers visual spectrum was one of those dozen. Never stopping, she grit her teeth and finally made it to the ladder, expecting at any moment to feel cold steel plunging through her back, but the attack never came. Propelling herself on limbs that screamed from fatigue, she was over fifty meters high when she allowed herself a glance back over her shoulder. Squinting, she could see in the distance the droids arrayed in a knot, with their tentacles moving in unison above something on the ground.

A moment later what looked like a black armored torso sailed from the cluster, where it crashed into a nearby trash heap. Choking back her breakfast, Angel closed her eyes and continued scrambling upwards, much to the protest of her arms and legs.

Packed in tight around the small monitor, Perfo replayed the video of the assassin and Vahri strained to find any useful information from the grainy footage. She'd never seen anything like it before, and the sheer brutality with which it moved and executed the helpless woman amazed her. Team Two had returned after establishing the connection and now all substation monitors glowed with life as they cycled through dozens of camera feeds arrayed throughout the station. So far they picked up little save for various droids milling about the hallways and corridors.

"This individual, at one time, was Colonel Shion Tirzee," Perfo said, tapping the screen and turning to the rest of the team. "A Pau'an from the planet of Utapau, he's been decorated over a dozen times by the Old AND New Republic for bravery and courage under fire and veteran of no fewer than three dozen conflicts, including battles in the clone wars against the Separatists."

"A freaking war hero, great," Hobbie said, perched atop the mapper table. "So what the hell is he doing out here, dressed in that getup and killing off our people?"

Sighing, Perfo stood and gently pushed past Vahri, she stepped aside and as the man passed could smell the stench of ointment come from him. "We pieced together that he must have been captured by the Empire and turned into this-thing," he gestured at the screen. "The senator must have been his primary target, and once he killed her he must have just continued killing," he leaned back against the substations door and shook his head. "Qualto, any word yet from Team One?"

Qualto's remaining seven soldiers were stationed around him, their black armor glistening like a chitin shell and as he looked up from one of the monitors, Vahri thought back to the insects that crept through the underbrush in the Mengali jungles, their slick ebony bodies glimmering in the moonlight. "Negative Kryll," he shook his head, "I don't see them anywhere. However," he stood, separating himself from his cocoon and crossed halfway to where Perfo stood. "I think we need to plan our next move. We know this killer is out there, somewhere, so what are we going to do? Spend the next month combing this station and play hide and seek with it?"

"Negative. We're going to get the station's beacon online, to warn off anyone who might come looking for fuel or refuge. Then we're going to load up, a team is going to secure a route back to the Lyma, while another team heads down and rescues that family," he turned to Hobbie. "Novan, you got the dataline to the admin tower up, right?"

"Affirmative, LT," Hobbie nodded.

"Good. Can you set up an emergency beacon that will override any other signal, and lock it down so it can't be disabled?"

Hobbie chewed his lip for a moment. "Maybe. I could set it up on an encrypted password and run the relay on a continuous loop through..."

"Good, get on it," Perfo interrupted and shoved the younger man off towards a console.

"Alright, sounds like you are finally talking some sense. We might even hit Mengali on time," Qualto said.

Perfo nodded. "You might, but not with us. We're heading to the nearest New Republic planet and we're loading up. Then we're rolling back in here with at least four platoons and we're going to scour this station from top to bottom til' we find Tirzee." Perfo leaned back, setting his jaw.

Vahri tensed upon hearing about the delay, but the loss of Crash had affected her, and, to her surprise, the desire to find her killer and rescue the family in the medbay kept her mouth sealed. Mengali had been through wars before, a few days wasn't going to matter now.

"Looks like you'll have to find another ride out to Mengali Qualto," Perfo finished.

"What the hell kind of soldier are you Kryll? Get your revenge on your own time son, I've got a team that has its own mission and we're due."

"I'm not just doing it for revenge," Perfo glared at the man. "I'm trying to prevent any more people from losing their lives on this damned station. You lost someone, do you want that to happen to someone else? Or have you forgotten?"

"I remember Kryll, and I remember I'm a soldier with a job to do. It's a shame you can't say the same thing."

"I don't answer to you, you answer to me. And it's not about revenge, it's about securing a New Republic safe haven and finding out what the hell the Empire did to Tirzee," Perfo leaned in. "Colonel Tirzee was a good man, I met him several times right after I joined the rebellion. He was with the rebellion from the beginning and ran numerous successful campaigns throughout the war. He was captured by Grievous in the Clone Wars and held prisoner for years before they rescued him. That he should make it through that, just to be captured by the frelling Empire and turned into this," Perfo trailed off and crossed his arms.

"He killed Crash sir, and this Senator, and Frost and who knows how many others," Deuce said from beside Hobbie on the mapper table. Her face was tight, and Vahri could tell she wanted to say more, but refrained.

"I'm aware of that Sergeant," Perfo snapped. "I know everyone is expecting a quick answer, but lets wait to hear from Team One. If they find a way down into the science facility through the fuel bulbs, then we can see about evacuating that family and getting them off station. If they can't," he gestured to Glick who sat on the opposite side of the mapper, scanning it with large bulbous eyes, "Glick is exploring an alternate route he just found that goes through several access tunnels and an arboretum at the base of the science tower. One way or the other, we are going to save their lives." From the table Glick looked up, his face hued in a blue ethereal glow from the crisscrossing lines of corridors and rooms scrolling by on the mapper.

"Sir, I told you that it wasn't an ideal route. It goes through close to several reactors and some of the atmosphere down there may be noxious."

"Acknowledged Private. But it's also the only other lead we have on a way to get to those people, so at the least it's an option. Make sure you load the route up into the team's datapads," Perfo said, stepping to the mapper.

"Done," Glick replied, picking up his own datapad and tapping away.

"Kryll," Qualto said, leaning against the console and gently brushing against Vahri as he did so. She felt her skin crawl as a fine sheen of his sweat clung to her arm like a glistening serpent. "Would you care to explain why we are still even discussing this rescue operation? You see what's out there, you know that this entire situation is fragged. Wouldn't it be best to cut our losses and, assuming Team One returns empty handed, we bug out?"

Vahri's pulse quickened and she looked sideways at the smirking lieutenant. "And leave this family? So they can die in those tubes, or worse?"

"You're a medic, try using your brain Mengali," Qualto said. "This family has been floating in those juicetubes for what? A month or better? You think they're just going to pop out ready to run a marathon?"

"That's not..." Vahri began but Glick drowned her out.

"Hey, he's right. Those people won't be able to keep up, I mean, they won't even know what's going on, you know?"

"Right, and who is going to take the time to give them a briefing on current events? Or how about a few days of rehab to get those legs working?" Qualto was on a roll now. "Or maybe we could just strap the tubes onto someone's back and they could just carry them out?"

"Qualto," Perfo began, but the man was shaking his head.

"Look, Kryll, put your personal feelings for me aside for a moment and think about this," he sleazed his way over to stand beside Perfo at the mapper table and Vahri felt like drawing her rifle and shoving it through his face. "It's just easier, and more practical to leave them here. In the end, when they die, they won't even know what happened," Qualto shrugged. "Better than popping them from those tubes and letting them suffer before they get sliced up like my soldier or your pilot."

"That's enough Qualto, I see your point," Perfo scowled.

"You're a monster," Vahri hissed.

"Private!" Perfo said, looking up.

"He is, Sir, but no one wants to say it," Vahri felt her blood pumping now, her face going flush and her hands beginning to tremble. "He doesn't care about any of us, only his own soldiers, and barely that. He treats them like servants, like dogs," the words barely cleared her lips when Kriegs, a flash of motion, slammed against Vahri as they crashed to the floor, knocking over several chairs in the process. Overpowering her, the soldier straddled Vahri, unleashing a series of rapid punches into her ribs; most hammered harmlessly against her torso armor, but a few snaked through, unleashing sharp pain that forced the breath from her body.

Amidst the screams of everyone in the room, Vahri spied Qualto watching, his mouth turned into a wide smile. Adrenaline surged throughout her body, and as hands descended from behind Kriegs, pulling her free, Vahri reached up with one hand, securing it in the falling black swoop of hair, while her right hand shot upwards, landing a solid powerful blow into Kriegs's left eye.

"Get them apart, now!" Perfo screamed from behind as the Ubese grunted in pain.

"I'm going to kill you, you Mengali trash," Kriegs snarled, spittle peppering Vahri's face in a fine spray as three Black Light soldiers pulled her away. With one last lunge, Kriegs managed to score a final shot, landing an uppercut that struck Vahri square on the jaw and sent a white flash of light sparking behind her eyes and causing her to almost black out.

The fight was over, and Vahri, head still swimming from the chin shot, found herself being lifted to her feet by Deuce and Rontack. Trying to focus, she felt something warm streaming from her mouth and running hot down her throat.

"Looks like you need a medic yourself Private," Deuce said, pulling a bandana from her pocket and balling it up against the corner of Vahri's mouth.

"SKRAG!" Kriegs howled, baring a set of sharpened fangs at Vahri. Straining against her own teammates, her eye was already swelling shut, a purple crater rising among the pallid skin. Vahri smiled, gave the woman a wink, then spat a globule of blood and saliva to the ground.

"How do you feel about mixing up our teams now Kryll?" Qualto said, shaking his head. "You..."

"ANGEL!" Double Zero's metallic roar cut through everything, freezing everyone. Vahri felt her skin go cold at its sound and turned to see what would have caused the outburst from the stoic armor-clad monolith. It was worse than any of them could imagine...stumbling into the room, Angel, alone, collapsed onto the floor, her body raked with sobs and shaking uncontrollably. Instinctively, Vahri's hands went to her medpack on her belt and she was alongside her downed comrade, gently turning her over with one hand while another closed on an injector filled with sedative; she froze, remembering the narcotic that was now coursing through Angel's body and let the small cylinder fall back into her pouch. Settling the woman on the ground, her hands came away slick with blood, and without missing a beat, she looked up at Perfo.

"It's not hers," she said, holding her palm up at the Lieutenant.

"No...not, not mine," Angel managed through cracked lips. Her eyes were wide, twitching uncontrollably, lime pupils darting across the ceiling. Vahri pulled her canteen free, and lifting Angel's head, allowed the slightest amount of water to fall into her mouth and across her sweat soaked face.

"Calm down, it's okay, you're going to be fine," Vahri whispered, swallowing a mouthful of blood that accumulated from her altercation with Kriegs.

"Ask her where the hell my team is!" Qualto said. He'd moved to the door and was scanning the outer hallways. The rest of Black Light had shouldered their weapons and pooled out into the hallway, with two splitting off and manning the E-webs.

"Dead...all of them," Angel shook her head and took another hit of water. Her trembling had subsided and Vahri could see her trying to fight off the effects of White Velocity and whatever hell she'd endured to reach the substation. "Taan...Zoobie, the others...ambushed by droids, we didn't stand a chance."

Hobbie, standing in the circle that surrounded Angel, looked at Vahri, then Deuce. "Taan? Aw frell man!" he shook his head.

Deuce nodded, her jaw clenching tight. "More damn droids. Sounds like this war hero has him a small army to do his dirty work."

"Wait, you're telling me some rust buckets are running around here killing off MY team?" Qualto screamed. "That's it, we're going hunting!" he stormed out into the corridor. "Kriegs! You and the others load up the mortar rounds and the detonite we brought along...we..."

"Negative," Perfo said. Standing between Black Light and the doorway, his voice was barely above a whisper. Everyone stopped, turning to stare at the man who had his eyes locked on Angel, unblinking.

"You stow that Kryll! My people are dead because of YOU!" Qualto shrieked.

