

Set To Kill

“Intrusion”

“It all started with a woman”.

Just saying the words hurt, and Gark the Red had been hurt many times in his life; shot, stabbed, even stuck in a burning speeder once...but the pain of having your heart broken made every other injury seem like a mere flesh wound. Shoving his long green snout into a mug of Selonian Baggers Blood, he drank deep, hoping the thick red spicy liquid would wash away the pain and memories hammering away at his lonely Rodian heart.

“I don’t have time for this,” the masked man said from across the table. In the sparse lighting of The Tramp Waiter Saloon, Gark couldn’t tell if the mask was black or blue...but he had no trouble making out the red zig-zag pattern that randomly weaved its way across the smooth material.

“I don’t care what you have time for! You want to deal, you sit and listen to the story!” Gark shouted, spraying anger and drink all over the man and the grimy surface of the table. “I’m tired of people telling me what to do.” He didn’t know the man’s name nor did he care; his left his concern for such trivial matters behind weeks ago.

Silence washed over the saloon and the few patrons that had nothing better to do during the afternoon cautiously turned their eyes towards the hostile Rodian. Slowly, they went back to their drinks and the background noise of laughter and murmurs returned. The Tramp Waiter’ was parked on the edge of the industrial district on Celanon, a planet known for its extensive commerce and trade.

Ordinarily, the domed tavern was packed with warehouse workers and merchants, either drinking or playing one of numerous holoivid games that lined the walls of its perimeter. Today however, a raging thunderstorm and predictions of the same for the remaining week had driven the planets populace home or to any other shelter.

Remaining quiet, the masked man simply sat and let the liquid seep into the material of the mask, coating it with a sticky wet sheen. Gark, shaking a long green finger at him, continued. “She was perfect. Blue, tall and beautiful...oh stars, you couldn’t have asked for more beauty if a Hutt wanted to sell it to ya on the cheap,” his eyes locked onto a distant spot, far from the smoke and noise of the saloon.

“She had indigo hair...as blue as the seas of...of...” he stopped, the words catching in his throat. He dropped his large black eyes back to his drink. “We met in a dive just like this...that’s when I fell in love with her...that’s when I lost my heart forever.”

In the rear of the cantina someone dropped a cred into a music machine and a sorrowful Bith tune floated across the room. “So I made a dumb mistake,” he continued, shaking his head. “I mixed business with pleasure. She simply wanted to earn a few credits and I? I

used to be one of the best in the biz. Yes sir, when Gark the Red took a bounty it didn't get away...and that was that," leaning forward he dipped his voice.

"Did you know three years ago I got the award for 'Most Persistent Hunter' back on Rodia? Oh yeah, tracked one bounty head across four systems and over a dozen planets." He leaned back, rustling in his red vest for some change. Hopefully the music box had something a bit happier than the current selection. "Then that stupid Wook came along and ruined everything...he-."

Leaning forward in his chair, the masked mans bored stare sparked to life. "What? What about the Wookiee? What about Socatoa?" he demanded.

Taken aback, Gark withdrew his long thin fingers from his vest and shifted under the intense gaze. "Uh...he ruined it...everything. First, he lied and told me I would make more creds than I would know what to do with...then the Bast...then he got rid of Shella..." Gark shrugged. "He ruined my life."

A wall of silence dropped between them and they sat, Gark drinking and rocking back and forth to the music while the stranger did nothing but stare vibroblades across the table. Finally, the uncomfortable silence broke Gark and he looked up at the man. "I had never cared about someone like that before. So when she left, I just, I didn't care what happened. Xu, the Quarren, he even drew on me one time. It was at that point that I wanted to see something bad happen to them. They didn't care about me...just their precious rebellion."

He took another hit off of the Baggers Blood, the last of it dripping from his snout. "I need another."

"Not before I get what we agreed on."

Enjoying the numbness that spread throughout his body, Gark nodded. Reaching into his vest, he produced a tiny silver data disk he'd copied only hours before, pocketing it before leaving the Trinity, the Nova 3-z that Socatoa captained.

Weeks were spent trying to find out the ships override codes before he finally lifted them from the Wookiees datapad. "They are all here, just like you asked. Everything you need to get onto the ship."

The masked man took the disk and held it close, letting his eyes play across the flat silver surface. "Perfect. You stay here, I'll get more drinks." Standing, he made his way to the lit circular bar, eventually disappearing behind a wall of patrons. Gark barely noticed him leave; deep in his mind he was lying on a blue Wroonian beach with Shella, letting cool waves roll across their bodies.

Only having crewed for a month on the Trinity, Socatoa claimed she was too disruptive and cut her loose; but Gark new better. Socatoa was worried she was too SMART for the crew. By being the biggest and loudest, Socatoa'd muscled everyone into falling into step with his operations. Shella was smart and attractive enough to convince everyone to get rid of him and follow her lead-and that scared him.

So, in a preemptive strike, he'd dumped her from the crew. She didn't put up a fight or argument, simply nodded, thanked everyone for their help and left. For some reason Xu even seemed relieved, though Gark suspected the Quarren was also trying to get

something going with Shella. On several occasions he noticed Xu exiting Shella's quarters in a foul mood, he guessed from repeated rejection.

"Gotcha a 'Thermal Well'," the masked man said, setting the bright orange drink in front of him, "Figured a bad-ass like you would want something that kicked."

Shrugging, Gark bypassed the straw and plunged his snout into it. Pulling back, he tilted his head and wiped it off against his jacket. The liquid stormed its way down his throat, landing in his gut like a thermal detonator

"Thanks. You know," his vision blurred slightly, "I never even got your name. We've been so wrapped up in this business and all..."

The edges around the man's masked crinkled from a hidden smile. "Doesn't really matter does it? After tonight we won't ever see each other again."

"I guess," Gark took another hit of the powerful elixir. "Anyway, I'm done with that walking carpet and his crew...can I have my credits now?"

Nodding, the masked man produced a small black velvet bag, tossing it across the table where it landed with a jingle in front of Gark.

The Rodian snatched it up and shoved it deep into his pocket, without giving it a second thought.

"You aren't going to count it?" masked man asked.

"I trust you."

"You shouldn't be so trusting."

"Maybe, maybe not. Fact of the matter is, I would've done the job for free...the credits are just a bonus."

"You must really hate that Wookiee."

"Yep." The drink was good once you got beyond the heat. Now it was just leaving a dull residual burn in his throat. "Don't matter now. I'm done. With these creds and a job I got lined up on Kadon I can start working and looking for her."

"Who? The girl? Shella?"

Standing on unsure legs Gark pushed away from his chair. "Of course...they didn't award me 'Most Persistent' for nothing."

"Of course. Well, happy hunting," the masked man said to his back. Walking slowly towards the door, Gark threw a hand up in the air without bothering to turn back. "Later."

Bile surged into his throat. For the second time since he'd left the Tramp Waiter, Gark vomited a rainbow of color onto the wet streets of Celanon. Just four blocks from the Saloon', he retreated into an alley, bracing himself against a wet duracrete wall. His snout was stinging from the latest barrage and he fought to keep further assaults at bay.

"Need to get to a hospital..." he mumbled when an abdominal cramp twisted his stomach into a knot, paralyzing everything from the waist down. Hitting the wet duracrete like a sack of grain, he lay there, immobile, while rain fell from the dark Celanon sky, saturating the back of his prone body.

Amid the pain he began to realize he couldn't move his legs. They lay like sand-filled cargo crates someone strapped to his hips. Panic set in and he tried to block it out, filing it away with the other senses assaulting him...the smell of the vomit he now lay in, the burning in the pit of his stomach...he had to shut it all out if he was going to survive. So he focused on one thing...her.

"Shella," he said, letting her blue face play in his mind's eye. Smiling, she let a sparkle of mischief glimmer in her lavender orbs, inviting him to find trouble with her. Struggling to pull himself up, he let her hang before him, slender blue body stretched luxuriously across a white sand beach. "Shell..."

"Your girlfriend can't save you Rodian, no one can."

Raising his head, Gark spied a figure standing at the end of the alley. Storm clouds blanketed the planet darkening everything in muted shades of gray. Speeders, racing along the street behind the man, bathed the wet Celanon night in a light show of color and illumination while skyscrapers stabbed into the sky, disappearing into the low hanging clouds. Against the visual noise of the city, the man's silhouette looked to be carved out of the darkest midnight.

"Who are you?" Gark spat.

The man walked deliberately, trenchcoat billowing, boots occasionally dipping into the small creek running down the center of the alley. He was just two meters away when lightning arced across the sky, bathing the urban corridor and the specter in a stark white light. Crazy eyes peered out from a black mask with red zig zags. "You!" Gark managed, before cramps tore at his intestines, folding him into a ball.

"You should have just rolled over and died Gark, but I guess I just didn't poison you enough. No matter, I won't make that mistake again."

As if by magic a Sentinel IV blaster pistol appeared in his grip, its black barrel looming less than a meter from his face. "I hate having to gun you down, well, okay, I don't HATE it..." the man let loose with what Gark interpreted as a snicker, "It just makes things messy for me."

Panic closed around Gark. The flash of realization hit him and he knew he wasn't leaving the alley alive. "I...I trusted you!" he sputtered, drool and bile splattering the pavement.

His breath quickened, numbing a bit of the pain ravaging his body.

“Yes, quite foolish if you ask me. You’re a loose end Gark, and I don’t leave loose ends.” Slowly the man adjusted a slide level on the blaster and nestled it tightly against the small thin spines on the back of Gark’s head. “Oh, and don’t worry about your little blue girlfriend. After she finished the job I had her on I took care of her. If I’d known you were so smitten by her I could have brought what was left of her in a small baggie and buried you together, I’m romantic like that.”

Anger and pain burst through Gark like an electrical shock. “Shella!” he screamed.

The “whump” of the silenced blaster shot drowned out the rest.

2

The rifle needed cleaning. Uurl knew this because he could smell it. Dirt and grime covered the focusing lens, and the next time the weapon was fired it would discharge an energy bolt that would be half as effective as it should be.

So he cleaned it, while sitting on a crate underneath “The Trinity.” The Z3 freighter loomed above, protecting him from the deluge falling from Celanons sky into the high-walled open air landing pad. Breathing deep, he let the clean air and rain drift into his muzzle, escape slowly between his parted fangs and out of his mouth.

Shistavenian Wolfmen were renowned for their exceptional senses and hunting abilities and he was no different; his canine features and black hair made him an intimidating figure, but when people needed his skills they overlooked his appearance.

Approaching from the rear of the ship, two beings stamped loudly through the pooled rain collecting on the landing pad. He’d smelled them the moment they entered the docking bay, but as they drew closer he didn’t need any special senses; loud voices locked in argument assaulted his ears.