"That may be, and I'll be the one to take the fall, but I'm not going to send more of OUR people off to die. We've already lost too many soldiers and this is simply out of our scope," he shook his head. "Dammit, Crash, now Taan..." he looked up at Qualto, his eyes glittering in the pale blue light. "Get your team together Sergeant, we're going to..." he stopped, then cocked his head to the side. "What the hell is that?" Echoing throughout the substation, coming from somewhere down the exterior hallways, the screech of grinding metal on metal, accented by a grinding, clicking noise sent daggers of ice rushing along Vahri's spine.

"Hobbie! Get that beacon operational! DZ, Rontack! I want you on those E-webs, now!" Perfo shouted, readying his rifle.

The soldiers were already in motion, sprinting through the doorway, with Rontack and Double Zero taking up position behind the massive blaster cannons as the Black Light soldiers dropped alongside and began monitoring the weapons power generators. Vahri stood in time to see, through the substation windows, a wall of disjointed, hulking droids, lurching down the hallway. Some were as big as a speederbike, some smaller than an R2 unit, but they all were armed; sporting deadly meter-long vibroblades fused to their appendages, or toting massive railguns, their unblinking, glowing red eyes-and they were all red-left no doubt as to their purpose.

"Fire!" Perfo ordered, triggering a volley from his rifle. It flared, angry red and beautiful as its destructive energy tore into the first rank and file of their mechanical adversaries, ripping them to scrap and setting off small explosions across the line. The rest of the soldiers followed suit, their sidearms and rifles drowned out by the roar of the E-webs, now sending orange tubes of energy into the advancing droid army down both ends of the corridor. Hell.

Hell had been unleashed in the Eldrick Outpost and as Vahri turned away from the blinding flare of blaster fire, the stench of blasted ionized air and burning oil hit her nose as explosions down both hallways pushed heat into the substation, turning it into a furnace. Throughout the station, warning klaxons began to wail, and from overhead, an ancient fire-prevention system began to shower the world with a fine rain of putrid water. Emergency lights kicked on, red lightrods set intermittently throughout the station bathed every glistening surface, while outside, the blaster fire dropped off enough so everyone could hear Perfo ordering a cease-fire.

Ears ringing, Vahri turned in time to see Angel stand and retrieve a blaster rifle from a nearby gear bag. In her free hand she pulled something from the inside of her forearm gauntlet and jammed it against her neck. Her eyes went wide, and for a moment she seemed like she couldn't breathe.

"What the hell are you doing!?!?" Vahri shouted above the ringing in her ears. You need to..." but Angel was already pushing past, her face streaked with sweat and gore.

"They need us, and if I'm not a soldier, I'm a liability," Angel shouted back.

"You're already a liability, don't make this worse," Vahri grabbed her by the arm, turning the woman to face her. It was too late. The White Velocity had her fully in its grip and the only thing that would stop Angel

now was death-either hers or that of the mechanical butchers prowling the hallways. The Zeltron curled her mouth into a smile, her eyes dancing with a mixture of adrenaline and insanity.

"Something's still moving!" someone screamed from the hallway.

"That's my cue," Angel winked and pulled from her grip, sprinting into the hallway.

Before Vahri could protest, before she could even open her mouth, the commotion in the corridor was drowned out by the scream of metal directly overhead; an avalanche of wiring, conduit, ceiling grate and horror fell from the sky-tearing, ripping, and in a blur of motion something was coming out of the ceiling for them. Hobbie scrambled from his station, snatching his rifle up just as a hunk of Black Light torso armor-gleaming with crimson, slammed into the computer he was working on. Bringing her rifle to bear, she let loose with a volley of shots at the hulking tangle of wires that fell over the gleaming metal assassin that perched atop the mapper table. They did no damage, and whatever it was, it wasn't the same fodder that lurched down the corridor just moments before.

"Move!" Hobbie screamed, tackling Vahri through the doorway and out into the hall. They collapsed like lovers at the base of the substation steps, and Hobbie took aim and fired one precise shot into the lock set alongside the door. It exploded, and in reaction the substation door slammed shut just as the mechanical nightmare leapt from the table.

From both sides the E-webs opened up once again, filling the corridors with a brutal orange strobe and deafening roar. They couldn't hear the droid as it slammed a pair of tentacles against the thick transparasteel, but its glowing red eye was locked solidly on them and it began hammering-relentlessly-at the transparasteel door.

"What the hell is that thing?" Hobbie screamed.

"Angry," Vahri said, getting to her feet.

Perfo was beside them, throwing concerned glances down both hallways, now choked with soot and smoke from the various fires that raged, despite the overtaxed sprinkler system that soaked everything in the hallway. Black clouds billowed throughout the corridor, reducing visibility to just a few meters while the only evidence of success was the raging orange fires at both ends of the corridor. Vahri had been here before, surrounded by hostiles, using the burning wreckage and chaos of her clan's own destroyed vehicles as cover, waiting for just the right opportunity to seize the advantage.

"We've got to regroup, we've got to bug out of here," Perfo said, looking up at the hammering monster in the substation. "Damn!"

"Yeah, I know!" Hobbie screamed.

"Did you get that beacon operational?" Perfo asked.

Hobbie nodded. "I think so. Didn't have a lot of time to do anything fancy before all hell broke loose, but yeah, I think I got it set up."

"Sir," Vahri shook her head and grabbed Perfo's arm. "That family, we can't leave them like this, we can't just leave them to die."

He stared at her, and amidst the roar of blaster fire, the raging heat of combat and the screams of metal and hammering of death just meters away, she watched his eyes go soft. "People could die Vahri, I can't give that order."

"People will die if you don't, Sir."

Qualto, like a specter, materialized behind Perfo and dropped to one knee, water pouring from his head in streams. "What the hell Kryll? We've about waded through this last wave, we might have a window to get our humps out of here."

"Get your people ready Qualto, you secure a path to the Lyma, we're going down to rescue that family."

"WHAT?!? Are you insane?" Qualto screamed as the E-webs began to slow, their rate of fire now coming in short bursts.

"Maybe," Perfo looked up, wiping water from his bloodshot eyes. "Take DZ and Rontack and Hobbie."

"No," Qualto said.

"No? Qualto, if there was ever a bad time for insubordination," Perfo was shaking his head, his hand tightening on the grip of his rifle.

"No, Black Light will go to retrieve the family. You and your people just make us a path," Qualto said calmly.

"What?" Perfo and Vahri both said in unison.

"It's your ship, you will need to get it primed, and none of my people are familiar with it. We're killers Kryll, not pilots. We're the most logical choice to go down there and to be honest, we have the best chance of making it out alive."

Vahri watched as Perfo turned over the factors in his mind, smoke drifting in thin wisps around his head. Finally, he nodded. "That family will need a medic, I'll go along."

"Sir, I'll go. The 'Pack will need you to get them to the Lyma," Vahri said. She glanced at Qualto who kept a blank expression the entire time.

"Why you Mengali?" Qualto asked. "Why are you so determined to get that family out? You don't know them, you don't owe them a damn thing!"

Vahri started hard at the man. He couldn't understand, wouldn't ever understand what she'd been through, what her clan had been through. The suffering, the dying, seeing children, barely old enough to walk, blasted from the face of her planet...never having a chance at life, never having a chance at anything. "I know what it's like to be abandoned," she said, water showering her from above, pooling in her eyes and falling down her cheeks, "and I know how important it is to get a second chance." She looked at Perfo, who simply responded with a nod.

"Deuce!" he shouted. In a moment the Twi'lek, face streaked black and slapping home a clip into her Longbow rifle, knelt down in the circle.

"What's up LT?" she asked, glancing at the hulking droid that was still hammering against the substation windows.

"Yeah, creepy, I know," Hobbie said.

"Black Light and Vahri are heading down to rescue that family. Take Angel in case they need back-up."

"We don't need backup Kryll!" Qualto said, shoving a cigarra in his mouth. Thankfully the sprinklers at least kept its flame at bay.

Perfo didn't respond, and as the E-webs fell silent and the crackle of fires throughout the corridor mingled with the thump-thump-thump at the station windows, he turned to Qualto. "No choice. If you get hit like we just got hit, and if there are more of those," he jerked his thumb at the window, "things, out there, you will need all of the help you can get."

"And what about you? What if you need help?" Qualto said.

His mouth creasing into a grim, thin-lipped smile, Perfo gave the Sergeant a look, a dangerous look that Vahri had never seen on the Lieutenant's face before. He jerked his thumb at Double Zero and Rontack who stood by without saying a word, as calm and casual as if they were on a flight deck instead of an infernal hell filled with fire and killer droids. "You think yours is the only unit that has stone cold killers? Then you've never seen these two go to work."

"I don't trust him, but given the situation, we don't have much choice," Perfo said to Deuce. He kept his voice low as Qualto and his team, just a few meters away, prepped their gear. The showers still fell from the high ceiling, drenching the soldiers and cresting the top of their boots; Melted slag and debris had clogged up the drainage pits alongside the walkways and there was several inches of water pooling on the ground.

"Why do you think he's doing this? Why the sudden turnaround?" Deuce said.

He didn't know. Since Qualto's offer just minutes before, he'd been racing through every possible reason why the Black Light commander would volunteer for what could easily be viewed as a suicide mission. "I don't have any idea, but keep your eyes and ears open for anything 'special'," he said, "I've got a gut feeling that he's up to something, and if we didn't need to clear a path I wouldn't even let him out of my sight."

"Copy that," Deuce said.

"Deuce," Perfo said, the words catching in his throat. They'd lost Crash and Taan, and in their place two cold spots filled his chest. He prepped himself for more.

"Perfo, don't," she shook her head. "This is just another op, just another job. We just didn't know what we were walking into, but we're going to walk out of here. All of us."

"Just, just make sure you make it back. You've got a date with a hacker to keep," he smiled.

"Just make sure YOU have our way clear," she nodded and turned to Vahri. "Ready private?"

"Ready," Vahri said, pulling her automapper/tracker from her gear bag. Angel was in a hushed conversation with Double Zero, who nodded and, digging into an ammo crate he'd brought from the Lyma, handed her a bandolier of frag grenades that she looped over her shoulder. She turned and saw Perfo watching her, and stepped over to him, offering small smile.

"That's a lot of ordinance," Perfo said, nodding to the munitions-laden belt.

"I've seen what those droid bastards can do Sir, and I'm not going down like that," she replied, stepping close. Perfo held his ground; he'd gotten used to Angels quirks and eccentricities a long time ago. She wasn't the only Zeltron he'd teamed with, though she was his favorite.

"I hope you don't need them, make sure you come back in one piece private," he kept his calm but the realization that he was sending this group off, possibly to die, tore at him inside. Angel smiled, stepping closer.

"Don't waste your goodbyes on me Sir," she slid a hand around his neck, and before he knew what was happening, had pulled him close, her mouth meeting his as her pheromones hit him like a shockboxer. The soldier in him shouted orders from the back of his mind to let go, to step away, but the man in him, the one about to face possible death and mutilation, said 'screw it'.

He bundled her close and for a moment lost himself in her kiss, letting passion and feelings long since untapped take over as the sweet scent of her body and tang of her sweat curled seductively about his nostrils, filling his mouth like the juice from a forbidden fruit. His chest thudded heavy and his breath, still tight in his lungs, burned hot.

Finally, they broke, her eyes swimming with lust and, he was sure, his doing the same. But duty, responsibility, and everything else that made him their leader, forced him away and he took a step back.

"Good...luck private," he got out, and even managed to snap a fairly respectable salute, though his chest heaved, lungs demanding air.

"Thank you...Sir," Angel smiled, and returned it, her breath coming in short gasps.

He realized both Vornskr Pack and Black Light were watching them both intently, and Qualto, shouldering his own rifle, had his thin lips curled into a smirk. "Wow, makes me wish I was the one staying back," he said.

"Don't. Your death wouldn't mean a damn thing to me," Angel snapped, her shoulders drawn square and her back ramrod straight.

He caught a glimmer of a smile on Deuce's face as she twirled her finger in the air. "Let's go, they ain't paying us by the hour." She looked back at Perfo and mockingly blew him a kiss. He rolled his eyes and turned to his own team.

"They got a hotel on the other side of the station LT, I bet there are plenty of vacancies now if you and Angel need time to..."Hobbie began.

"What are the odds that I'll be able to live this down?" Perfo asked, cutting him off.

"About as good as Princess Leia returning Hobbie's love letters," Rontack said.

"You didn't," Perfo cocked an eyebrow at Hobbie.

"Just a couple," Hobbie said, scowling at Rontack, "What? I didn't know she was seeing that freighter jockey!"

Perfo laughed, despite the situation. "Why doesn't that surprise me?" He turned and gestured Rontack to the front of his group as point. All advanced towards the smoldering barrier of melted slag and charred droid parts. Blue sparks still peppered several of the charred husks, sizzling as they jumped high and met the fine mist that still fell from the ceiling. Occasionally, movement would catch their eye, and a droid, its circuits still firing, would make a halfhearted reach for them; they were systematically blasted to scrap for their efforts. The body mound went on for half-dozen meters, and in some areas the chassis were piled so high it was like moving through a scrapyard.

"LT?" He heard Hobbie from behind. Turning, he saw the younger man squatting in a crouch, his weapon slung, picking through a charred mound.

"Yeah?"

"What do you know about this Tirzee?" he looked up, small waterfalls running from the edge of his helmet, glinting red in the near-darkness. "I mean, why droids? Why not rig the security system to flush the air from parts of the station? Or rig some explosives?"

Shrugging, Perfo looked past Hobbie at Double Zero who was covering their six. Smoke, mist and darkness obscured everything beyond the gleaming black soldier in a drifting crimson cloud. They could have just as easily been in a rain forest beneath an angry-blood red moon as the corridors of a space station. "I don't know. Maybe he's regressing. Maybe whatever they did to him left him a shell. He spent years on a Separatist Command vessel, surrounded by droids, night and day. Maybe he's falling back on what he learned during that time."

"Like to kill innocents?" Glick said. Even without pupils, the boy had a stare on him that worried Perfo, like he was watching something unfold behind the mirrors of his black wide eyes that only he could see, that only he was living. His finger was caressing the trigger of his rifle, and he was wound-tight.

"Then why not send something more powerful at us? Why not send your heavy hitters?" Hobbie asked standing and readying his rifle. "Why send these pieces of junk? I mean," he waved his hand at the mounds of scrap, "these things couldn't stand up to us, hell half of them were barely able to move. Why bother?"

"To weaken our resources, to gauge our response," Double Zero said, his voice rattling off of the surrounding metal.

"He's right," Perfo nodded. "This first wave was a test. I think that thing that landed in the substation is more indicative of what is running around these hallways now."

"Fantastic," Hobbie said, shaking his head.

They were just beyond the scrap now, calf-deep in water that filled the massive hallway and picking through a maze of abandoned station hoppers-small two-person repulsor vehicles some used in the wider areas of the station to get around. Some had light carbon damage, like they had been in a firefight, while others were nearly destroyed, sitting as nothing more than burned out husks. Busted delivery sleds and empty cargo crates added additional obstacles as their shoulder lights stabbed pale white beams into the soupy haze.

They were moving slow, deliberately, when they heard the scream of Rontack's blaster rifle from around a corner up ahead. It was followed a millisecond later by a green strobe that lit up the darkness like a supernova, sending mad reflections of light and shadow echoing throughout the corridor.

"Incoming!" Perfo heard Rontack over his helmet comm, and was already dropping behind an overturned sled when the Klatoonian, racing back down the hallway, turned and leveled a string of green blaster bolts down the corridor. Double Zero, Glick, and Hobbie had already taken cover and as Rontack hit the ground in a shower of water, ejecting a blaster clip and slamming home a fresh one, Perfo spied the targets of his attack.

Less than thirty meters away and hovering two meters off the ground, pointed like the tip of an arrow, no fewer than a dozen red glowing orbs slowly advanced from the darkness like a legion from the bowels of hell. Webs of electricity danced about the hovering nightmares, and as they passed among the spinning emergency beacons, they raised massive arms to knock aside crates and sleds that happened to be in their way. Beneath their chassis, mounted to what was once manipulator arms, were blaster cannons and chain guns, dripping and gleaming like the hungry fangs of a predator. Two advanced quicker than the others, bearing down on the group as the rotating barrels of their chain guns began the high pitched whine that preceded destruction.

"Down!" Perfo screamed as the weapons roared to life, belching ridiculous gouts of blazing energy at the makeshift barricades, ripping crates to pieces and slamming into the hoppers with such force that they bucked and jumped like wild beasts.

Sliding through the murky black water on his stomach, Perfo tried to block out the sickening foul stench that hit his nose and rain of slag and debris now falling from the sky. What didn't hit sizzling into the pool, smacked against his armor and, in some cases, landed on his fatigues where it began to burn into his skin. Hobbie was just ducking down after delivering a volley of shots, his offense met by the hammering of even more blaster bolts.

"Not going to last long against this LT" he screamed.

"Roger that," Perfo glanced around. Just a few meters away, Rontack and Double Zero were unloading on the advancing droids, their blaster rifles spitting bolt after bolt of destructive energy into the advancing chassis. Chancing a glance between the sleds, Perfo watched with grim satisfaction as the two lead droids sparked and flamed with damage, their hulking bodies crashing orb-first into the murky water, steaming and blazing as they flailed, then died.

From farther down the corridor, the main body of their enemy advanced, plotting, planning and taking their sweet time.

"DZ! What do we have!?! " Perfo screamed.

"This," he pulled a satchel from around his neck and held it out. "It's...special."

Perfo glanced around. They were at a junction, and just a few meters up ahead were a pair of blast-doors, partially shut, sat frozen in place. Set along the far wall were the controls, flickering with a rainbow of lights- they were still getting juice.

"Glick!" he screamed. "Get over there and see if you can get those blast doors sealed!" he looked at Double Zero. "DZ! Get that package primed. When those doors are almost shut, you throw it- and maybe we can take some of those bastards out before they rip us to pieces!"

Glick was moving with purpose, sprinting through the maze of rubble towards the control panel. Several blaster hits exploded nearby, but the small Sullustan was a machine, dodging and weaving so as to be in exactly the right place at the right time. Perfo fired off a volley at the advancing droids, who were now less than ten meters from the blast doors- and only fifteen from the group. They moved with no speed or sense of urgency- why would they? They had Perfo and his team trapped, and there wasn't a damn place they could fall back to.

Glick was at the controls for what seemed like an eternity, when finally, with a squeal of metal, the blast doors shimmied, then began to slowly close, gears grinding as they forced the massive slabs of durasteel along on tracks that may not have been used in a century. The droids continued to advance, the front line rotating to the back while fresh replacements moved forward, continuing to unload a rain of deadly energy through the quickly narrowing opening.

"DZ!" Perfo screamed. "Now!"

The heavy weapons specialist stood, leaned back and began to twirl the satchel in the air by its belt. The thick heavy bag looked like a plaything in his massive hands and, as he was about to let it fly, a bloody red shaft of light tore through the sky between the narrow opening of the blast doors, severing his arm at the elbow joint. Double Zero, who Perfo thought was impervious to damage, fell back silently as the satchel flew through the air just a few meters, then, with its creators hand still gripping it's belt, bounced off of the blast door and hit the water-on their side.

The doors continued to slide shut, the droid's shots hammering loudly as they scorched the meter thick durasteel; Creeping slowly, they were so close to the blast doors that Perfo could see nothing, save for the red glow from their single angry eye. It was almost over, he thought. The doors were nearly closed, and with the explosive package floating just meters away, they wouldn't be able to get to a safe distance in time.

Movement from his right caught his eye, and Glick, small and nimble, sprint from behind one of the derelict hoppers, and without missing a step, snatched up the explosive satchel and launched himself through the sliver of an opening, just as the blast doors slammed shut, separating them from certain death.

Silence filled the corridor.

Save for the patter of water on the derelict hoppers and the lap of waves against their bodies, they all froze in place, motionless, waiting. Then, briefly, the blast doors shuddered, and the sound of an angry God, swinging his hammer and letting loose with all of his might, hit the durasteel and shook the ground beneath their feet, riding a wave up into the teeth in the back of Perfo's head. Then, just as quickly, silence reclaimed the corridor.

* * *

Left unattended for weeks was long enough to allow Eldrick Outpost's arboretum to become overrun with wild foliage and growth to the point where it ceased to be a benefit to the station and became instead an obstacle. It took a laser torch to cut the door free, and upon entering Vahri realized why: Vines and roots had grown wild, twisting across the walls and intertwining themselves in the circuitry and controls that operated the wide doors.

Hovering in the doorway, Vahri triggered the light on the underside of her blaster rifle to life, sweeping the narrow beam back and forth across the jungle that lay before them. The lights had died, like in the rest of the station, but instead of red rotating beams, a series of pale green overhead discs sent intermittent shafts stabbing from high above into the arboretums canopy. Just enough light to allow her to see a handful of meters in front of her, but not enough to do any real good. Still active sprinklers sent a shower down onto the group, while runoff gurgled somewhere nearby.

"This seems like a hell of a lot of growth for just a few weeks," Qualto said beside her.

"Not really. If the droids used to administer this facility have been...redirected...to other duties, this ecosystem was probably allowed to collapse in on itself," Vahri said. She turned and, more to Deuce and Angel than the others, lowered her voice. "Stay close."

They moved quietly into the brush, pushing aside limbs and vines and stepping over thick roots that were slowly, almost visibly, working their way throughout the cavernous room. Vahri had been through some considerable bush back on Mengali, and since joining the New Republic had sloughed through her share of rainforests and jungle on at least a dozen different planets, and this easily as bad, and as she peered into the darkness and continued to glance down at her automapper, she realized why. It was dead calm.

In other forests, in other jungles, the sounds of creatures filled the air. Be it the shout of mating calls from one Stingle Bird to another, or the grunting as a Boro Hawg rooted through the underbrush. Every jungle had its own distinct set of sounds. But this wasn't a real jungle, and this wasn't a living breathing planet. This was a dead place. A place where beings died, horribly, and are still dying. Looking up at the green glow overhead, her hand went instinctively to the mauve and cerulean necklace her father had passed on to her, and gently rolled it back and forth between her fingers. From high above the irrigation system continued to run, sending a fine mist of rain down onto the group. Nothing moved, nothing, save for the soldiers, made a sound.

"Daydreaming?" Deuce asked from behind. Vahri smelled her before she spoke, and she detected the same scent she detected on Angel and Qualto- apprehension.

"No, just..." Vahri trailed off and shook her head. "I can't put my finger on it, but I feel like there is something tracking us, watching us-just waiting."

"I haven't seen anything through the IR scope on the Longbow," Deuce said. "And I've been scanning this entire place," she shrugged. "How far to the medlab?"

"Just another hundred meters, shouldn't take us too long," Vahri said without looking at the mapper. Her eyes still scanned the canopy of leaves and the bars of light that stabbed from the darkness like long thin ethereal fingers reaching into the arboretum.

"What's the holdup? You want to leave us sitting here just WAITING for something to drop from the sky and slice up the rest of my crew?" Qualto was hissing in her ear like a Trandosha Wizzor Snake and his breath reeked of tabaac and...perfume?