“I don’t know where he is! He probably got tired of being assaulted,” Xu’s voice carried across the pad. The Quarren stormed from behind Uurl and spun, thick wet robes moving around his large frame. His wide tan head glistened with moisture from the downpour and rage dipped his brow low over two brilliant blue eyes.

“I don’t care, that little insect was supposed to clean the refresher and he didn’t do it!” a bellowing growl answered. A massive black and tan Wookiee stormed past Uurl and up to Xu, towering above him by almost a meter. Long hair hung in nappy patches from his frame, clumped together by moisture and grease from the Trinity’s crawlspaces.

Months back, Uurl made a point to learn the Wookiee language after an unpleasant misunderstanding between he and Socatoa. Ever since he was able to understand, if not agree, with everything that came out of his partners mouth.

Regarding him with an incredulous stare, Xu turned his eyes towards the wolfman. “I can’t believe this. Socatoa, do you have nothing better to do than worry about the Trinity’s refresher?”

“That’s not the point! It’s about respect! Respect I haven’t gotten from that little green speck since he stepped on MY ship and began crewing for me!” He was trembling in anger, two giant fists shaking in the air above him.

Uurl let the wookiee’s growl-speak enter one ear and exit the other. Simply listening to him talk was annoying; listening to him argue, unbearable.

Dropping onto an empty crate opposite Uurl, Xu crossed his legs and sat so that rain from the crease around the newly replaced escape pod dripped onto his wide domed head. Closing his eyes, he allowed the water to run down the several long tentacles that sprouted about his mouth, “And this behavior is new?”

Socatoa lowered his fists and his voice emerged as a low growl. “What do you mean?”

“Surely you are smart enough to realize this is nothing more than a pattern,” Xu opened his eyes. “It repeats itself with every one of your crew. Gark, Shella, even that small Ishi Tib named Febback...you’ve scared them all away-and that’s just been since I’ve been on board.”

“That’s a lie. You are still here...and Uurl.” Upon hearing his name the Shitavinean looked up. He’d weathered these conversations before, but this one seemed to be going in a direction others never ventured. Still working the grime from the barrel of the rifle he cautiously watched his partners out of the corner of his eye.

“Yes, but I’ve got more at stake. The Rebellion has fallen on hard times and it needs good operatives. You fail to realize that not every sentient shares our convictions and it takes poise and persuasion to get them to join us. Not violence and threats.”

“If they can’t handle taking orders then we don’t need them! Just like that blue slut Shella, I’m glad she’s gone. She caused Gark to draw on me...if it wasn’t for my easy going nature we would have all died on Tinfyl.”

Laughter exploded from Xu and he threw his head back, long tentacles shaking uncontrollably.

“Ha! Oh that is priceless! Your ‘easy going nature’ would have gotten you killed you ridiculous Wookiee,” his smile disappeared and Uurl sensed a shift in Xu’s demeanor-a dangerous shift.

“You’ve brought nothing but a history of pain and violence to those you’ve encountered Socatoa. Shall I run down the list? Remember Team Firebrand? Who you first teamed

with? All dead. Then there was Klux Martin, Ket Adkins, Vic Palisades, A'so..."

"SHUT UP!!!!" the Wookiee roared, drowning out the din of the falling rain. "Don't you repeat those names to me...parasites...the lot of em'."

"Nonetheless," Xu continued, "the fact remains that your rage, anger and lack of vision drove competent individuals from this crew. I suggest you learn to temper that personality flaw of yours Socatoa. Bad things tend to happen to those who can't."

"Are you threatening me?" The question emerged as a challenge. Uurl quietly began replacing parts of the blaster, hands working their way among the weapon with unmatched familiarity. He wasn't done cleaning it entirely, but that didn't matter now.

"Of course not, and thank you for illustrating my point. Your anger, your attitude-is your greatest hindrance. If you could simply realize..."

"Frell this! I'm done with this conversation. If you don't like how I run this ship then you can find another cell. I don't need you, Uurl and I..."

Looking up, Uurl bore his long white fangs in Socatoa's direction. "I follow Xu. No one else." he growled. The blaster sat assembled in his lap now, a hairy-clawed hand resting lightly on its grip.

Socatoa's face contorted in disbelief and he roared, throwing a vicious kick into the side of a loaded cargo crate full of repulsor components. The impact split the crate, scattering coils across the docking pad. A moment later the Wookiee was aboard the ship warming up its engines.

"I suppose we should go ahead and get aboard," Xu said, rising from his crate. He cast a glance out into the darkened landing bay and the rain that still poured from the sky. "Gark will just have to make do, I'll try to leave a message with starport control before we leave...just in case he comes back looking for us."

"He won't be back," Uurl said rising. Xu was smart, but Uurl knew some things he didn't.

The Quarren turned towards him, confusion in his eyes. "And why is that?"

"His things are gone, his locker, empty. Some beings can't be forced to put up with such abuse for long." The Shitavinean shouldered his rifle, returning the Quarrens questioning stare.

Reluctantly, Xu nodded. "You are right my friend. We must go along with Socatoa for now, but when we set down on Bonadan, I'll make arrangements for a transfer; I'm sure the Rebellion High Command will understand."

"I'll follow you, wherever you go," Uurl replied.

Xu made his way towards the loading ramp, clapping a hand on his shoulder as he passed. "Thank you my friend."

The sweaty, dirty smell of a man was masked by engine grease and grime. He was human, and he was located somewhere on the Trinity. Normally, such a smell should have been accompanied by desperation or fear, but Uurl sensed nothing, and that worried him most of all. Sitting upright in his bunk, he let his eyes scan the room, taking in the dark corners and recessed nooks. Since Gark left there wasn't much to look at in the small cabin, just a few odds and ends...a crate of weapons and an empty closet.

Wherever the human was, he wasn't in here.

Grabbing his carbine from beneath the bunk he slowly rose. He needed to find Xu, and quickly. The human's stench was at least a few days old, meaning he had been waiting and watching, potentially gathering information...but for what reason?

Too many questions filled his mind. He wasn't the brains of the operation; he knew his limitations. Weapons and recon, that was what the Shistavanien Irregulars, his old Mercenary Unit, taught him and that's what he stuck to. Command and decision making was better left to those with the brains or the reproductive glands to pull it off.

Sliding the cabin door open, he slowly advanced into the darkened hallway. Four meters away, a dim light flickered in the galley, sending shadows jumping and shifting along the corridor walls. With his species ability to see in the infrared spectrum, the dark areas revealed their secrets to him, and he moved along with a quiet confidence.

Stopping, he turned to a door set into the wall to his right. The room belonged to a Wroonian woman named "Shella" before she was kicked off of the crew several weeks back. Slipping a firm grip around the horizontal latch, he pushed down. The handle failed to move; its interior lock was engaged.

Backing away, he brought his weapon to bear at an ambiguous spot in the corridor and continued down the hall. Pulling even with the galley, he gave it a quick once over.

There was no door to the area; instead it was an open lounge set into and around the bowels of the ship.

Empty.

Passing the galley he left the hall and entered into the Trinity's large cargo receiving area. Off to his left was the bay door to the starboard cargo hold with the matching port access door situated far off to his right.

Moving off towards the port side, he used the dim lighting to his advantage and blended among the shadows, passing the cargo ramp and entering a similar hallway to the one he just exited. Tilting his head up and to the side he froze in place. The smell was stronger now, the human having either passed through or lingered for a while in the receiving bay. Quietly advancing to Xu's room, he rapped lightly on the durasteel door.

“Yes?” came from the other side.

“It’s Uurl, open up.”

A moment later the door slid aside and Xu stood, filling the portal adorned in a pair of black coveralls. “We’ve got company,” Uurl said brushing past him. Xu’s head jerked in his direction and he quickly shut the door. “What?”

“Someone is on the ship with us. A human,” Uurl explained, checking under the Quarrens environmental sustainment chamber. The operative’s species needed it to stay hydrated; an important consideration for an aquatic-based lifeform. “He has tried to mask his smell with engine grease, but I’ve picked up his scent, lingering somewhere underneath.”

The Quarren’s eyes were wide with disbelief. “You’re certain?”

“Yes. We need to get Socatoa and do a search of the ship and quickly. The room next to mine was locked- it wasn’t when we took off.”

Dropping into a small chair, Xu shook his head. “We’ve been in hyperspace for close to a week, how could someone...how could they evade us for this long? Is it maybe a residual scent? From some of the cargo perhaps?”

Shaking his head, Uurl stepped back to the door to make sure it was locked. “No. I would have detected it once we left the planet,” he said. Checking the charge in his weapon he turned back to Xu. “Perhaps he primarily stayed nestled back around the engines...remained still, reduced his activity so as not to sweat or give off a scent. There are products that even mask scents, used extensively by hunters.”

Light glimmered in the Quarrens aqua eyes. “The cargo! The cargo we picked up on Celanon. Any of those boxes could have been tampered with. We left in such a hurry...we never checked...” He didn’t finish, instead drawing a blaster pistol and a glow rod from a duffel sitting beside his chamber. “We’ll have to check it out. ”

“What about the Wookiee?” Uurl asked.

“Still locked in the cockpit,” Xu said, shaking his domed head back and forth. “He only comes out when we are asleep-apparently for food and a refresher break. He’s still fuming over the conversation we had back on Celanon. I’ve tried to talk to him he’s ignores me...just sits in that cockpit singing wookiee battle anthems at the top of his lungs.”

Standing, the Shistavinean shouldered his weapon. “Then it’s up to us. Let’s go hunting.”

The intruder was hiding somewhere in the starboard cargo hold. Uurl could smell his scent everywhere, but the hold, easily two hundred square meters and stacked with a maze of cargo containers, provided numerous hiding spots.

The Shitavenian triggered the bay's overhead lightbars upon entering, only to realize half were non-functioning, casting the area in a dim, hazy light.

Xu, inspecting the port hold, suggested earlier they regroup in the receiving area and work through the aft engineering together. Uurl felt uneasy, normally he would welcome this challenge...but why would one person infiltrate a ship alone? What was to gain? Possible suspects tumbled through his mind. The most obvious was Gark, but he wasn't a human. Neither was Shella, or any of the others he had crewed with. Was it perhaps a bounty hunter? An Imperial? A commando who had possibly shadowed them and chosen this moment to strike?

Working his way towards the back, he circled the perimeter, winding up in the cleared area near the doors. The scent in the hold was old, hours old. He was about to turn around and head into the interior maze of the crates when a loud "clank" echoed through the hold and the bay door behind him slid open.

Spinning, he levelled his carbine; instinct caused him to squeeze off a shot, the red bolt of energy singing the flowing cloak of a form darting into the hold.

"Uurl! It's me!" Xu screamed dropping to the ground and rolling.