"Back off Qualto. Vahri thinks we might be walking into a trap, so if she wants us to wait here for the next six hours that's what we're going to do," Deuce snapped.

"I think we'd better get moving," Vahri said. She felt like this earlier in the day, right before they exited the docking tube and entered the station. A sense of dread, of something not "right" about the situation they were walking in to. She rolled her eyes. There were killer robots unleashed by a madman killing their team throughout the station-as long as they were on the Eldrick Outpost, nothing about their situation would be "right."

She had to keep her mind on the job. Several had already died, and if she wasn't on her game, more would likely fall before the day was through. She shook her head free of the nagging doubts and the nerves that that writhed throughout her stomach like a pile of slugs and tried to calm her breathing.

"It won't be easy," her father had told her before she left to join the New Republic- at the time known as the Rebel Alliance. They were overlooking the ruins of a settlement that Clan Ji'karr had razed just hours before. Columns of black smoke spiraled high into the coral colored Mengali evening, while fires still licked at the charred corpses of burned out buildings below.

"It would be easier if I stayed here and helped you fight," she'd told him. He regarded her with that knowing-sometimes overly smug-look of his and shook his head.

"We've enough warriors to fight and die here Vahri, what we need is someone to carry our message, and gather us aid," he said. Slowly, with hands worn rough by time and darkened by age and elements, he took his necklace from around his muscular, powerful neck and placed it over her head. "This will remind you of home. Whenever the galaxy throws you to the wolves, and threatens to wear you down, it will help you remember, not only for what we fight for, but what you fight for as well."

He was dead just a day later.

Gripping her blaster rifle, she set her jaw and continued on, still rolling the polished stones of her necklace between her fingers. They continued on without incident, and finally, after picking their way through the artificial jungle, they came to a sealed blast door, covered with an expanding patch of red moss. Angel took up position outside as Vahri triggered the access panel pulled the doors apart from the web of foliage and allowed the team to move inside. Weapons drawn, Qualto's soldiers move quickly into the dimly lit corridor, sweeping every inch with the barrels of their high-powered blaster carbines. At the end of the corridor, spilling blue light through a tiny oval window, lay the medlab.

Followed by Deuce and Qualto, Vahri entered, stepping aside for Black Light to conduct their sweep throughout the lab in case anything was hiding in wait. With efficient movement and direction, the remaining Black Light soldiers fanned out and disappeared into the maze of bacta tanks and storage lockers that filled the medlab. Behind them the door slid shut with a hiss, sealing them in the sterile environment. Cool, recycled air filled the room, and while the rest of the station looked like a tornado had tore through it, the medlab was pristine, with polished instruments laid out neatly throughout the large room and several banks of computers and diagnostic equipment still clicking away at their uninterrupted duties.

On the far side, at the end of a darkened row of stasis tubes, the bodies of the Hasmik family, the father, mother and child slept. Vahri slowly approached, setting her rifle down on a nearby table and retrieving a handwritten chart that hung from the front of the male's stasis tube.

Oblivious to the mayhem and death that lurked throughout the station, they wore serene masks of sleep, as tiny bubbles collected, breaking loose from their eyelashes and long flowing hair and racing to the top of the tube.

"Going to be a harsh world to wake up to," Deuce said. She'd come up and both now stood staring into the impassive faces. The child couldn't have been more than ten standard years, while her parents were both at least thirty standard years old.

Vahri glanced at their stats-everything was in the green, though a constant readout on the tube's display panel indicated they still suffered from the Stringfish virus. She took a few minutes to go through the med logs, on the outside chance something had been tampered with or disturbed. Nothing.

"I just hope we can get them mobile. We need to check for any stimulants or regenerative injections, otherwise we are going to be wheeling or carrying this family out by hand," Vahri said. Something in the reflection of the tube's glass caught her attention and she turned in time to see Qualto light up a cigarra. The rest of Black Light had accumulated around behind him in a semi-circle and he wore a smile that caused her stomach to seize up.

"Won't be necessary, this whole place is picked clean, except for some high grade narcotics," he kicked a black duffel that lay at his feet. "No stimulants, and NO regen-injects," he smiled.

"Then we find some gurneys, or hoverchairs, something to," Vahri began, but Qualto gestured and her voice caught in her throat as Pok and Elfingtor both raised their rifles, pointing them directly at Deuce and Vahri.

"Are you out of your ever-loving mind you sick freak?" Deuce snarled. She still held her Longbow, but it was pointed uselessly at the ground. "You kill us and Vornskr Pack will slaughter you like cattle."

"You?" Qualto laughed, "I would never kill you, unless you gave me reason of course," Qualto pulled his sidearm. "Now, why don't you both step aside so we can go ahead and ventilate the Hasmik family, put them out of their misery and proceed with our operation."

"Your operation?" Vahri shook her head, but stood her ground. Right now she and Deuce were the only thing standing between the Hasmiks and death.

"Explain yourself Sergeant," Deuce said.

"Of course. It's a big station, full of a lot of salvageable material. But you don't need to worry your pretty little lekku about that, right now you both just need to step aside and hand over your weapons," Qualto smiled. "I don't want you doing something foolish that might cost you your lives."

Deuce raised her rifle, a move that brought every Black Light weapon to bear. "You're felled Qualto. Salvage? You're New Republic soldiers! Now drop those weapons and act like it!"

But Qualto merely smiled, shaking his head in the cloud of smoke that hovered in thin wisps like a translucent helmet. "Negative, 'Sarge', we stopped being soldiers the second we saw the value of this place. We're back to being mercenaries. Soon to be extremely wealthy mercenaries."

"Do you think you would just lead us down here, and what? Kidnap us? Do you really think Perfo will leave without us?"

He shook his head, removing the cigarra from his mouth and exhaling a thick cloud of smoke into the room. "Of course not. He'll march his way back to the Lyma and, like a good little soldier, get it ready for us," he pulled a thin metallic cylinder from his trousers, the upper tip was blinking red. "So, you both have a decision to make now. March back up there, tell him you were attacked and Black Light was eliminated and get the hell out of here and don't look back. Or," he twirled the cylinder between his fingers, faint blue light bouncing up and down its gleaming shaft. "Do I trigger three crates of detonate strategically loaded right alongside his engines, that will go up and a ball of destruction so beautiful they'll be able to see it on Coruscant?"

"You would destroy your only way off of this station just for some salvage?" Vahri shook her head. It all seemed so surreal she almost slapped herself to make sure she wasn't hallucinating.

"Mengali, the second we found this station abandoned it became my retirement fund," Qualto gestured with both arms. "Look around! Just the equipment in this lab, sold to the highest bidder will be enough to pay off my gambling tabs from the last decade!" he shook his head. "Say what you want about the New Republic, but they make sure their allies are well supplied. The rest of this station may look like a steaming heap of bantha dung, but this lab is stocked with top of the line equipment and meds...it's worth a fortune." He smiled. "And as far as our way out of here, do you both really think I would leave myself abandoned in the middle of nowhere without an exit strategy?" he tapped the red avian tattoo on his forearm with the detonator. "In less than a day this station is going to be crawling with Torrid Bleeders."

"Pirates? You are nothing more than common pirates?" Deuce said, her face curling into a mask of disgust.

"We are exceptional pirates Sergeant, and we are going to strip this station bare as a Twi'lek dancing whore," he said with a smirk and nod.

Deuce moved with blinding speed, her Longbow rifle hitting the ground at the same time she reached Qualto; lowering her shoulder so as to hit him square in the solar plexus, she made contact, and seemed to roll off, having done no damage as Qualto merely took the hit and moved aside. But Deuce wasn't done, and instead of hitting the ground, she rolled, taking her back on her feet. Movement behind her caught Vahri's eye and before she could shout a warning, Kriegs fired a boot out, catching Deuce squarely between the shoulder blades.

"Frell!" Deuce spat, falling forward and rolling immediately to her feet. "Alright you Ubese trash, bring what you got," she snarled, working her shoulders and assuming a fighting stance.

Expecting Qualto to intervene, Vahri was stunned when the man merely smiled, waving his soldiers back to allow the two combatants room in the center of the medlab. With slow, deliberate movements, Kriegs slowly removed her helmet, tossing it off to the side where Elfingtor caught it in midair.

"Don't bother with the rest, it's your head I want," Deuce snarled.

Kriegs threw her own snarl back and laughed. "You think you're the first Twi'lek whore I've killed? The only thing your species is good for is dancing and..." she didn't finish as Deuce immediately moved on her, firing a series of chops and swings at her head. The Ubese, caught off guard, threw up a series of blocks, allowing only one hit to make it through that opened a cut beneath her eye.

Kriegs, baring rows of pointed teeth, retaliated, and for several minutes both danced in a circle, firing repeated jabs and kicks into each others midsection. Most hit, and Vahri could tell that while Kriegs was moving slower, hindered by her full body armor, she was also taking much less damage than Deuce. Still, eyes locked like a predator on her opponent, the Twi'lek persisted, twirling and somersaulting about the small space, using her agility to land more hits than the Ubese could counter.

Vahri glanced to her left. Her rifle sat just a few meters away, and she slowly began to move with the action, trying to mask her advance towards her weapon. She was within arms reach when Deuce landed a blow to Kriegs mouth that sent a spray of blood splattering in globules against the armor of her comrades. Dropping to her knees, Kriegs was still bent over when Deuce stepped up, bringing her combat boot up with such force that it connected with a loud "crack" catching the Ubese square in the jaw and sending her flailing backwards where she collapsed, unmoving, on the ground.

While everyone stood transfixed on the action, Vahri made a move for her rifle. Gripping it tight, she dropped to one knee and brought it to bear just as a pair of stun blasts slammed into her body. Pain exploded along her frame and her body shook with convulsions as she dropped to the ground, her weapon hitting the polished floor plating-useless. She managed to open her eyes just long enough to see two soldiers double team Deuce, hammering her to the ground with their rifles and shoving the barrels into her chest.

"Enough!" Qualto roared.

Like droids, Black Light froze, then stepped aside silently. Vahri felt herself being jerked to her knees as the grinning Sergeant approached, sliding the detonator in his belt. Someone behind her jerked her hair back and while struggling to resist, she thanked the Gods that her armor absorbed much of the stun blast.

Staring up at the smirking Sergeant, anger and ferocity pumped fresh blood through her body, and she felt herself continuing to shake- this time from rage.

"It didn't have to go down like this," he looked at the prone figure of Kriegs lying on the ground, turning back to Vahri. "You and your Sergeant could have played along. Could have maybe even made a nice piece of change out of this if you had played your cards right." he shook his head. Behind him, Elfingtor kneeled alongside Kriegs, turning her over.

"Looks like a concussion Sir," Elfingtor said, her voice rattling throughout the medlab. "A serious one too."

"Blast," Qualto swore, stepping over to the prone figure. Kneeling, he ran a finger along her neck and forcefully jerked her head back by her black hair. "She's useless to us now. And I don't have time to waste with dead weight," he leaned down and kissed her, long and passionately, though the gesture wasn't returned. Pulling away, blood dripped from his mouth and as he stood, he turned away and reached to his belt, tapping away at a remote located on his hip. A moment later, Kriegs body seized violently, blood gushing from her mouth in a black spray; she shook for a moment more, then went limp.

"You frelling monster," Deuce said, staring at Krieg's corpse.

"I am," Qualto shook his head. "It tears me up that I had to kill her, but in the end, her death is really on YOUR hands as much as it's on mine Sergeant." He stepped over to Vahri and shook his head, small drops of Krieg's blood falling onto her face. "The point of no return has been reached, it would appear. Now, I guess we'll just have to take you with us and see what we can get for you in the slave markets."