Pulling back up on his weapon, Uurl cursed. "Do you know how close you came to getting shot?" Xu, still on the ground, nodded and pulled up a fold of his cloak still smoldering from the blaster shot.

"Yes, I do."

"The scent in here is dead. He must have moved to another part of the ship or maybe he's using whatever he was using before to mask himself..."

He stopped in mid-sentence when he saw the Quarrens eyes grow wide. In the dim light they lit up like two bulbous glass orbs. Something hit the ground behind him and he felt a large gloved hand encircle his snout while a forearm slid around his throat.

Reflexes took over and his body went rigid; he attempted to fire a vicious elbow into his assailant's midsection, but the man was too quick. He heard a "crack" and felt something snap in his neck as the powerful hands twisted his head at an unnatural angle.

Unable to breath, Uurl struggled for a swallow of air, digging a claw into the powerful forearm that encircled his neck. Vision blurring, his body seemed to simply drop out from underneath him as darkness closed in from the edges; the last thing he saw was Xu, struggling to bring his rifle to bear on the man who murdered him.

Terror gripped Xu like a Rancor. The man had dropped silently behind Uurl from the shadows above, grabbing the wolfmans head and twisting violently, snapping his partner's neck like a reed.

The lifeless body hit the cargo bay floor with a dull "thud" and the intruder, discarding some sort of mesh cloak, emerged fully from the darkness. Two cold blue eyes peeked out from a dark mask covered in an erratic red patchwork of jagged lines.

Overriding the fear that coursed through his body, Xu jerked his rifle up and squeezed off a series of blaster bolts.

Moving in a blur, the man easily dodged the deadly bolt of energy, sliding quietly into the maze of empty cargo containers. A microsecond later, return fire lanced out of the shadows towards the Quarren.

Sparks rained down on Xu as he scrambled across the floor away from the shots, rolling through the bay doors and out into that Trinity's large receiving area. In desperation, he unloaded with several more bursts, all slamming harmlessly into the cargo bays doorframe.

Unsure that he hit anything, he scurried across the dark loading ramp and towards the port bay doors and the receiving bay's light switch. Behind him the starboard cargo bay door slammed shut, eliminating the sparse bit of light that fell from the bay and into the vast area. Ducking behind a damaged cooling unit, Xu checked his weapons energy cell charge.

"Running is useless," the man's voice purred, echoing through the darkness. Anger replaced fear and Xu readied his weapon, gripping the carbine with fierce resolve. The bay was drenched in darkness, save for a random flicker of a malfunctioning lightbar nestled high above.

"That's quite a lucid observation, considering we are on a ship," Xu snarled, slowly scooting backwards and aiming his carbine in front of him. Moving by memory, he only banged his knee once against a crate Socatoa failed to put away. Silently cursing his Wookiee partner, he eventually found his way to the far wall.

"Ooooh, a witty corpse, those are the very best kind," the intruder replied.

Was the man closer? Xu wasn't sure. Behind him the durasteel bulkhead rose up, its uneven surface and random conduit boxes jutting painfully against his back. Moving his free left hand slowly along its cold, worn surface, he eventually reached the bay door frame; over the ridge he could feel the receiving bay's round light button rise to meet his fingers. Setting his jaw, he dropped to one knee and jammed a finger into the control.

The overhead lightbars immediately sprung to life with strobe flickering, bathing the bay in dull erratic illumination. The masked man was no more than 3 meters away, crawling

across the receiving area floor like a spider.

Startled, Xu fired, but not quickly enough. Rolling to the side, the man brought up two blasters, squeezing off deadly bursts of energy as he rolled.

Blaster bolts slammed into the bay door, centimeters from Xu's head. Heat, scorching his moist skin, sent a blinding sting erupting across his face. Turning to return fire, another shot pierced a dull gray hose running along the ship's bulkhead, causing it to rupture.

Bright orange reactor fluid sprayed the left side of the Quarrens' face and indescribable pain tore through his brain. His finger, jamming hard against the trigger of his weapon, randomly sprayed a hail of blaster fire towards the man.

With a mighty lurch, the ship bucked, dropping out of hyperspace. Warning klaxons wailed and the Trinity shuddered as if she were going to erupt, scattering her hull towards every point in the galaxy. Bathing the bay in a yellow strobe, emergency lights spun to life in a wild pattern of shadows and light that turned the bay into a madhouse.

Both beings hit the deck, the masked man's body hitting hard and sliding against a support column.

Gripping the edge of the corridor's frame, Xu fought against gravity and pain to maintain his balance. Slinging himself down the circular corridor towards his room, tears blurred the vision in his one good eye, but he knew stopping meant death. Something hot slammed into his back, burning through his blast vest and boiling the tender flesh underneath.

The world swam in front of him but he barreled on, instinct carrying him through to the outer escape pod airlock.

Crashing through an access hatch to his left he dropped into the cushy confine of the Trinity's lone escape pod. Hammering a fist down, the hatch slid shut, sealing him off from the nightmare pursuing him through the ship.

Bringing his weapon up, he expected to see the killer in the pod with him, the crazed eyes and insane mask swimming in his blurred vision. But he was alone. Orange liquid pain continued to sizzle on his skin with waves of anguish and nausea continuing to crash through his body; bile erupted from his mouth, spraying the pod with that morning's breakfast.

A constant beep counted down and the escape pod disembarked from the Trinity, jetting away like a fleeing mynock from a drained energy cell.

Dropping back onto the padded seat, Xu located a med pack and ejected a hypodermic needle filled with a powerful narcotic. Jabbing it into the soiled leg of his coveralls, he settled back as the fast acting med attacked his wound. Years of military training and countless battles enabled him to block out the pain that was ripping at his body. Pulling a bottle of salve from the kit he ejected it across his face, biting back a curse as the liquid hit, stung and then numbed what remained of his left eye and one of his facial tentacles. Gathering up a bundle of gauze he pressed it tightly against the throbbing wound and what was left of his eye.

Rolling his remaining eye towards the small round window, the Trinity disappeared slowly, eventually reduced to nothing more than a tiny speck.

Klaxons erupted in the Trinity's small cockpit, rousing Socatoa from his slumber. With a violent shudder the ship stopped, the lines of hyperspace receding into a tapestry of brilliant white stars. What the hell? The Wookiee thought. Only by clutching the sides of his captain's seat, did he stop himself from falling forward into the control panel.

Angry red lights urgently vied for his attention across the soiled control panel. Killing the warning klaxons, he took in the readout and various red data scrolling across the ship's system screen.

"...hypdrive coolant lines # 37 and 44 ruptured, security system codes experiencing a malfunction, escape pod jettisoned..." a growl forced its way up through his muzzle. He had expected the Quarren to be angry, but in no way did he expect the crazy frell-head to try to sabotage his ship.

Grabbing his blaster pistol from under the jump seat, Socatoa checked its charge.

Loaded.

He flipped the switch from stun to kill and triggered the door. If Uurl was still around he and the Wookiee were going to have to repair the ship. If Uurl took off with Xu...well...SOMETHING was getting shot in this ship.

The corridor glowed sickly yellow from the emergency lights. Gripping the heavy blaster pistol, Socatoa stalked angrily, kicking aside several empty crates that were unfortunate enough to be in his way. Rage coursed through his veins like a narcotic, engorging his muscles and banishing reason from his enormous skull. He would shoot the next living thing he saw...no one messed with his ship and made it away unscathed.

Halfway to the lounge, movement caught his eye. Before he could roar a challenge, three red bolts of energy screamed from the shadows; one, striking the blaster, blew apart its firing mechanism and reducing it to molten slag; the other two barreled into the thick corded muscle of his legs, superheating his kneecaps and bursting scores of blood vessels. Dropping to the ground, pain and fury reduced him into a feral mass of violence.

Using the rush of adrenaline, Socatoa struggled back to his feet. He didn't have a blaster but he didn't need any; two hundred kilograms of angry Wookiee stood ready to tear someone limb from limb.

Emitting a deafening roar, Socatoa stepped forward on unsure legs, hands balled into melon-sized fists. More blaster fire found its way into the sensitive flesh of his knees, and his body simply failed to respond. Hitting the ground, the blaster fire continued to pour into his immobile form, reducing his knees and lower legs into a flaming mess. Quickly he rolled, extinguishing the burning fur of what used to be his legs.

The rage that was so violent and intoxicating slowly ebbed from his system, leaving the dull painful realization that he couldn't move.

Roaring, he slung the ruined blaster towards the dark shape that detached itself from the shadows. Yellow light glinted off of the red embroidery that crossed the deep blue mask

and recognition dropped on Socatoa like a crippled At-At.

“Ket, you Bastard!” he roared.

“Oh, I’m the Bastard am I?” Ket said, stepping fully from the shadows and kneeling in front of his former partner. Socatoa noticed he was still wearing that stupid outfit that he bought on Valex 3: A red and black skintight bodysuit, two matching gun belts crisscrossing his hips and a loose trenchcoat, stylishly cut so he had easy access to the deadly weapons.

“What do you think you are doing?!?” he roared at the younger man. The last time he’d laid eyes on Ket was on the deck of the Imperial Star Destroyer Reliant. Captain Nock’Nord, tracking the hapless group, captured them as they attempted to escape from the planet Graymoore.

Standing silently, the gunslinger twirled his weapons and dropped them soundlessly into their holsters. “You know,” Ket began, as if addressing an assembly. “When I was younger I was really only good at one thing:

Shooting.

I could shoot like no other slinger you ever saw; an important commodity when you are born on a planet where the inhabitants have blaster showdowns just for kicks.” He turned his back to the prone Wookiee and looked towards the Trinity’s ceiling, as if lost in thought.

“I was destined for a life of leisure and greatness. That is until I fell in with a group of wannabe heroes,” he snarled. He turned, insane eyes boring holes into Socatoa. If looks were blaster bolts the Wook knew he would have taken his last breath.

“You’ve lost it,” Socatoa growled, trying to push himself back along the corridor and away from the crazed madman. “Those implants of yours have finally sent you over the edge. I knew we should have stopped you from...”

Ket slowly slipped a blaster free. Light danced along the Sentinel IV, ending in the large black maw of the weapons barrel.

Socatoa’s anger and bravado from earlier was now gone, replaced with a feeling more primal and instinctive than any he could manufacture: Pure Fear. Visions of his mutilated corpse hung in his eyes and he scrambled for a way out. Fighting was out of the question and running was impossible...

“No! Please! Don’t...let’s work this out...partner...we can always work things out.”

Shaking his head Ket kept the weapon trained on the Wookiee. “Sorry ‘partner’ I don’t deal. There is nothing in this Galaxy that could possibly rob me of the pleasure of seeing you dead.” A red bolt lanced out of the weapon and smacked into Socatoa’s chest. Slowly, the shadows in the bay spread, consuming everything until all that was left was darkness. Then he knew nothing else.