"We'll kill you first, you...won't make it out of here alive," Vahri snarled. Something dark and violent was burning inside of her, and she was loosing the fight to keep it contained.

"You know Mengali, I...I actually believe you." He reached down and ran a sweat-slick glove through her hair, gripping her ponytail and jerking her head back.

"QUALTO! You won't make it!" Deuce shouted. "You and this harem of galactic trash you've assembled, you'll let your guard down, you'll blink one too many times and we'll..."

Qualto shook his head. "Then I guess we'll just have to kill you both, once I'm done with you of course," he sneered, running his thumb across Vahri's lips. The darkness won out and she acted without thinking, giving herself fully to the primal instinct that never totally evolved its way out of the Mengali biology. With the cracking of several jawbones, Vahri opened her mouth, and with one swift move extended her lower jaw to the point where her cavernous mouth, lined with jagged, lethal rows of saw-blade teeth, encircled Qualto's hand. He had just enough time to register surprise as her teeth clamped down across his wrist, cleaving the bones like a lightsaber through chibi butter. He stumbled backwards, dropping to his knees, his mouth in a silent scream as his other hand reached up and closed on his stub of a wrist that now sprayed a geyser of blood into the air. With grim satisfaction, Vahri spat the man's twitching hand out onto the floor.

"Keep your hand off of me," she smiled as streams of blood now ran from her mouth.

"My...hand!" he finally managed to scream, staring at the bloody stump in horror. Eyes wide with pain and rage, he glanced from Vahri to Deuce, then finally, at his own soldiers. "Get my damn hand!" Several soldiers made for the twitching appendage scrambling like children after a piece of grisly candy.

"Private, it's not the first thing I would have bit off of him, but it will have to do," Deuce said, her mouth pulled into a grin. Vahri smiled back, throwing a defiant glance at Qualto. She never expected this was how she would die, but she readied herself for the inevitable.

Qualto struggled to his feet, as one of his soldiers rushed to his side, administering a tourniquet to his wrist. Color has rushed from his face and sweat stood out in glittering blue droplets along his scalp. "What the hell are you waiting for?" he snarled at the soldiers with their rifles still trained on the duo. "Kill them."

The pungent stink rushed from the creased blast doors, hitting Perfo square in the face and threatening to force his meager breakfast up into his mouth. It had taken the combined skills of Hobbie and Rontack the better part

of an hour to get the doors open, and when they did they were met with a grisly soup of flash-boiled water, floating scorched debris and the stink of charred flesh.

"Cripes LT," Hobbie said beside him, shaking his head in disbelief. "I can't believe he did that, what the hell was he thinking?"

"He saved us, and if we don't get to the Lyma and get her prepped, we're all going to die here and his death will have been a waste," Perfo said. Inside, deep down, another piece of him died, and while something inside drove him to move, to act, to keep going, the voices of the soldiers he lost today screamed-for revenge. Revenge that they wouldn't get because to stay any longer, to stay and try to face the unknown, here, would surely kill them all. Bravado, rage and revenge tore at him to stay, even if it meant losing every last soldier- but reality, and the duty he had to the lives of those still alive and counting on him to get them off of the station, and the lives of that family, made his mind up for him.

Alongside the door, Double Zero shouldered his blaster rifle with his remaining left arm. While normal beings would be unconscious, or at least in shock, Double Zero moved and acted as if nothing had happened; his armor had miraculously sealed around the wound and the heavy weapons specialist had waved off Perfo's offer of medical aid and pain killer.

"I'm just ready to get moving, Sir," was all DZ had said.

So they did, picking their way through the steamy, filth ridden corridor now filled waist-deep with murky water and sewage. Weapons trained and ready, they moved with purpose through the corridor, with Rontack back on point and Perfo taking up the rear. He expected another attack, expected, at any second, some metallic serpentine monstrosity to rise from the water, glistening with weapons, ready to dispense death for each one of them.

He remained tense until they made it to the spacers section of the station. Moving through the lounge, they'd neither encountered another person or droid, picking their way through the floating tables and debris that bobbed and bounced atop the gently lapping waves. Slowly they entered the locker room, scanning side to side as his team moved ahead. Lockers stretched out on both sides into the darkness, the beams from their shoulder lights bouncing bizarre shadows and reflections in all directions. Something moved.

It was almost imperceptible, and he almost missed it amidst the funhouse distortions of the light and shadows. But beyond a row of lockers, down a deserted hallway, a flash- the slightest movement through the window of a closed door- a shadow that didn't belong. At first he thought he might be imagining it, but he couldn't take any chances- he'd already taken too many and soldiers had died because of him. They'd cleared the way this far for the others, and he couldn't risk something waiting in ambush.

"Hobbie, get the others to the Lyma and get it started up. I'm going to check something out," he said.

"I'll back you up," the younger man replied, shouldering his rifle.

"Negative," Perfo shook his head as the frigid water lapped at his waist. "It might be nothing, and if I need backup I'll comm. You get the Lyma primed and station Rontack and DZ on the airlock, and keep those channels open in case they need help."

"Sir, I've seen enough horror holos to know it's a bad idea for you to go off by yourself," Hobbie replied. "Let me cover you."

Perfo snickered. "Corporal, I don't have the luxury of being able to take your advice," he pulled two extra blaster clips from the man's vest, "but I will take your ammo. Get on to the ship and secure the area. I'll see you in a bit. If I don't, get on the ship and when you pull away from here, I want you to unload our proton torpedo battery into the largest central fuel bulb, then haul ass out of here."

Hobbie stared in silence for a moment. "Sir, I thought the beacon we set up..."

"Was to shut everyone up and get them moving. If Qualto knew about the active fuel bulb, knew there was one way to blow this whole station, I wouldn't have put it past him to try something- to mount a mutiny, kill us off and write this whole mission off and blow any evidence of what happened into space dust. No, he had to think we had to work together to get off of here alive."

"You think he's that sick?" Hobbie asked.

"I do."

They both stood in the lapping waves and silence as Hobbie digested what Perfo had crashing around in his mind for the last several hours. Finally, the younger man set his jaw and nodded. "Secure the ship, blow the station if you aren't back. Roger that sir." He tapped the location transponder on Perfo's combat harness. "Just make sure you keep this on."

Offering a wane smile, Perfo slapped the man on the shoulder. "I'll try to be back in time for the fireworks," he said. Hobbie sloughed off through the murk, motioning Rontack forward towards the decontamination chamber. Changing his comm's frequency, he radioed the Lyma, relieved when Rocket's low whistle filled his headset.

"Rocket, its Perfo. Hobbie and the rest are heading to the airlock, eta about five minutes, I need you to dock and be ready to receive them." A high pitched whistle answered an affirmative and Perfo nodded, shutting the comm down.

He checked his blaster clip and the BAX-10 Concussion grenade securely attached to his harness. Toggling the motion detector affixed to his rifle, he began to make his way through the flooded locker room, glancing from the sweeping green line to what was directly in front of him. He made it to the mouth of the corridor, and while the motion detector didn't read anything, his gut told him that something was waiting.

"Come on Perfo, get your ass down that hallway and clear it out," he mumbled to himself. He kept moving, his finger lightly brushing back and forth along the trigger of his rifle, slowly sweeping back and forth.

The stench began like a tickle in the back of his throat, but with each breath, the air around him turned sour, rancid-like death. He'd been moving along the corridor for the better part of five minutes, dipping in hallways and adjacent rooms, finding little save for floating furniture and flickering glowtubes.

He'd gotten used to the smell of decaying food in the station-but this wasn't food that he smelled now. The sick stench of decaying flesh made him steel his jaw and mentally try to block it out. Cables and wiring from the ceiling above fell into the water, creating a moving, swaying wall of glistening black tentacles that he could barely see through. The emergency lights had been shut off or destroyed this far down, and now the only thing that lit his way was the meager shoulder lamp that stabbed a pathetic beam into the hazy darkness.

Something beeped. On the side of his rifle, just two meters ahead of him something moved. Walking through the jungle of cables, he moved cautiously, his rifle parting the lines and conduits. He was right on top of the signal. Moving back and forth, his shoulder light played off of the glistening curtain- then froze.

A face stared back at him, it's eye's wide with horror.

Air catching in his lungs, Perfo almost let loose with a volley of blaster fire, stumbling back. The thing- it was once an green alien of some sort, tried to mouth words, but where there should have been a jaw, was instead a mixture of clicking and shifting machined parts-droid parts. Slinging his rifle, Perfo reached out to steady the shaking alien. He'd started convulsing and Perfo knew that if he didn't act soon, the small faced being would die. Reaching for his medpack on the rear of his belt he closed on something soft and turned. Hands, hands were reaching out from the tangles of wiring and suddenly Perfo was surrounded, cold wet hands gripping him, pulling him into the wiring, and through it all the click-click-click of what should be voices, drowning out all other sounds.

They were hung like cattle, their pale bodies- briefly glimpsed in the mad twisting of his shoulder-lamp. Some made gurgling sounds, but there seemed to be dozens, maybe even hundreds, all reaching for him, all in a frenzy now...

Out of the corner of his eye, his motion detector, still strapped to his rifle, spun wildly, his location surrounded by faint flashing dots that represented these half-dead things. But something moved- quicker than the others, like a flash, and in the last second he noticed the beeline it made for him-

Something hit him in the back and an explosion of pain and white light blocked everything out, sending him face first into the cold putrid water, where hands continued to grab and pull at him, even as he slipped into darkness.

"That would be a terrible idea for a whole rainbow of reasons." Angel smiled and held aloft the bandolier of concussion grenades she'd taken from DZ earlier. Her right thumb was jammed against the trigger of the topmost grenade, with a halo of angry red lights flashing in unison with a loud beeping that filled the infirmary. Before her, Qualto's face was a mask of rage; having stripped his goggles off, white pupils seemed to lock on and flare. The rest of Black Light stood motionless, while Vahri and Deuce looked slack jawed in disbelief.

"You wouldn't," Qualto snarled, still clutching his bloody stump.

"If you think that then you aren't nearly as sharp as I thought you were," Angel replied.

They stood in silence, their eyes locked on each other. Finally, Qualto nodded. "Then what do we do now? You just want us to let you walk out of here?"

"No, you let Vahri and Deuce and that family go."

"Are you serious!?! Why the hell would I do that?" Qualto sneered. Blood continued to pour from his wrist- Angel could tell he didn't have long- his body language, every tic and motion pointed to Qualto losing it. He was at his wits end, and was at his most dangerous. She would have to make her play now, or risk him doing something suicidal.

"Because you are going to get me in trade."

"Angel, don't..." Deuce began but she was already shaking her head.

"There's no other way Sarge, and we're all out of time," Angel hefted the bandolier and looked at Qualto.

"You? Why the frell would I want you?" He slurred, spit flying from his thin lips.

"Because I'm unlike anything you've ever encountered before. And in a few more minutes you'll have lost too much blood. A few more minutes and Perfo will know something has gone wrong and come looking for us. Look around you Qualto...you've lost half your team today, and how many more before you get off this station? Who is going to be your 'number one' now?" she nodded at the prone body of Kriegs on the floor. "You'll take me and let them go because I'm the best chance you've got of getting off this station alive."

Grinding his teeth, Qualto rolled his neck and looked at the handful of Black Light that still remained- and what she sensed from the small handful of soldiers was terrifying. Complete and total loyalty and obedience to Qualto- every one of them, all female she could tell now, would just as soon die for him, right here, than question him in any way. Her mind spun over what he had done to them to command such loyalty and respect, but she had no doubt, if he agreed she would find out.