Somewhere in the dark, a hyperdrive engine hummed. He knew it was the Trinity's, just as he knew he was lying on the floor of the cockpit. It was the smell. That was the second sensation to return. The cockpit Smelled...lived in. For a while he simply sniffed at the air. He tried to move but nothing seemed to respond. So he sniffed.

An empty food container from a week ago...he recognized that. A helmet that still stank of Zeltronian hair cream...used to be A'sok's.

Ket. He could smell Ket. It was a frightening smell. Blaster lubricant, gun belt oil, to preserve the Dewback leather and keep it supple, and the repugnant scent of engine grease. He let the smells drift to him slowly as he reconstructed what led him to the floor of the Trinity's cockpit. Slowly, he opened his eyes, and looked into the calm cold stare of death.

"Welcome back to the land of the living. Hope you enjoy it-since your pass expires in," the gunslinger mocked looking at a chrono on his wrist, "oh, two or three days."

Ket was seated in his captain's chair, adjusting the console controls, his every move as silent as a whisper. Socatoa watched him for a moment, fear still working through his system like a narcotic.

"Why?" he finally managed. He tried to stare at his body but couldn't move his head. He felt no restraints, but still was unable to move any of his appendages.

"Why?" Ket echoed, "You mean, why are you going to die? Come on Socatoa. You, Vic, A'sok, Klux...you all conspired to destroy my life. You did unspeakable things to that poor girl...you worked with that scumbag bounty hunter to set me up. I dare say killing you is the least I could do to return the favor."

"No...you're wrong...we were a team we..." Socatoa struggled as the accusations rolled around in his mind like a handful of marbles.

"I see you still have enough energy to lie to me," Ket said, exasperation creeping into his voice. "Since we have another day before we hit Valex 3, I'll describe-in great detail-why you are going to die slowly, and in great pain." He set the ship on auto pilot and turned, propping his boot up on the Wookiees chest. Socatoa tried to growl, but simply had no energy. Pain hammered away as Ket ground his bootheel into the spot where he shot the Wookiee. Finally he stopped struggling and let his head drop to the deck in submission.

"It was all of the time Klux spent in my head. Telling me what you were doing, and how useless I was. See, that Jedi was always doing stuff like that," he shook his head, pulling a blaster from his holster. "In fact," he stopped, frozen in place, "I think he may be doing it right now...GET OUT OF MY HEAD!" Ket screamed, brandishing the weapon. Socatoa cringed, waiting for another shot from the blaster. A moment later, clarity settled

in the young man's crazed stare. "He's out there Socatoa, still out there picking away at my brain," he said, shaking his head. "Then there was Vic. I never trusted that one from the start...he just had to come along and muck things up. We could have made it off planet without him but no. You guys came up with the genius idea of taking out Akelish. Why? What purpose did it serve?" he let the question hang in the air, crossing his heels amid the tufts of scorched chest hair.

"Then we come to you. You and your blasted wheeling and dealing," he shook his head. "If you weren't so money hungry and anxious to be a rebellion whipping boy, we wouldn't have set down on that wretched ball of ice. Next thing I know, I'm being collared and hung out to dry. You have..."

Rage exploded from Socatoa. "YOU were the one who ran OFF!" he roared. Energy surged through him but his limbs continued to lay impotent at his side. Shaking uncontrollably, he fought against the invisible force pinning him to the ground.

"Don't waste what little energy you have partner," Ket advised. "The neuro-toxin I injected into your system was potent enough to paralyze a herd of Banthas." Yawning, he slid his arms behind his head and gazed out into the black of space. Centimeters away his gunbelt hung in Socatoa's face, taunting him.

"You felled up Wook. I was just a run of the mill kid from Valhallan Falls who was great with a blaster. Then you and your infernal group of do-gooders stumbled into my life and the next thing I knew I'm in a hole being tortured for kicks," He cast his eyes back down to his prone prisoner.

"Don't worry. For the pain and suffering you made me endure you get to take a trip through a living hell, wishing for death every moment you take a breath. Akelish and I have been looking forward to this for a long time."

The room was molded from a blue and white marbled mineral indigenous to the underground canyons of Valex 3. Apparently Akelish had a deal with the head of the local penal colony and the prisoners would excavate tons of the ore in search of Dredgel, a spice found in the planets ocean bed.

Ket filed this information away in the back of his mind. He would use it later, of course. He always used every bit of information he came by. But now he was here to enjoy the show. Leaning his back against the cold stone he propped one boot up on the railing separating the raised viewing area from the main floor. Several months of work and revenge was about to pay off.

Strapped in the center of the round room lay Socatoa. The Wookiee was restrained by a series of pristine spiked chains, each one holding down a different appendage and each one piercing the Wookiees skin. The more he struggled, the more the chains would tear at

his flesh, sending small puddles of blood bubbling up from the mass of brown and black fur.

Following the blood streams, Ket watched them disappear beneath the victim and heard them dripping slowly into the reservoir of the bright durasteel table the chains were lashed to. Floating around the table in synch were two matte black medical droids, both projecting a red laser across Socatoas prone body. At first Ket expected them to be dissecting lasers, but in fact they were merely scanning his body, gathering information and conditions, all to insure that he didn't die before Akelish showed up.

“That big wook sure is quiet! Wonder how much is fear and how much is sedative?” A Rodian asked from beside him. He was one of several spectators in the room, all allowed by invitation only. Some were henchmen, there to make sure Akelish never came under any danger; in the past a particularly nasty Coynite had caused some damage before he was taken back down.

The rest were the common scum you would find in a Hutt's palace: parasites sucking the tiniest bit of wealth and adoration they could possibly get before being swatted away.

He looked at the Rodian with disgust. The sniveling creature reminded Ket too much of his childhood friend Croto.

“Speak to me again and I'll cut you into chunks and set them on fire,” Ket promised, staring into the large bulbous black eyes of the green skinned alien. The Rodian's tiny antennae twitched, the large circular overhead lights seeming to grow in his frightened stare.

“I..I'll catch you later,” he stammered, his snout trembling nervously. Never taking his eyes from the gunslinger he retreated backwards and bounced off of the large Gammorean who guarded the blast door. With a violent shove the Rodian landed face first out into the hall with a crash.

Letting his eyes wander around the pristine walls and spotless floor, he noticed his former partner staring at him. No longer filled with rage and anger, the look in Socatoa's eyes was one Ket had seen a hundred times before.

Fear.

The Wookiee knew he was going to die today...badly. Letting his eyes lock with Socatoas, Ket nodded ever so slightly.

No growl came from the blood matted maw, rather, the Wookiee took the opportunity to mouth a single word.

Help.

Somewhere, deep in the recesses of Ket's diseased mind, something ached. It was only for a moment, and, had his perceptions not been augmented artificially he may not even have noticed it. But it was there and gone in a fraction of a second.

Guilt. He felt, if only for a moment, a touch of guilt jerk at the tendrils of his mind.

Immediately he thought of the auburn haired Jedi, somewhere out there in the galaxy.

“Get out of my head Klux...get out of it and stay out,” he muttered to himself. The hum of the medical droids aging repulsors drowned out the quiet words. The Wookiee, lucid but unmoving continued to stare at him.

“There won’t be any famous Raptor Squad rescue this time my friend,” he whispered to Klux, Socatoa and whoever else wanted to hear. “Not all of your little adventures end with victories and celebrations you know.”

Off to his right the blast door disappeared into the cool blue walls and the crowd grew silent. Akelish, one of the most disturbed Hutts in known space floated in on a red metallic repulsor bed trimmed in gold and adorned with thousands of tiny skulls.

Her girth falling over the edge of the sled like gelatin, Akelish slowly took in the room with slow appreciation. Where the right side of her large head should be was a cybernetic cap set with a glowing green eye; a gift from Raptor Squad oh so many months ago. Mechanisms whirred and sputtered on the apparatus, a release of steam occasionally discharging from a rear release valve.

A stained, rust colored 3PO unit toddled along several steps behind the massive floating bundle of ochre colored flesh. Upon stopping, Akelish opened her arms and began to speak, the 3PO unit translating, word for word.

“The most wondrous and benevolent Akelish welcomes you all to the show,” the 3PO repeated, its feminine voice sounding both bored and sad at the same time. Ket’s increased perception allowed him to actually watch the crowd swell with excitement...sweat ran more freely and some of the denizens even licked their lips. One Aqualish in the corner actually began to tremble slightly.

“You are all here to pay witness as the Wookiee, Socatoa is punished for crimes against our beloved Akelish. This includes, but is not limited to,” the 3PO gestured to the glowing green eye on her master, “marring the flawless beauty of Akelish and forcing her to forever need this infernal accessory.”

The small crowd, fueled by the speech and thirsty for blood began to catcall and chant for the Wookiees death.

Set into the far wall, a small door revealed itself, spilling a brilliant light into the room. The crowd silenced immediately and an automated repulsor cart hovered into the quiet area, stopping in front of Akelish, who maneuvered a mere meter away from the Wookiee.

Spread across the cart, all manner of glistening durasteel razors and cutting devices were arranged, edges glinting pristinely in the overhead light. Nearly all were vibro-enhanced, but some of them, the instruments Ket had seen get the most use in the past, carried no upgrades. These were crude cutting devices that would cause pain, each and every time they touched flesh.

Flicking from her mouth, a sickly green tongue wet Akelish’s lips, rolling around and eventually retreating like a wounded space slug. She continued in her deep guttural voice.

“And now Socatoa, prepare to experience pain. Pain unlike any that you could possibly imagine,” the 3PO unit droned.

A glimmer caught Ket’s attention. Amid the bright lights and glistening instruments he’d not noticed it before. Pulling his attention back to the Wookiee, he watched a small stream of tears roll from the corner of Socatoa’s eye and drip onto the cold steel of the dissecting table.

The pang of guilt he felt before returned. Disgusted, Ket turned and stormed from the room, barreling past the Gammorean who knew better than to stand in his way.

The hallway was quiet at first. Leaning against the hard stone, Ket fished a sack of credits from the deep inner pockets of his trench coat. The bag weighed quite a bit, and slowly, methodically, he began removing cred chips from it, mentally adding them together and dropping them back into his deep pockets.

He was somewhere in the tens of thousands when the Wookiee began to scream. Despite the narcotics and restraints, Socatoa finally reached the end of his pain threshold, and his screams, unlike any Ket had ever heard from a Wookiee, filled the halls with an indescribable shriek.

Ket continued to count. Creeping through his mind, picked up by the cybernetics nestled in his skull and filtered from the piercing screams, he could hear the sound of flawless razor sharp instruments severing flesh from muscle.

He tried shutting it out. He continued to count. Eventually, the only sound he could hear was the “clink” of credits dropping on top of each other in the deep pockets of his jacket.

THE END

“Rainy Day Creds”

The rain at Gelgelaar Free Port never stopped. Downpours, drizzles and mists were all one could expect on the saturated jungle planet. Khara Doone knew this all too well, having only been dropped off a few hours earlier. Her stay thus far had been thoroughly miserable, leaving her drenched and chilled to the bone.

Normally, an abundance of water wasn't a problem for a Wroonian. Coming from a planet made mostly of water where downpours and typhoons were the order of the day, being wet was in her nature. But this was a different kind of wet. Khara stood huddled in the doorway of a squat duracrete building; a six-foot tall figure with white leather trenchcoat bundled around her, trying to keep the chill air at bay. She hadn't dressed for this weather, and her white tank top and white leather pants were clinging to her body like an uncomfortable second skin. Normally they would accent her trim, lithe frame and effortless beauty, but today they just made her feel like a drowned womprat.

The street was empty except for a few vagrants huddling together forty meters away beneath the protective awning of a droid shop. Good luck, she thought to herself and tried to crawl further into her jacket. The chrono on her wrist beeped. It was almost time. Shivering, she cast her lavender eyes towards a brightly lit building a few blocks down the muddy street.

Through the gloom and rain she could just make out the hanging sign that read “Gelgelaar's Outfitters”. They would be closing soon and then she could get down to “business”. The “business” of unloading stolen goods, she smirked to herself. For the umpteenth time she pulled the small metal object from one of a dozen hidden pockets in the jacket.

Shining with an unusual green light, the amulet sat in her hand feeling unusually warm against her light blue skin. “You, my little friend, are going to help me catch a ride off of this wet, dumpy planet,” she whispered and slid the item back into her jacket with the grace befitting a Wroonian Thief. Scanning the alley to make sure she hadn’t attracted any attention, she moved from the partial cover of the doorway into the nearly deserted street.

Her knuckles had barely rapped against the wooden door when it swung wide and bathed her in a warm orange glow. A short sullustan wearing a green cap and purple robes waved her into the squat two story building.

“Please, please, come in! Too wet outside! Too wet always! Come in!” he yammered at her in his native tongue. Khara knew him only from reputation. He was Qulo Ecls, the manger of the Gelgalar Outfitters and younger brother to the administrator of the Gelgalar Free Port.

Flashing a smile made up of a perfect set of teeth, she stepped into the warmth of the building. As he shut the door behind her the comfort of the room enveloped her and she felt her chill subsiding. The store was larger than it appeared from its façade. The first 2 meters of flooring was some sort of carpeting that seemed to literally pull the moisture and grime from her white leather boots. Khara thought for a moment the spongy substance was going to pull them off and quickly moved on to the rich wood grain floor.

Merchandise adorned every nook and cranny. If she didn’t know any better she would have thought she was in a museum. Warm interior lamps illuminated all manner of survival gear and nick-nacks that covered the walls that stretched on for dozens of meters. Qulo was already behind her and tugging at her jacket. “Please, please! This is soaked, take off!”

Khara smiled but gently pulled away from the Sullustan. “Thanks but I’ll keep it on,” she said. Qulo nodded as if he had heard it all before and quickly shuffled towards the back of the store, waving her along. Dragging a hand through her indigo hair, Khara followed, letting her trained eye creep over the more expensive and valuable of Qulo’s goods.

“Quite a stash you got here,” she said. Metlock had mentioned that anything worth having could be found at the ‘Outfitter’s.

Mumbling something polite, Qulo passed through a deep green curtain hung across a doorway in the back of the store. The place seemed empty but Khara could just barely pick up muffled voices from somewhere upstairs. More than likely Qulo’s family, she thought, passing through the thick curtain.

The office was small, and in danger of being overrun by trinkets. It seemed that whatever he couldn’t fit in his showroom made its way here, finding a permanent home. A light covering of dust coated several Bith statues sitting in the corner and a large ornate desk sat littered with datapads and dirty shot glasses. He waved her into a seat opposite him

and dropped into a large well-worn chair. Beside him a pot sat on a small burner, emitting a delicious earthy aroma. Carefully removing it, he poured a rich brown liquid into a small silver cup and handed it to Khara.

“Metlock! You are his blue friend! Metlock has had good things to say! Good things to say means good business!” he said, crossing two stubby hands over his small gut.

Khara leaned back in the chair and relaxed. The smell of incense and rich wood drifted throughout the small office and was remarkably soothing. Taking a sip of the drink, she let the glass warm her hands while its contents hit her stomach and filled it with a mild burn. “That’s right, I have goods to sell,” she said, taking another sip.

Qulo smiled. His large bulbous eyes gleamed and his puckered mouth turned upwards. “Excellent! I have interest in buying! Always fair, never a scam artist!” he exclaimed.

“Oh, I have no doubt of that,” she said matching his smile; it was just wide enough to border on flirtatious. Not that there was any interest of course, it was just good for business. One of the things the Wroonian Thieves Guild taught aspiring thieves was how to use your strengths to your advantage. If that meant relying on her beauty and winning smile then so be it. Credits were credits, after all.

The amulet was still warm when she pulled it from her jacket. She didn’t remember it feeling like this when she lifted it from the Tapani noble she “bumped” into a week earlier, but then again it wasn’t as if she took the time to notice. Qulo’s eyes widened and he reached for the amulet. As soon as it touched his hand his face contorted into what Khara would only read as a frown.

“Ooooooh. This, ah, this would be ah, a Finder’s Amulet,” he said, hefting the piece in his hand. Khara watched him inspect it as if he were holding a diseased Mynock.

“A Finder’s Amulet? What’s that?” she asked. The warmth in her stomach began to harden into a knot.

The Sullustan looked back to her and gently placed the amulet on the desk between them. “Nobles, yes, nobles wear them. Valuable? Yes, worth at least twelve thousand credits,” Khara felt her pulse quicken, “but I can not, uh, I can not buy.”

Her stomach flip flopped. “What? Why?”

Spreading his hands out before him, he offered her a sympathetic glance. “These amulets, coded, they are, to the wearers DNA. When worn, they glow a beautiful red, if they are ever removed, well” he didn’t finish, just gestured to the green glowing amulet on the desk.

“What the frell? Can’t you do anything with it?” she pleaded. A marked good was useless to her and she nearly kicked herself for not inspecting the item thoroughly.

“Afraid not. The markings designate this as a special ornament of house Barnaba. To tamper with the amulet will result in the disintegration of the crystal inside, the only real thing of value in the necklace. I’m sorry...very, very sorry.”

Khara sat deflated. After everything she had been through in the past year, this was icing on the cake. She was down to her last hundred credits and would have to beg or steal a lift off planet. And then where? Back to Laric to beg for a spot in the thieves guild? No, Khara Doone made her own way and begged for nothing.

She was about to ask if Qulo could recommend another trader or buyer when the curtain behind her rustled. The Sullustans bulbous black eyes widened and Khara slowly turned around.

Standing just two meters away was a man adorned in a black leather trenchcoat, cut so that he had easy access to two gunbelts crossing his hips. Poking from the holsters were what Khara guessed were Sentinel IV blaster pistols, not run of the mill by any stretch, but nothing about the man seemed to be “run of the mill.” Where his face should have been was a crimson mask, criss-crossed with an insane pattern of blue zig-zags. Two wide, intense eyes stared from rips in the fabric past her and directly at Qulo.

“You, blue woman, please, uh, please step out into the uh, storefront, please, will be with you shortly,” Qulo said from behind his desk. His hands were slightly trembling and Khara could smell fear pour from him like a cheap deodorant.

Snatching the amulet, Khara stood and turned. The stranger never took his gaze from Qulo and she had to step around him to get past the curtain. Out of habit, her hand brushed lightly against his trench as she passed. If she wasn’t going to get anything for the amulet maybe this mark...

“Watch your hands...thief,” his voice purred. She froze and stood staring up at the man. He slowly turned his head and the eyes that seemed intense a moment ago now bore into her like blaster bolts. Cautiously, she retreated through the curtain feeling a cold shiver run down her back. She shook it away and began quietly inspecting the amulet. From behind the curtain she heard Qulo’s and the stranger talking in hushed whispers.

“...is no one on the planet right now that I know of who does that work.” Qulo’s voice.

“I simply need an infiltrator. Someone who can get in, gather information and get out. It’s a simple job and I’m willing to pay. Twenty-thousand credits.”

Khara’s ears perked up. Twenty thousand credits? That would be enough for her to move to Torina, set up a safe house...”

“Lotek, my friend, I’m telling you, and I do not lie, there is no infiltrator on planet now. My brother would have told me. Yes, yes he would have.”

The rain hadn't let up, in fact it seemed like it was getting worse. She had just settled next to the doorway and pulled her jacket back around her when the wooden door swung wide, depositing the stranger, "Lotek" out into the rain.

It seemed not to affect him and he stood letting the water splatter against his mask and pour down the back of his coat.

"Hey..." the word was barely out of her mouth when he sprung. Khara was quick, but even she wasn't able to track his movement. In one blinding motion he closed with her and drew a Sentinel, bringing it to rest up under her chin. In the dim rainfall and illuminated only by the faint glow coming from the Outfitters' they looked no different than embraced lovers.

Pressing the barrel slowly into the tender blue skin of her jaw, he forced her head back. "Most people who try to get the drop on me rarely live to explain why. So take the chance I'm giving you and tell me what you want."

Khara swallowed hard, her throat moving slightly against the cold, wet barrel. She could play this a few ways but she needed the money and wanted to show this character she wasn't easily rattled. "I heard you needed an infiltrator. Someone who can get things done and gather information. I think I can help you out. Now," she said, bringing her finger up and jabbing it in the stranger's chest, "if you are done trying to scare me, we can go get a drink and you can tell me who the mark is." Hoping her bravado paid off, she continued to look down her nose at him.

Lotek stood motionless for a moment watching her with his steel blue eyes. Slowly he removed the blaster barrel from her throat. Dropping her head, she cocked an eyebrow at him. "So?" she asked, floding her arms across her chest. The rain continued its assault in sheets now.

"The 'Slippery Eel' is right down the street. Lets go talk business and I can decide if I want to hire you or kill you," Lotek said in a low voice. She could see a smile stretch under his wet mask but it never seemed to reach his eyes.

She woke with a start. A violent growl in her ear had pulled her from a deep slumber and instinctively she gripped her heavy blaster with both hands, bringing it up in front of her with a finger lightly touching the trigger. Darkness surrounded her, unchanging, for the last 2 days. Getting her bearings, she relaxed, replacing the heavy weapon in a black leather shoulder holster. She wiped the sweat from her eyes and cast her gaze off to the right and down through a ventilation grate. On landing pad #22 a 3-Z light freighter sat immobile, bathed partially in fluorescent light and shadow.