"I don't buy it," he seethed. Your Sergeant will tell Kryll and he'll come back looking for you. Some sort of misguided rescue attempt- I know his type."

"No, no he won't. Because I'm not your prisoner Qualto. You let them go and I'll be your property- just like the rest of...these," she nodded at the stoic Black Light soldiers. "They won't come back looking for me because I won't go. Right Sarge?"

Deuce remained silent and Angel cursed beneath her breath. "Deuce..."

"He'll brainwash you Angel. He'll turn you into one of these things and you'll never stand a chance," Deuce said.

"He'll try," Angel gave a small smile to Qualto. "But that's why he's going to make the deal. He wants to try- he wants to see if he can do it, isn't that right you sick head case?"

Finally, he nodded. "Alright Sergeant. Get your medic and those flesh sacks and get out of my sight. Elfingtor! Find me a damn tissue regenerator," he drew a thin smile across his face and let his eyes scan the length of Angel's body. "You're mine now, but I don't think you have any idea what you've just gotten yourself into." Nodding, Angel kept her thumb on the grenades kill switch. "I don't think you do either."

Deuce and Vahri slowly got to their feet and began prepping the family while Qualto and the rest of Black Light made their way to the far end of the infirmary, where one of his soldiers began tending to his severed hand. Angel took a deep breath and brought the bandolier down to her side and when no one was looking, when things looked to be under control, disabled the active grenade. Her hands shook uncontrollably, and she could feel White Velocity surging through her body, running its course.

"Angel."

She looked up and saw Vahri watching her. She offered a weak smile and balled her fists up. "Heya Doc. How's the family?"

"The family," Vahri threw a glance back at the stasis tubes. "They...they won't be able to move once we pop them. Their muscles will have..." Vahri stopped, fixing her stare on Angel. "I'll need something to give them to bring them out and get them moving- Deuce and I can't carry them through the station by ourselves." Angel's hand went instinctively to the last vial of White Velocity she had. Nestled in a thin tube on her harness, it was the last vial she'd brought with her onto the station- the rest stowed beneath her bunk on the Lyma. It might as well have been a galaxy away.

"Forcing me to give up the junk, huh Doc?" She smiled.

"Now is as good a time as any, and it's going to save lives," Vahri nodded.

Pulling the vial free, Angel shoved it into Vahri's hand. "It's already cost lives, at least it will do you some good," she smiled, but inside her body screamed to take the vial back, to inject the entire thing into her throat and run for the Lyma.

She bit back her fear, and silenced the voices in her mind. She would never see Perfo and the rest of Vornskr Pack again- would never see her family again. "Hey Sarge!" she shouted to Deuce who was tapping away at the stasis tube controls. The Twi'lek looked up- one of her eyes was already swelling shut from her battle with Kriegs. She left the tubes and stepped over, casting a glance at Black Light who was focusing on Qualto's hand.

"Thanks for rescuing me...tell the others thanks for everything," Angel said, her voice catching in her throat.

"It doesn't have to go down like this Angel. We could try to take them out, they wouldn't try to stop us if we..." but Angel was already shaking her head.

"No choice Sarge. Don't feel bad though, Qualto is getting the worse end of this deal."

"What do you mean?" Deuce asked.

Angel calmed her breathing and tried to keep her emotions in check- always a struggle for a Zeltron. "I'm...broke Sarge. That grenade that messed me up on our last mission...I...I've never been the same since. Down in that fuel bulb, Taan died because I was too slow...I froze up." She couldn't stop the tears and decided to let them fall. "He died because of me Sarge."

Deuce stood silent, but sympathy poured from her, making Angel sob even harder.

"Angel, it wasn't your fault. You were drugged, you were working against impossible odds, no one could have stopped what happened," Vahri said.

"Drugged?" Deuce looked to Vahri. "What are you talking about?"

Holding up the thin vial of White Velocity, Vahri nodded to Angel. "Angel came to me needing something to counteract the effects of the other meds the doctors had her on. I administered this thinking it would help- it had some side effects." Not believing her ears, Angel stared wide eyed at Vahri, who threw her a glance to keep her mouth shut. Deuce looked between the two, then at the vial.

"What is that?" Deuce asked, her eyes narrowing.

"The only thing in this room that can get that family up and moving," Vahri said.

"Then lets make that happen," Deuce said. "Angel," she looked back, and gently took her hand. "You'll always be Vornskr Pack, no matter what has happened or what will happen. You know how to get in touch with

us when you're ready to come home." With a final squeeze, Deuce let go and went back to working the stasis tube controls.

"You didn't have to do that," Angel whispered to Vahri.

"And you don't have to sacrifice yourself to save us but you are. Guess we're all doing things we don't want to but have to," Vahri replied.

"Thanks Doc," Angel smiled.

Nodding, Vahri offered a small thin-lipped smile and returned to help Deuce with the family. The Husband's tank was draining, and he was already twitching awake. In a few moments he would be ushered into a fresh nightmare-one he and his family would be lucky to survive.

Slinging her bandolier of concussion grenades over her shoulder, Angel watched Qualto and the rest of Black Light staring at her from across the room, and in the cool blue glow of the lights watched his mouth pull into a predatory grin that made her skin crawl.

* * *

Rocketing down the narrow corridors, Vahri was barely able to keep the small station hopper under control. Not designed to go more than 75 kmh, every bank and turn it made almost threw the Hasmik family from the small convertible cab- and had they not all been jammed in tight liked packaged seafood, Vahri was sure they would be decorating the station walls.

Nestled in the front storage compartment of the small red vehicle, Deuce was sat with her rifle nestled against her ribs, scanning the terrain ahead for any hostiles. They'd blasted the compartments covering off, allowing the Sergeant just enough room to hunker down and act as gunner.

Suddenly, the flat even durasteel floor dipped, and the group found themselves slowing as they skimmed atop a section filled with water.

"Can't this heap go any faster!?" she screamed over the whine of the engines as Vahri glanced from her automapper to the dark yawning hallways that opened up before her. Water continued to sputter from above and the repulsors were having a hard time navigating across the top of the building water.

"Not unless you want to paddle sir," Vahri said.

Beside her she felt the mother, Foyra, tremble- though Vahri wasn't sure if it was from the cold rain of rank water or the dose of White Velocity still coursing through her veins. The child- Jeeble, was cradled in her arms, still barely conscious. She'd been spared the injection of the narcotic as Vahri was against doing something that might overload her young system. Now the child watched from a round pasty white face with half-lidded black pupil-less eyes as the world moved by.

"You, you said there were things on this station, what happened? What caused all of this?" this husband, Lucius, whispered beneath his breath. He was the same pasty white color as his wife and child, sporting a bald head and large soulful black eyes. Clad in white jumpsuits, they were now drenched by the fire suppression system, but still reeked of bacta. The whole family still seemed to be in shock from being expunged into a dark shadow place they used to know as their home. Corridors and hallways once associated with family and friends were now cold dark reminders that the galaxy was still a brutal violent place where no one was safe. Vahri new exactly how they felt.

"We're not sure. Just keep your eyes open," Vahri pulled her sidearm from her holster. "You know how to use one of these?"

I..." Lucius stammered but to Vahri's surprise his wife, Foyra, a thin faced woman with a low forehead and pasted long black hair snatched the weapon from her grasp. "He's a male, good only for breeding. I know how to shoot," she said.

"Of course," Vahri replied. The mapper pointed to a turn up ahead. It wouldn't be far now, as they were approaching a turn that would take them near the security substation. She was still mentally assigning the remainder of the route in her head when the roar of Deuce's Longbow rifle jerked her attention back to the corridor.

Rising from the water, gleaming black bulbs with long thin manipulator arms dripped and hissed as steam rolled from their bodies. The Longbow traced a line of angry fire into the nearest, causing it to buck and recoil, finally exploding in a ball of debris that showered the hoppers windshield with flaming bits.

"Vahri move it!" Deuce shouted, the longbow sputtering a final shot then dying in her hands. Tossing the massive weapon aside, Deuce drew out her dual blaster pistols slung along her hips and began blasting away at the half dozen droids that now bore down on them.

Jamming her thumb against the thrusters, Vahri, jerked the controls hard left, sending the hopper into the side of the corridor and up along the rise of the wall...finding more solid purchase than the meter deep water, the hopper took purchase and shot off, nearly throwing them all from the cab. Deuce continued to blast away, taking two of them down as the Hopper dodged past, but at the last minute one of the hovering droids telescoped it's long thin arm, and where there should have been a manipulator, instead lanced a sharpened spear into the Hoppers front storage compartment- and directly through Deuce's right shoulder.

It happened in an instant, and by the time Vahri realized what had happened, the jagged makeshift durasteel blade had already ripped a chunk from the Sergeant's shoulder, and Deuce, without a word, dropped her blaster and gripped the gushing wound, dropping her head back so that her skull rapped the window directly in front of Vahri.

"Sarge!" she shouted, but didn't dare to stop, as the droids were in pursuit, converging on their rear. Foyra handed Jeeble off to her husband and turned beside Vahri, squeezing off a series of shots. Blocking out the roar of the weapon, Vahri dodged around a stationary blue hopper submerged in their path, catching its front with their own bumper and spinning the conveyance around. The firing stopped and for a moment Vahri thought the blasters fuel cell had gone dry. But a second later three shots in rapid succession roared from the weapon, followed by a massive explosion.

Turning in her seat, Vahri was stunned to see the blue hopper engulfed in flame, and the droids nowhere to be found. "Nice shooting," she said turning back around and focusing on the dark corridor ahead and her wounded unconscious Sergeant leaning up against the windshield.

"It comes in handy when you live in a shadowport," Foyra nodded, still scanning behind them.

"Deuce!" Hobbie shouted, sprinting through the airlock docking tube. Vahri had managed to cauterize and dress the wound once they made it to the spacers lounge, and had carried the unconscious Twi'lek the rest of the way. She'd lost a lot of blood, but would likely make it if they could just get off the station.

"Where's Angel, Qualto and the rest of..." he began, taking Deuce from Vahri and carrying her into the Lyma.

"Still on station- they aren't coming," Vahri said, motioning for the Hasmiks to follow Novan. "I'll fill Perfo in later, but now we need to get off this station."

Stopping in his tracks, she could tell something had gone wrong. "What is it Novan?" she prompted- they didn't have time for indecision.

"Perfo isn't back. He went to check something out in the locker room and never..." Hobbie trailed off. Hobbie looked at Vahri, shaking his head. "His transponder quit transmitting just a short while ago. He said if he didn't make it back to blow the station, but if Angel is still on board..." They stared at each other without speaking.

"You're in charge," Vahri said. "With LT gone and Deuce out of it you are ranking officer. Now," Vahri said, nodding to the family. "How about you order me to go get LT and you get Deuce and this family stabilized in the medbay?"

Shaking his head, Hobbie continued to walk. "I'll go. I'm not leaving Perfo behind...we've already lost too many Vornskr Pack today."

"Hobbie," Vahri stopped him and turned him around. "I'll go. I'm a tracker, its what I do. If Perfo's transponder is offline the only thing I'll have to find him with is his scent..."

"It's raining sludge, there is a meter and a half of water in the station and most of the power is out in this area-" Hobbie shook his head. "You've got a snowball's chance on Tatooine of finding him."

"I know, but he's worth the risk," Vahri said. "If I don't return..."

"I know, I know, take off, don't look back," Hobbie rolled his eyes and continued on towards the medbay. "I've already heard that once too often today."

She was almost through the airlock sleeve when a sound that sounded like grinding metal froze her in her tracks. After catching her breath she realized it was just DZ calling her name from inside the Lyma. Turning back, she saw he was approaching her, carrying something in his hand.