“...I don’t care what you think, the fact of the matter is that we are going to need an outlaw tech or hacker or something!” a voice screamed. Khara adjusted the volume on the earpiece she was wearing and unconsciously leaned forward.

“Graaaaaaa Mrwwwwwwwwllllllllll!” the roar came back, but not a regular roar. This was Wookiee-speech. Leaning over her LX-390 Laptop she tapped a few keys, initiating a translation program she’d been working on. In the faint glow of the screen, words began to appear. The program, nicknamed “Smartmouth”, began recognizing the voice patterns of those talking, giving her a readout of the conversation. Everything being said in the hull of the light freighter 100 meters below her began to scroll across her screen:

Socatoa (Wookiee-“Mark”): We do NOT need a hacker. What we need is to simply roll in there and blast anything that moves.

Xu Perrel (Quarren-Co Pilot): Socatoa, these imperial files are hard to crack. Just because we pull the files doesn’t mean that a termination program won’t be running. If we aren’t careful we could lose every...

Gark the Red (Rodian-hired muscle): Xu ‘s right. I’m all for blasting that base to chunks, but...

Socatoa (Wookiee-“Mark”): Shut your mouth! We do not have the time to go find ourselves a hacker....the last hacker I worked with left me high and dry for a few measly credits! You can’t trust em...sneaky...

Uurl (Shistavinean-hired muscle): Why is it so hard? Aren’t the files just nav coordinates? Right? Why would they be encrypted...

Socatoa (Wookiee-“Mark”): You don’t know when to shut up Uurl. These aren’t just nav coordinates, they point to the location of...

A blast of air exploded down the corridor to Khara’s left. Screeching turbines and the whine of engines drowned out the conversation coming across her earpiece. The translation program, dependent on the audio feed, was disrupted and began logging an error message.

This was the fourth time in so many days this had happened. The Crichton-14 space station was an old decrepit hulk sitting in the outer rim that was lucky to still be functioning. Lotek’s info packet on the Wookiee pointed to this location as one of the

most likely spots he was to be found. Sure enough, a quick scan of the stations manifest revealed a 3-Z light freighter named “Trinity” docking only a week before.

After securing herself a room, she spent the next day getting used to the stations layout and numerous hallways and crawlspaces. The 5,000 credit advance Lotek paid her insured that she had no problem getting a room and no questions asked. The rest was typical surveillance stuff. Downloading a layout of the station revealed a rarely used access duct. Then it was just a matter of sneaking into the bay when the Wookiee and his crew weren’t around and planting a small bug on the ships hull.

The downside of course was spending 2 days in the access duct with dirt and dust motes. Filth covered her skintight bodysuit and she was beginning to itch like crazy. Her mind wandered to the sonic bath just two floors away in her room...maybe she would order room service when she got back...a nice skeebass steak....

Seconds later the error message disappeared along with the turbines roar, the conversation once more resuming on the laptops small screen:

Xu Perrel (Quarren Co-Pilot): ...Is a spacers myth Socatoa. Even if it did exist, there is no way you could make it through the asteroid field that surrounds it...it would tear this ship apart!

Socatoa (Wookiee-“Mark”): It is NOT a myth. I know the coordinates are there and I’ve talked to spacers who have tried to get in. A good pilot, which I am, would have no trouble navigating that asteroid field...

Gark the Red (Rodian-Hired Muscle): Look, all of this poodoo about “secret systems” and “deadly asteroid belts” is making my stomach do a hustle. I’m heading to the stations cantina for a while to get loaded and get fed...

Socatoa (Wookiee-“Mark”): Don’t forget we leave in a few days. I want everyone sober and ready for action. Tinfyl may just be a relay station but it’s still gonna have imps...

Khara disconnected the audio line and shut her comp down. “So,” she thought aloud to herself, “The Wook and his buddies need a hacker...well, I know just the woman for the job. And if these nerfdodgers are half as stupid as they sound, getting in their group is going to be a walk along the beach.”

It took only a second to spot the Rodian. He was parked at the bar with his head down and long green fingers tapping in beat to the music being piped through the bar’s speaker system. The Final Jump Saloon was a run down dive nestled near the station’s core. Most times The Jump’ would be populated with Crichton’s mechanics, merchants and spacers; today it had only a smattering of patrons including Gark the Red.

Weaving her way around several tables, she took up a spot at the end of the bar, opposite of Gark. The last hour had been spent in a sonic bath eliminating two days worth of funk. She swapped her work clothes for something more casual; black dewback leather pants and a white silk top sporting a neckline that dipped between the swell of her chest. It was the kind of outfit that got you noticed, either in a high class casino or a depressing out of the way space station.

A virtual menu appeared on the bar before her and she let her fingers dance across the multi-colored interface. Moments later an automated arm clicked towards her and extended a tall glass, albeit a little shaky. She took the glowing pink concoction and sipped a tiny bit, letting her eyes wander above the rim and down the bar.

Gark's fingers had stopped tapping to the moody jizz music and he sat staring at her, his snout twitching slightly. Flashing a smile, she cast a hand out, gesturing at the quiet room. "Certainly is dead around here," she said, stirring the drink with a silver swizzle stick.

"Yeah, nothing going on in here till you walked in," he said in his native language. His green snout moved slow, alerting Khara that Gark the Red had more than a little to drink. Perfect, this was going to be too easy.

The jizz music had stopped and an automated voice announced "last call" across the Jump's speakers. Khara was still giggling at the last joke Gark had made, all the while keeping him at bay with her wit and mixed signals. It was working perfectly. She had convinced the Rodian that she was fresh out of college on Wroona and adventuring through the galaxy on her own. Repeatedly he tried to coerce her back to her room but she had used alcohol and a string of fabricated stories to keep him glued to his seat.

"Well...I guess it's time to go," Gark said, a bit of drool running from the corner of his snout and down his neck. Producing a cred stick, he slowly brought a trembling hand up towards the virtual menu when she stopped him.

"Here, here, there's no need to worry about the bill," she said, smiling. He stared at her for a moment with swimming bulbous black eyes and curled his snout in a smile. "Ohh...you buying my drinks? Dat's fiiinne..." he said.

Still smiling she shook her head. "Nope...no need, let me show you a little trick." Turning to the menu, she let her fingers play across the virtual keypad and entered in a bypass code she hacked into the system a day before. Suddenly, Gark's balance went from 127 credits to Zero. Offering up a wide grin she threw him a wink and leaned back against the bar.

Gark stared at the pad then at Khara, some of the haze clearing from his eyes. “How did...where did you learn that?” he asked, trying to shake the webs on intoxication from his mind.

Shruggin, she offered a polite school girl smile. “An old classmate used to be a hacker...I picked up a few things,” she said, finishing her drink. The same one she had started on 4 hours before.

“That’s...hey, can you get around any system, like that? Security codes an’ stuff?”

“Oh, I know some tricks...how do you think I got to be at the head of my class all 6 years?” she quipped.

Less than five minutes later she had a meeting with Socatoa.

“Look, since we have a little time to kill, how about you and me...”Gark began but Khara cut him off. “Gark, hold on to that thought, I’ll be right back.” She slipped from the barstool, and danced her way to the refresher, spinning once and blowing him a small kiss. Once inside, she wasted time freshening up and applying more makeup than necessary. Checking her crono, she waited until several minutes had passed before finally returning to the bar.

Gark was face down in a puddle of lum, snoring loudly. “Awww, looks like little Gark can’t hold his liquor. Or maybe it was the drug I slipped him,” Khara snickered to herself playfully kissing the back of his bumpy green head. “Sleep tight, you sad little mark,” she said, skipping around the tables and heading back to her room.

The Trinity sat in the hanger surrounded by silence. The clicking of Khara’s heels echoed through the expanse as she made her way towards the ship, cradling her laptop to her chest. Background noises normally associated with a landing pad-diagnostic machinery, repair droids and the like were not to be found here. The Wookiee valued his privacy.

She had rarely seen an uglier ship. The Nova 3-z was a copycat design, trying to capitalize on the popularity of the YT-1300’s “disc” shape, but that’s where the similarity ended. Most 3-Z’s, including this one, sported a gaudy coloration accented with gold-tinted hull plating. It’s weapons looked as though they were pulled from a variety of different ships and random red rectangles dotted the hull. Rounding out the package was a gaping maw where an escape pods had been jettisoned and never replaced.

A sudden “Clank” almost caused her to jump out of her skin. The loading ramp was slowly descending and faint white light spilled from the underbelly of the ship. A moment later Gark appeared, wearing dark goggles and swigging from a can of fizz.

“Hey, babe,” he said, stumbling down the ramp. He moved to wrap his arm around her but she stopped him, gently pushing him away. “Woah, woah, we don’t want to mess up my suit now do we?” She opted to change into a black suit-skirt cut in the latest Coruscant fashion. Stopping just above her knees, it was set off by a pair of black high heels and matching nylons zig-zagged with a powder blue florescent stripes. The final touch was a pair of black wire-rimmed glasses that sat perched above her nose.

“Yeah, right...well you certainly look...good. Ya look real good. Uh, about last night,” the Rodain began but Khara was already in motion, heading towards the ramp of the Trinity. “Forget about it Gark, I’ve had plenty of guys pass out on me. At least you had the courtesy to act like you were halfway interested in my boring stories.”

“But that’s uh...” he began but she was already past him and moving into the belly of the ship.

She had just stepped through the hatch when a mouse droid screeched, sailing towards her head. Dropping to one knee, it just missed her and slammed into the bulkhead, shattering into hundreds of pieces. Bit’s of metal and wiring rained down on her, clattering to the floor in a brief shower.

“Are you out of your mind!?!” the Shitavenien roared, appearing next to Khara. His body was humanoid, sporting a black and silver flight, and, like all Shistavenians his face head was canine; black fur surrounding a snarling grey snout set off by white gleaming fangs that marched in perfect rows through his muzzle. Looking up at him, he seemed fierce and not entirely the brainless thug she had written him off as. He reached down and helped her to her feet, albeit a bit roughly.

From the inside of the lounge came a roar. She stared in awe as an eight foot tall Wookiee entered the corridor, arms raised high and voice reverberating throughout the ship. He was a massive bundle of muscle wrapped brown and black fur that hung from his body; a pair of intense eyes peered out above a vicious snarl. Gritting her teeth, she straightened, and gently pulled away from Uurl. Slowly, she smoothed her suit and stood with her laptop tucked under her arm.

“Mrrrrrrrawww gaaaaaaa Rooooooowwwwwwwww!” the Wookiee shouted at her. Taking a deep breath, she waved away the atrocious smell that escaped his maw and headed for the door to the lounge. The Wookiee watched her in wonder as she quietly slid past him and into the room he just emerged from.

The room was filthy. The smell of wet Wookiee seemed to cover the gray couch like a drop cloth; junk food wrappers and drink tumblers lay scattered about sticking to whatever she happened to touch. She spotted no less than 5 adult holovid disks, several featuring someone named “Vic”-as in “Vic so and so and the legion of lost Zeltrons.” She fought off the urge to be sick.

She took her time and moved with graceful purpose, carefully producing a handkerchief and spreading it on the lime green couch. She sat, opening her laptop and making sure it didn't stick to the table's surface. Paying no heed to the crowd at the door, she initiated the translation program. She then placed a small earpiece in her right ear and removed a small jeweled broach from her jacket and pinned it to her collar. After a few final keystrokes she smiled up at the Wookiee, who was now watching her with fascination.

“Good Morning. My name is Shella Versani, you must be Socatoa,” she said, offering him a polite smile.

“Ok lady, what is with you and the hardware? If I don't get some answers quick you are going to wind up like the mouse droid over there!” he said gesturing behind him towards the door. His voice attacked her on two fronts. In addition to his growling, it also existed as a normal, annoying male voice that came through the earpiece.

“These,” she gestured to her laptop, “are my tools. The item in my ear is a translation device, so that I may understand your speech without having to rely on a go between.”

Gark stumbled through the door, almost running into Socatoa. “Hey! I just bumped into Uurl...man, is he piss....” He stopped once he realized he was interrupting and quietly sat down next to Khara. She ignored him and continued. “I just wanted to be sure that you and I are clear when we discussed business.”

Socatoa continued to stare without saying anything. Under his carpet of brownish black fur, she could tell he was seething with anger, the remnants of his altercation with the Wolfman. A moment passed and Gark let out a nervous cough. Eventually Socatoa dropped onto the grav couch opposite of her and pointed to the laptop.

“I ain't never seen anything like that. Most translators are large bulky contraptions you have to hang offa' your belt.”

Nodding, she drew a hand across the rim of her laptop's display screen, caressing it. “It's a looped relay system. The broach,” she nodding to the jewelry, “is a microphone. It picks up your voice and broadcasts it on a secure frequency to my computer. There it gets broken down, translated and put back together in basic. It's then re-broadcast to my earpiece with a lapse time of less than 1.2 seconds.”

The Wookiee snarled and leaned forward. A series of grunts and bellows came from him and wound up in her ear 1.2 seconds later. “I'm supposed to be impressed by that? Some little college girl hops in here with her science project and plays at being a hacker?”

“Hey now, shes not just some,” Gark began but Khara put a hand on his shoulder. “Gark, please.” Turning back to Socatoa she stared at him with fire dancing in her lavender eyes.

“Look, I don’t know what you know or what you THINK you know about Wroona, but let me clue you in. After I get done with my little vacation and go home, I get to look forward to spending the rest of my life in one of the Merchant Guild Houses, shuffling papers and pretending I’m happy. If I’m lucky, I’ll make enough money and perks to stir up envy in my sisters and probably get married to a loser who is stuck in the same line of work I am.” She sat back gesturing to the laptop.

“Or, I can find some work out here, make a nice bundle of quick cash and set myself up without having to rely on my Daddy or the favors he can call in. I can try to get in with a crew and actually DO something with my life. I’m too damn young to settle down Wook, and you taking me on with your crew is going to benefit both of us.”

He sat regarding her for a minute and picked up a datapad that had been lying next to him on the grav couch. “OK,” he growled, sliding it across the table to her, “I took the liberty of encrypting a file on this. You’ve got a minute to decrypt it, or,” he produced a heavy blaster pistol from under the table, “I blow your blue brains across the lounge wall.”

Gark’s eyes bulged even more than normal and he grabbed for Khara’s arm, trying to pull her from the couch. “You’re..You’re nuts man! Come on Shella, we don’t,” but Khara gently removed the Rodians thin green fingers from her sleeve and quieted him down. “Gark, I can handle this...why don’t you run and get me something to drink, hmm?”

He looked from Khara to Socatoa and back. “Uh, sure, yeah I can do that.” He straightened and quietly began backing out of the room. Socatoa snarled in his direction, not taking his eyes from Khara. “Better go ahead and bring a mop too,” he smiled, “just in case.”

The datapad hummed to life in her hands. She was getting tired of having guns shoved in her face and thought about killing the Wookiee once the job was done. But no, that wasn’t in the deal- all she was supposed to do was infiltrate, place some bugs,download the ships nav computer manifest and get it to Lotek. She still didn’t know why Lotek wanted this info but she hoped it was to do something bad to the ugly creature sitting across from her now grinning.

“And...go.”

Her fingers played across the datapad, first trying several known encryption codes that didn’t work. Ten seconds passed. A small bead of sweat trickled down her brow. Was she going to be able to do this? How good was Socatoa? Her fingers danced about the datapad and she accessed the daily log. Using that she was able to pull up a manifest of recently used programs and saw that the Wook had just an hour earlier utilized a Gran alphabet program. 20 seconds. On a whim she typed in “Trinity” using the Gran phonetic pronunciation of the name.

The file opened up. She couldn't believe it at first, and just sat staring at the datapad for a moment. Socatoa mistook her surprise for confusion and gave her a broad grin, tapping the blaster on the table. "Better hurry Shella, Mr. Soro-Suub here is going to be singing the sweet song of death soon."

The idiot used his ship's name. Khara ducked her head and began to randomly tap away at the keypad, mimicking activity. Oh, this was too good, she thought to herself. He began to spit out the last ten seconds and once he reached "4" she sat back, spinning the datapad around to face him. Faking a release of tension, she threw her head back and let out an audible sigh.

"How..how did.." he began, staring in disbelief at the datapad.

"Hey! That was some encryption! I mean, I was ready to meet my maker. You're really good!" she lied, trying to keep a straight face.

"Uh...yeah, yeah I know I am. You must have gotten lucky," he said, scratching his head with the blaster barrel. Why don't you do the universe a favor and accidentally pull the trigger, she thought to herself.

Grak appeared in the doorway a moment later with a mop in one hand. "Uh...wow you are still...uh...I'll go grab that drink," he said, disappearing back down the corridor.

"I guess we can take you on," Socatoa said leaning back. "If you do good with this mission, maybe I'll let you stick around," he dropped the blaster onto the grav couch.

"Whats the pay for this gig?" she asked.

"Ten thousand, up front, more if we see you are worth keeping around" he replied. They eyeballed each other for another moment.

"I run the show around here," he growled.

"I can see that."

"The other's might be thrown by long leggy women but I'm not."

"That doesn't surprise me."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Just that you don't seem easily distracted," she replied. "And neither am I. So you keep that little Rodian barfly on a short leash and we'll get along just fine."

"I thought you are he were getting' cozy."

“You thought wrong.”

Socatoa stopped and stared at her. “Don’t try to get between me and my crew or I’ll space you as sure as you sit there.”

Khara didn’t say a word, just watched him rise and leave. A second later she heard Gark curse in Rodian and enter the lounge wiping Dewbrew from his bright red blastvest.

“I swear, me and that wook, “ he stopped and offered the can to Khara. “It’s about half full, sorry.”

Smiling, she stood and closed down her laptop. “Thank’s Sweetie, but maybe later. I need to go to my room and collect my things. Looks like I’m a part of the team now.”

His green face seemed to brighten. “Great! Ya know, if your cabin is too uh, ‘confining’ you can crash wi..” but Khara held a thin well manicured finger up to his snout.

“Gark, Honey, we are business partners, and I NEVER mix business with pleasure,” she purred and moved off towards the ramp. Somewhere behind her another string of Rodian expletives echoed through the ship’s corridor.

3

Silence filled the 3-Z for the first time in what seemed like days. Khara took advantage of it by shutting her door and opening a bottle of Twistler. Leaning back on her bunk, she took a sip and let the Corellian brandy and fruit concoction sit in her mouth for a moment before slowly working its way down her throat.

Things had been going at a hectic pace for the last several days. Between Socatoa’s tantrums and the rest of the crew walking on eggshells, she wondered how this team could even pull off running the ship, much less infiltrating an Imperial outpost.

Imperial outpost. She shivered and pulled the blanket from her bunk, wrapping herself in it’s warmth. The last time she was near anything Imperial was when she was a prisoner on the Victory-Class Star Destroyer Darkk Hammer. She’d been captured on a backwater planet in the outer rim and identified as part of a rebel cell.

Her “partners” made a run for it, leaving her to fight the Imps alone. The next week was spent enduring various methods of torture and interrogation. Drugs, probes, mind tricks and outright violence were all used to get Khara to spill her secrets. When they were done she lay in the floor of her cell bleeding, wishing she had known more...maybe then they wouldn’t have made her suffer for so long...through such pain...

A rap at her door brought her out of the gruesome memory. She took another hit off the bottle and capped it, dropping it behind her on the bunk. "It's open."

The cabin door slid wide revealing a tall, broad Quarren. He stood, regally, in a purple and gray set of robes. His head was tanned and as wide as his shoulders, tapering to points on either end; a set of deep blue eyes stared impassively back at her. A mouth that ended in several long tentacles reaching halfway down his chest twitched when he nodded in greeting.

"Hi Xu, have a seat," she motioned towards an empty crate sitting in the corner of her cabin. Socatoa didn't believe in luxuries such as chairs.

"Thank you Shella, it is good to see that I am not the only one living in such primitive conditions," he said, his voice accented with gurgles and clicks. She understood him rather well; Wroona was home to many Quarren communities she frequented as a youth.

"Well, given how the Wook flies this bucket, I doubt I would drop too much money on any niceties...might wind up splintered against the bulkhead."

"Yes, or slung in rage against the lounge wall," he said casting his gaze down. "Poor little Spindle never saw it coming..."

Xu crossed his legs and raised his head, regarding her with a deep inquisitive stare for a moment. "I've been meaning to ask you, what college was it you attended on Wroona?"

Her heart stopped. Up to this point, no one had questioned her story, respecting her privacy and solitude. She should have known it wouldn't last. Feverishly her mind searched for a suitable lie. "Oh, it was a Guild operated school, on the coast of Indigo City," she said smiling.

He nodded, absently stroking one of his tentacles and redirected his gaze to the rest of the cabin. "There are many excellent institutions along that coast. Which Guild was it?" His demeanor was relaxed, but with enough of an edge that she felt him fishing for something.

Was Socatoa on to her? Doubtful. The Wookiee, while strong and violent, wasn't the brightest light on the coast. No, Xu was fishing on his own, and that made him dangerous.