"Yeah," she said. She didn't have any time for goodbyes and it wasn't like Double Zero had ever even acknowledged her presence.

"You may need this," he reached into a duffel bag and held out what looked like a standard grenade-round, metal and with a single detonator on top.

"I don't need any explosives Double Zero, if I don't rescue him one grenade isn't going to help."

He shook his helmet back and forth. "This isn't a standard grenade. It's an EMP grenade. It will kill all electronic devices in a ten meter radius when detonated."

Taking the orb, she looked it over and hefted it's weight in her hand/ "These would have come in real handy earlier you know," she said, strapping the EMP grenade to her belt.

"We don't have any on board. I crafted this one just now."

"Quick work," Vahri said.

"It's what I do. However..." Double Zero's voice echoed throughout the dark sleeve, "if you use it, keep in mind that it kills ALL electronically powered devices- that includes your automapper and your blaster," he reached back into the bag and produced a pistol. "This fires explosive tipped bullets. It's the only weapon you'll have."

She took the weapon from him and replaced her blaster sidearm with the slugthrower.

"Are you hiding any other helpful goodies in there for me?" she asked, trying to offer a smile.

He shook his head. "I couldn't fit the E-web inside."

The shrill whine of a saw snatched him awake and Perfo instinctively went for his sidearm before his eyes were even open. Too late he realized his arms weren't moving and slowly cracked his eyelids, squinting against a bright, white light. His back throbbed and he remembered being hit...and pulled through the water right before he lost consciousness, and now, as his eyes adjusted to an overhead light, he realized with no small amount of dread that he was trapped- and the wrinkled, lined gray visage that stared down on him would likely be the last thing he would ever see.

"Colonel Tirzee," Perfo said, his voice cracking.

The thing that used to be a New Republic soldier continued moving, it's thin, sharp fingers gently moving about Perfo's face, inspecting it, tracing thin lines around it, up about his temples. The mask it was wearing in the holoivid was gone, leaving a scarred thin narrow head with various ports and a web of wiring sprouting from its skull and falling about its shoulders like a waterfall of gleaming metal. It's glowing red eyes showed no emotion as it worked, and when it turned he could see a round cybernetic implant nestled at the base of it's skull. Perfo tried to raise his head but a strap was around his neck, limiting his movement. He managed to see he was in a long narrow shower room, strapped down on an operating table and surrounded by overhead lights that washed out almost every color in the room- except for the rainbow of color spattered across the walls. It looked like an abstracting painting done by a youngling with a vivid imagination and several buckets of paint-but Perfo knew what it really was. Dried blood from at least a dozen different species of victims.

"Tirzee, stop this. Stop this madness," Perfo said as the thing's eyes narrowed into slits, and it shoved his head back down. Several droids surrounded the table, one, a smaller ovoid with thin appendages and a series of glowing red orbs held a buzzing hand-held saw that woke him. The circular blade was no bigger than a few centimeters, but it glinted brilliant in the white light, capturing and reflecting a million glittering pinpoints on its rotating teeth.

Tirzee continued to work, inspecting Perfo's face and neck, and picking up something nearby and holding it against Perfo's face, then returning it to a nearby tray.

"Tirzee, I'm Lieutenant Perfo Kryll. I can get you off of here, take you back to the New Republic- they can fix you, help you!" he screamed finally, trying to get a reaction from the being who showed as much interest in him as a mortician droid showed in a cadaver. Finally, Tirzee stopped, looked down and bared rows of sharp teeth at him.

"I...I wish I had a choice Lieutenant," Tirzee said, the words coming in a choppy, unnatural pattern.

"Colonel, listen to me, you have a choice! Stop this, come with me, I can help you," Perfo said, but Tirzee's hands were still moving, still adjusting dials on a nearby machine, still typing in information as he continued to move- albeit a bit more slowly than before.

"I'm afraid I don't Lieutenant, he...won't let me."

"He? Who?" Perfo asked.

Tirzee stopped and looked off into space for a moment, saying nothing. Finally, he turned his attention back to Perfo. "He told me not to tell you, to get back to work, but, I'm...I'm trying hard to fight him, to hold him off. But he's strong..."

"Who? Colonel, who are you talking to?"

"The dark one, they---they put him into my brain and he controls things now...pulls from my knowledge, my secrets, uses them to do his bidding..." long fingers moved along Tirzee's scalp as if he were trying to massage his scalp, but instead managed to puncture his skin, sending several drops of deep crimson racing along his facial crevices where they slowly fell onto his black leather bodysuit.

Voice catching in his throat, Perfo's eyes went wide. "The Empire- put something into your brain?"

"Not something-someone," Tirzee said, his voice slurring. "It takes a lot to fight through, just to talk to you...but the dark one is weak as well...we are both falling to insanity..."

"Tirzee, I know about the Red Coda Project, I know what the Empire did to you..."

"You have no idea of what the Red Coda is," Tirzee mumbled, his glowing red eyes darting back and forth in their sockets. "A murderous AI, patterned off of the most vile serial killers in the galaxy. You don't know what it's like to have those... memories...in your mind!" he screamed, throwing the tray of components aside where they clattered along the tile floor. He gripped the edge of the table, leaning down so that the rotten vile stench of his breath filled Perfo's nostrils. "All of those killed...all of the bloodlust, the rage...and I couldn't stop it...couldn't turn it off...all I could do was sit back and watch myself slaughter."

"You have to fight this Tirzee, let me out, unbind me and get me off of this table. He tried to remain calm but he felt himself coming apart. His armor lay in a heap on the floor and he was bare from the waist up and completely helpless. He took a deep breath- by now Deuce and the rest should be back on the Lyma, or getting close and then Hobbie would be blowing this station into dust. He just hoped it happened before he suffered too much.

"I can't Lieutenant, I've tried. When he began chopping into the others, when he ran out of droids to modify and began altering the prisoners-I tried to stop him then, tried to stop him before he made it to the children..." Tirzee's voice trailed off and he went silent. Suddenly his hands began moving faster, his thin fingers tapping away at the consoles with an increased speed and precision and Perfo realized this "Dark One"- the Red Coda AI that was embedded inside Tirzee's mind, was winning out, making the Colonel move quicker so he could silence Perfo.

"Colonel..." the word was barely out of his mouth when Tirzee spun around, a long thin needle in his hand, and jammed it squarely into Perfo's left shoulder. He screamed as searing pain ripped through his torso, his body pulling taught against the restraints. Blood spattered up onto his face as Tirzee leaned in, the thick needle plunging in farther, the pain unbearable. Nausea filled Perfo and as darkness closed in from the edges of his vision, he saw Tirzee shaking his head back and forth.

"He says it will only get worse for you from here on out. I'm sorry Lieutenant- I...I... tried to kill you but he just wouldn't let me- he said he wants to see how strong you really are."

* * *

The scream froze her in her tracks. It came from up ahead, and Vahri had no trouble placing its owner. Moving quickly and gripping her blaster rifle with white knuckles, Vahri hoped she wasn't too late and that what she heard wasn't the last scream of a dying Lieutenant.

Moving through a cascade of wiring and conduits, she glimpsed things moving inside with her-but didn't stick around long enough to find out what they were. The automapper was attached to her belt, tracking her movements, so that if she was able to find Perfo they would be able to find their way out.

Breaking free of the cables, she waded through the waist deep water and found herself at the end of a corridor, with a flight of stairs leading up and out of the water to another level. Slowly she descended, moving quickly down a short dark hallway. At the end a small circular window spilled white light into the hallway from a sealed door. She crept close and, standing on her toes, peeked inside.

The light almost blinded her, but she could tell she was looking at the back of a droid, and over its shoulder a black clad humanoid was moving back and forth. Other droids encircled a table and lying in the middle, she could see as the humanoid moved, was Perfo, barely conscious and covered in blood. The humanoid did something again and Perfo screamed a series of curses, spitting a wad of phlegm at the humanoid- Colonel Tirzee no doubt.

There was at least half a dozen droids of various sizes in the room, in addition to the humanoid. Opening the door and unloading with the blaster would likely get she and Perfo both killed, and there was no way she could simply sneak in. But she had no choice. Once the door opened, they would hear it and all hell would break loose. Gripping her rifle, she tried to determine the biggest threat and decided to shoot the droid closest to her in the back, then go from there. She took a deep breath and looked down, saying a small prayer in Mengali. Something caught her eye and she froze.

Below her feet a metal grating covered a drain line that ran underneath the door to the shower room. She peeked once more through the window and realized that the same drain line ran into the center of the room-directly beneath the droids feet. The drain was too small for a person to sneak in, but big enough for the perfectly round sphere attached to her belt. The drain line was angled down, which meant she would have to put some force behind the EMP grenade, but between the whine and screaming coming from inside, she doubt anyone would notice.

Moving quickly, she removed the grating and glanced up the pipe, making sure there were no obstructions. She then set the detonator on the grenade for five seconds and with a vicious snap of her wrist sent the orb rolling up the drainpipe and beneath the shower room.

She'd barely had enough time to stand and draw her sidearm when a massive flash of light and audible "whump!" filled the corridor. Instantly, screaming erupted from within the room, along the thunderous crash of metal on tile. Fried ozone hit her nostrils and she wasted no time in throwing the door open and pulling an emergency flare from her harness and tossing it into the room. The red flame burst to life, showing all of the droids frozen in place, their arms and limbs trapped where they had been when the EMP grenade had gone off. A few were on the floor, motionless, and she moved quickly, and was almost to Perfo when Tirzee, face covered in blood, slammed into her and knocked her to the ground.

She rolled with the force of the hit, her sidearm skittering out of her grasp and clattering against the chassis of a downed droid. The sound of slick metal sliding free filled her ears and she knew what was coming- Tirzee was about to attack.

Rolling quickly to the side, she moved just in time to avoid the thin telescoping fingerblades that dug grooves into the tile floor. He was quicker than she expected, and backhanded her, opening cuts along her neck

and cutting into her chest armor. He was almost on top of her, his mad face and glowing red eyes moving with the shadows cast by the red flare. Firing a kick out, she caught him in the side of his face, knocking him back and using the leverage to roll herself backwards. The slugthrower was in her hand as he lunged again, and the firearm bucked in her hand as the explosive shell caught Tirzee in the cheek, sending blood and bone spraying into the air. She didn't stop, and continued to unload the firearm into his face, and neck, reducing him to a twitching, lifeless corpse within seconds.

Vahri lay panting, trying to catch her breath as the assassin bled away into the drain, the only sound that filled the room now was the solitary drip of blood.

"Vahri," Perfo's voice called down to her from the operating table.

"Sir?" she said, wiping away the thin trails of blood from her chin.

"EMP grenade?"

"Yes sir."

"I didn't think we had any of those on board."

"We didn't. I guess no one expected we would be facing an army of killer droids on our trip to Mengali."

Silence filled the room and she slowly made it to her feet. Perfo was partially bathed in shadow but she could tell his wounds weren't life threatening and unstrapped him from the table. "We've got to move sir, can you walk?"

Nodding, Perfo held his arm out. "Hit me with your painkillers Doc, and I'll fly out of this frelling deathtrap."

* * *

The Lyma grew smaller in size as it drifted farther and farther away from Eldrick Outpost. Finally, it's rear thrusters flared blue and brilliant and the ship disappeared into the field of stars. Angel gently placed her hand on the transparasteel, wishing she could reach through the thick station viewport and pull the ship back along with the rest of her friends and family.

"I didn't expect them to make it off of here alive," Qualto said from behind her.

She saw him enter the room in the windows reflection, and chose to block him from her mind. "Many of them didn't" she replied quietly. Turning, she noticed the rest of Black Light were in the corridor outside, waiting and watching.

"He'll come back looking for you, you know. A wasted effort, but that's the kind of hopeless romantic Kryll is- hopeless and foolish."

"You don't know anything about him, Angel said. "That's what makes him a great leader and a great man, and that's something you'll never be."

"Come now Angel, you'll learn to cherish your time with Black Light," Qualto managed a smile. His hand was in a protective bacta-filled cylinder that hung from his wrist, and his sardonic smile was replaced with constant grimaces of pain.

"I've been a slave before Qualto, I don't see this as being any different."

"So you'll try to escape then? Make a run for it as soon as you can? It's going to make for a very unpleasant and solitary life for you in Black Light Angel."

She shook her head then glanced out the window, hoping to see a flare of thrusters as the Lyma entered hyperspace-but saw nothing save for the twinkling of stars. "No, I'll do what I did to the last person who enslaved me- I'll kill you when you least expect it." She looked back, expecting a snarl, or even some sort of abuse. But Qualto merely offered a thin lipped smile.

"Well, until that happens, I'm looking forward to our time together. I even brought you a gift," he stepped close so his acrid breath stung her nostrils and brought his hand up to her chest. She closed her eyes-expecting this. She'd come back to being a slave- a plaything-but at least for a while she was part of a family, a family who cared for her and loved her-for who she was. And not even this slime Qualto could strip her of that.

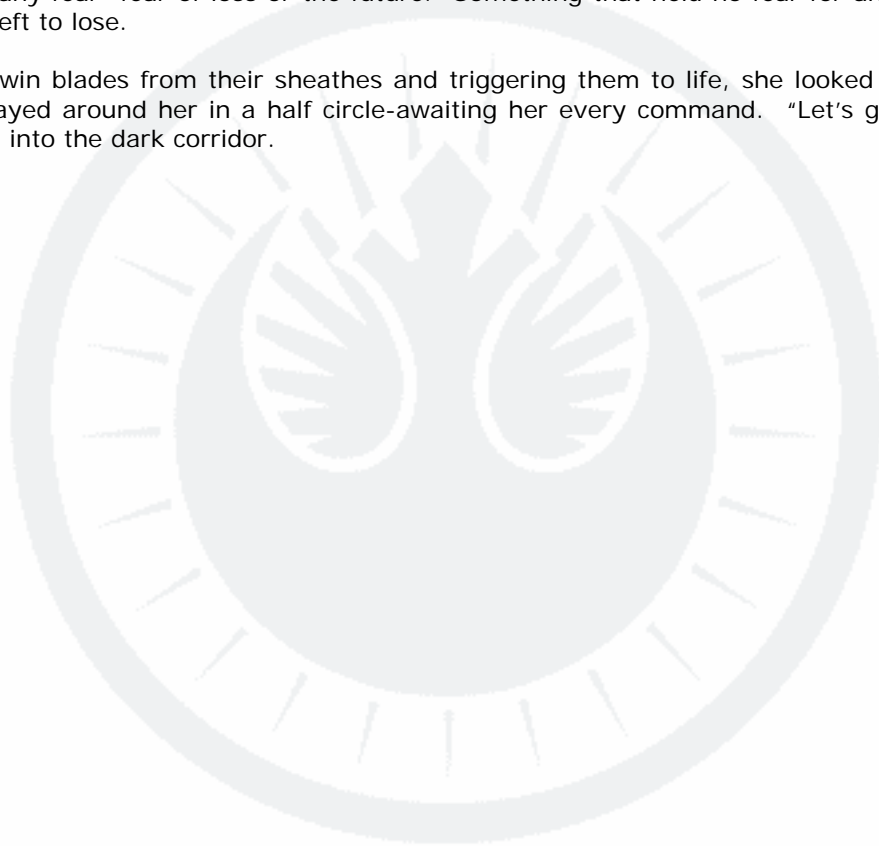
"Open your eyes."

She complied...slowly...and realized he had stepped away, still smiling, and both were now surrounded in a half circle by the rest of Black Light. He was holding something red in his good hand, and as she looked down, saw a "1", scrawled and circled in deep crimson on her armor's chestplate. From the doorway Elfingtor addressed Qualto. "We've got droids coming this way Sir, a whole slew of them."

He didn't bother to turn around, and instead nodded to Angel. "Copy that. Number One, why don't you take us into battle?"

Still staring at the one on her chest, something steeled inside Angel-something long buried, something that no longer held any fear- fear of loss or the future. Something that held no fear for anything, because she simply had nothing left to lose.

Pulling her twin blades from their sheathes and triggering them to life, she looked at the remainder of Black Light now arrayed around her in a half circle-awaiting her every command. "Let's go," she said without emotion and strolled into the dark corridor.



Epilogue

The muggy Mengali afternoon clung to Perfo like a pair of wet coveralls, causing his uniform to rub him in all of the wrong ways and the wound in his shoulder to throb. In his mind he could still see Tirzee, bound in the madness of the Red Coda AI jamming the thin needle in to his arm.

Trying to press the thought from his mind, he followed Vahri as they picked their way slowly through the underbrush made up of multicolored stalks and wide leafed bushes; Vahri-who was out of her armor and wearing a loose skirt and vest of thin silky pink and blue material, had walked for a bit without speaking, letting him ramble on about tactics and schedules.

Vornskr Pack- or what was left of them had landed on Mengali just a few days earlier, along with Bonn'Sha's Specforce team the 450 Rangers and after meeting with the leaders of Clan Sa'Mondaley, had begun setting up a training camp and unloading the weapons and artillery the Mengali's would be using in their battle with the Imperial supporters on their planet. His shoulder flared up again and he moved his hand to the spot and rubbed it absently.

"How is your shoulder?" Vahri asked, still keeping her eyes on the ground in front of them.

"Better. It's amazing what a week in bacta can do," he smiled. They had made it off of the Eldrick Outpost and back to the New Republic base on Mopary Prime. After healing and being debriefed, he led a task force that included what was left of Vornskr Pack back to the station- and found nothing.

That wasn't entirely true he thought as he stepped past long green vines that fell from high trees above. They'd found a mound of droid scraps-probably dozens by the sheer volume of the pile, and in its center, perched atop a thin piece of scrap- Angel's Vornskr Pack helmet. Otherwise there was no sign of Tirzee, Black Light or Angel...the station had been picked clean and all that was left was the nightmares and horrors that still lingered in the memories of those that made it out alive.

"She made her own decision you know."

Surprised, Perfo turned to Vahri who absently rubbed a necklace that hung low on her chest. "I didn't know the Mengali could read minds," he smiled.

"I don't need to be able to read minds to know what you are thinking," she said, "it's been written all over your face since we left Eldrick Outpost." She stopped and turned to face him. "LT, we're all soldiers. We know that as long as we put on our uniforms we are at risk. If we weren't willing to take the risks, we wouldn't have joined. Angel knew what she was doing by sacrificing herself for me, Deuce and for the Hasmiks. She was battling her own inner demons long before we set down on the Outpost...and her sacrifice silenced them for her."

"I still cared about her- about them all," Perfo said. "That we lost so much, that so many had to die...it's hard for me to forget."

She placed a hand on his shoulder and smiled-and he was amazed that this was the same hard female that he first met back in his small office on Tierfon Station. "You're a good man Perfo. That's why they will stay with you, that's why their lives meant so much to you. And you meant the world to them."

"Thanks Vahri," he smiled and shrugged. "But that's what I wanted to talk to you about. I'm hanging up my stripes- I'm taking the promotion they've been trying to give me."

It was Vahri's turn to be surprised. "Sir? You're leaving Vornskr Pack?"

"Yeah. I think I've done all of the good- or bad- I can. I'm taking a position with NRI when we get back."

"NRI?" You, a spook? Hard to see that sir."

"It's a hard time for the New Republic and I think I can do more good there. Someone is letting people like Qualto and Black Light run ops for the New Republic and that has to stop. Plus, if he pops his head up again in a New Republic uniform, I want to be able to get my hands on him and make him pay-And I just can't do that behind the stripes of a Lieutenant."

Vahri narrowed her eyes at him. "Talk of revenge doesn't sound natural coming from you sir."

"We've all changed. You can't stay the same forever."

"I guess that's true," Vahri said. "Well, congratulations Sir, I don't know what the others will do without you."

"That's why I wanted to get you away from the others and talk to you in private," Perfo looked in Vahri's gold flecked eyes and smiled, "I know you are planning on staying here to help the Mengali train on the weapons systems and gear we've brought."

"Yes sir," she nodded.

"But Deuce has said she would stick around a while longer, and she'll need some help. And with me leaving and the losses we suffered, the 'Pack is going to have to rebuild and she could use all of the help she can get. It will be more responsibility, more work. What do you say Corporal?"

"Corporal?" Vahri's eyes went wide. "Who in their right mind would promote me?"

Smiling, Perfo took her arms and led her by the hand. "I've still got a little time before I resign, and I can't think of anyone finer. You saved my life Vahri- and I can't repay that. If it weren't for you, Tirzee would have turned me into..." he trailed off. "A promotion is the least I can do."

Vahri stopped and looked around. "This...is my home Perfo. For good or bad, it's where I was born, and my clan is here."

"I understand..." Perfo said nodding. "I just thought..."

"...But," she stopped him, "I found a home with Vornskr Pack. You and the others showed me that I could belong somewhere other than with my clan- that there are those who still care and still do what has to be done to make the galaxy a safe place- not just for my planet, but all planets," she smiled and nodded. "I'll accept the promotion sir."

"I'm glad to hear that Corporal," he said.

"LT!"

The voice roared across the small clearing and they turned to see a large human in a brown vest and white tank top barreling through the underbrush. A mop of brown hair fell down in front of his bloodshot eyes and a thick cigarra was clenched between his teeth.

"What is it Race?"

The man stopped a few meters away, panting. Race Moothall was the Lyma's new pilot and one of the first new recruits in the rebuilding of Vornskr Pack- based off of Hobbie's recommendation. After catching his breath and taking another puff of his cigarra, Race spat a wad of phlegm off into the grass and nodded to Vahri who curled her face up in disgust.

"Heya Vahri. LT, I tried to comm. you but there must be something wrong with your comm.."

"Yeah, it's called being turned off," Perfo said.

"Oh, well look, this damn atmosphere is mucking up The Lyma's aft intake manifolds. It's going to take me forever to clear them out if we stick around much longer. Those knuckle draggers in the 450 have already unloaded and set up camp, we're ready to bug out when you are- the sooner the better if you know what I mean," Race said.

"Gotcha Private. Head on back to the Lyma and get it prepped for takeoff. Tell Bonn'sha we..." Perfo stopped when he noticed Race was focusing more on Vahri's bare midriff and long tan legs than what he was saying.

"Race? Private Moonthall?" Perfo snapped his fingers in front of Race's face, bringing the man back into focus.

"Huh? Sorry sir...I...I just never seen Vahri dressed like that before," he smiled at the Mengali and offered a sheepish grin. "You look real nice."

"Thank you private, I think LT was giving you orders though," Vahri said, her expression shifting from disgust to amusement.

"Yeah, uh, get back to the Lyma and get her started up, right sir?" Race said, smiling.

"Sure, that will be good enough for now," Perfo said, slapping the man on the shoulder and pushing him back the way he came. He and Vahri watched race jog back, throwing one more look back at Vahri and offering a wave before he disappeared into the Mengli underbrush.

"Rebuilding Vornskr Pack, huh?" she asked as they watched him disappear.

"Yep," Perfo replied.

"It's going to be real interesting to see what happens Sir."

Perfo smiled and threw her a sideways glance. "I know Corporal. It always is."

THE END