Feigning embarrassment, she cast her eyes towards the floor. "I hope you understand that I'm hesitant to reveal much about myself Xu. There are certain facts that I would like to keep private...about my family...friends, you know, things like that."

The Quarren nodded. "Of course, I was merely making small talk. I take it you are clear on our mission objective?" he shifted gears. She nodded and relayed back what she

memorized earlier. “Yup. Gark and Uurl handle the guards and techs. You and Socatoa scavenge whatever might be worth something, supplies and whatnot. I hit the main comp core and download...” she popped open her laptop at the end of the bed and scanned the screen, “Nav coordinate files K-412 & K-474, along with the relay station manifest and ship cargo logs for the last year,” she finished, shutting the comp down.

“Excellent, we are only a few days out from the listening post” he said standing. “I’ll take leave of you now Shella.”

“Xu,” she tried to let a degree of innocence show in her large purple eyes. “No hard feelings, alright?”

Stopping at the door, he stared at her for a moment, his tentacles twitching slightly. “Of course not Shella, in our line of work we need to be careful...there will always be those who will attempt to exploit our weaknesses.”

They stared at each other for a beat and then he retreated through the door. Khara let a breath of relief escape her lips and dropped back into her bunk. She was going to have to keep an eye on Xu, of all the Trinity’s crew he was definitely the razorfish in these waters.

Harsh wind and dust battered Khara as she and the crew of the Trinity made their way across the arid surface of Tinfyl. She’d buttoned her white leather trench up to her neck to block the pounding elements and was inhaling filtered air from a breath mask nestled under her goggles. In addition to the rocky cliffs and violent wind gusts, the moon also possessed a slightly toxic atmosphere, causing her skin to tighten slightly. Up ahead, Socatoa led the group across the flat slate gray terrain, armed with a lethal looking blaster rifle and packing enough explosives to make an impressive crater in the ground. His fur was caked with dust and sand, changing his color to actually match the planet’s drab brown geography.

Gark was off to her right, covered in crimson armor and sporting a pair of black goggles and breathmask comically strapped around his snout. He’d not spoken more than a handful of words to her after she joined the team. The one evening he did attempt any small talk at the dinner table earned him a gruesome lump from Socatoa. After that he would go so far as to change direction when he encountered her in the same corridor.

On her left flank Xu seemed to be taking everything in at once; blue eyes peeked intently from behind a clear visor, darting from one side of the landscape to another. She had downloaded Socatoa’s personal log a few days earlier and found some interesting info about the Quarren. The log revealed he was a former mercenary who hooked up with Socatoa only a few months before. The Wook mentioned being referred to Xu by “The Organization,” never elaborating on which organization or giving any other info.

Smugglers? Pirates? She wasn't sure. Hopefully it's not the kind of organization that holds a grudge, she thought. Depending on what Lotek is going to do with the information she had so far lifted from the Trinity and it's crew, anything bad that might befall the Wook could always come back to bite her in her blue ass.

A shadow appeared from behind an outcropping up ahead and sprinted towards them. Panic gripped her and she reached for the heavy blaster pistol strapped to her right thigh. Gark's fingers closed around her arm and she pulled her eyes from the weapon to the approaching figure. Squinting, she realized that the emerging dark form was actually Uurl, who had scouted ahead to do some recon.

The wolfman trotted up to Socatoa, speaking and gesturing back the way he came. The wind blocked out their conversation but a moment later the wookiee growled and Uurl turned and sprinted back towards the small ridge they were approaching. He turned and waved everyone over next to a small boulder.

The Wookiee took a knee and the others did likewise. Khara felt like she was watching a shockball game, with the players huddling up for the next big play. The wookiee began a series of growls behind a black leather breathmask. When he was done he nodded at Xu.

"He says that the listening post is over this ridge in a valley. We will advance, using the outcroppings of rock and debris as cover. Then we dispatch any guards and move on the building," he turned back to Socatoa who nodded. More growling and barking and Xu turned to Khara. In the light of the Gas giant high overhead the Quarrens skin was a bright reddish color, matching almost everything else on the moon.

"Socatoa will blow the door. Gark and Uurl will then go in and hit the interior guards. He and I will mop up and then split off. I will hit the supply room...and he," gesturing to Socatoa, "will go with you when you hack the mainframe."

Shaking her head, She had to scream to be heard over the gusting wind. "What? Why? I thought I was on my own to download the core-I don't need a frelling babysitter!" she pointed at the wookiee. Socatoa's large brown eyes shot wide and he screamed, a bellowing loud noise that cut through the wind like a lightsaber. Rising to his full height he shot one massive foot forward and connected with her chest. Sailing up and backwards, she landed on her rear like a discarded sack of droid parts.

Pain exploded through Khara's spine to match the numbness in her chest and she fought to hang on to consciousness. Through slit eyes she watched Gark turn on Socatoa and bring his blaster rifle up, inches from the Wookiee's face. Socatoa did likewise and time seemed to stop. Khara, trying to get her wind back, didn't make a move. Taking in quiet sips of air, she watched the transaction from several meters away, her body still shuddering from the impact of the wookiee's attack. Gark spat something in Rodian from around the breathmask and leaned forward, caressing the trigger with his long green finger. She wasn't sure, but she thought the Rodian's snout curled into a snarl when he spoke.

Socatoa replied with a snarl of his own, showing rows of broad white fangs. The Wookiee slowly brought his barrel forward so it was only centimeters from the Rodian's right eye. Xu, still on one knee, rose and brought his blaster rifle up, leveling it at Garks temple.

"Let's not do something stupid friend," he said. With his left hand he reached up and placed his large hand on Garks rifle, pushing it down and away from the Socatoa. Xu looked over at Socatoa who still held his rifle at the Rodian's forest-green head.

"Socatoa... why don't you lower your weapon as well," Xu said, it coming out as more of a command than a request. The wookiee didn't move. Finally the pressure in her chest eased and Khara spoke up. "Hey! I'm o.k. guys! Lets just uh, lets just hit that base. Huh?" She slowly pulled her aching body from the hard ground and began dusting off. Socatoa's eyes darted to her and back to the Rodian. He growled something at Gark and quickly turned away, heading for the ridge.

"Funda Poodo della fwakku!" Gark spat and turned away from Xu. The Quarren lowered his weapon, throwing a glance at Khara. He didn't say a word, just shook his head and moved off, catching up with the wookiee.

Pain still throbbed through her back and along her spine, but she was able to move. The rocky surface had dug into her and she expected no less than ten bruises would be making an appearance that evening. "Hey, Gark, thanks man..." she began, but the bounty hunter had already turned away.

"Forget it, let's just do this thing," he said moving off. She stood motionless for a moment. The realization that she was going to have to rely on the group to not only protect her once in the post, but to get her safely off planet and in one piece caused her stomach to curl. I'm going to die on this stupid moon surrounded by Imperial's and Retards, she thought to herself. Shaking her head she double checked the charge on her heavy blaster pistol and headed off after the Rodian.

The Imperial listening post sat as an unassuming, rectangular two story building that was even less to look at than the surface of the moon they were on. From her vantage point amid the crags of the ridge, she could make out a landing pad alongside the building with no less than two docked Skipray Blastboats.

There was little significant about the building, save for the entrance and the roof. The former was a large blast door, void of windows and accessible only by a keypad set into the wall beside it. The latter was what immediately caught your eye. Atop the building sat dozens of sensor arrays and parabolic dishes aimed in various directions.

“Let’s move,” Xu said from behind her. Uurl and Socatoa had already made it to the door and were in the process of lining its perimeter with explosives. Standing, she and Gark began to move down the loose footing of the ridge, occasionally taking cover behind the various outcroppings of copper colored rock. Behind and above them Xu picked up the rear causing her to wonder if it was to cover them or keep an eye on them.

Taking cover behind the last large boulder at the bottom of the ridge they stopped to regroup. The listening post lay just twenty meters away; Uurl and Socatoa finished with the door and turned back. While Uurl sprinted directly to the boulder, Socatoa sprinted to the edge of the building’s corner and disappeared for a moment

Wiping a film of dust from her goggles, she peered at the door. It was covered with small blocks of dull gray Detonite, one of the most powerful explosives she had encountered. “That sure looks like a lot of Det for a door” she said peering at the mounds of explosives.

“Socatoa knows what he is doing,” Xu replied. But she detected a slight hesitation in his voice.

“Really? You have much experience with demolitions Xu?” She asked looking from the Quarren to the door and back.

He never took his eyes from the building. “No, my area of expertise was always supplies and procurement,” he said, bringing a pair of macro binoculars from around his neck up to his visor.

Khara snickered behind her breath mask. “So you’re a frelling gun runner.”

Xu jerked his head towards her and his eyes turned into slits. “You should watch that tongue my young blue friend. Leaving someone to die on a hostile planet is not something I am a stranger to.” He turned back towards the building as Socatoa sprinted up behind the rock and dropped next to the others. Pulling a detonator out, he keyed in a code and nodded to Xu.

“OK, last time, that door blows, Uurl and Gark you take out resistance. Shella and Socatoa are in the computer and sensors room and I’m on clean up detail. Keep a level head and don’t play hero.” He nodded to Socatoa who nodded back and jammed his finger against the detonator.

Nothing happened.

The Wookiee stared at the device in his hand as if it were a dead Dianoga. A confused “Gruwolf?” escaped his muzzle and he tapped at it with huge fingers.

“What the frell is the problem?” Gark snapped, taking his eyes from the door. Socatoa snapped a growl back but kept his eyes on the detonator, tapping uselessly at the keypad.

“Give it here, “ Khara snarled and jerked the device away from him. Disbelief crossed his face quickly replaced by anger. Paying him no attention she popped the back off of the small black box and began inspecting the wiring. During her time in the Wroonian Thieves Guild, she was apprenticed to a former thief who also happened to dabble in safecracking. She dug deep and began to reconstruct the lesson he once gave her on how to use Detonite and remotes on particularly tough Bankers Guild vaults.

Beside her Socatoa snarled and darted from behind the rock, charging towards the building with Uurl in tow. She was in the process of bypassing a bad circuit and stripping two wires when glanced up in time to see them both skid to a stop halfway between the rock and the door.

It was slowly opening, the parting halves causing blocks of Detonite to pull away and drop to the ground.

Behind her Xu cursed in Quarren and dropped to the side of the boulder, bringing his rifle to bear on the door. Gark did the same. Bypassing the bad circuit she gently touched the two lives wire together.

A loud, violent flash of fire and carnage consumed the door and part of the building. Socatoa and Uurl flattened dropped to the ground as debris and body parts showered the entire spread between the ridge and the building. Gark and Xu followed suit and Khara simply balled herself up in the shadow of the boulder.

When she opened her eyes her partners were already moving. They made it out to the two prone figures on the ground, as the wind gusts smoke began to dissipate their smoke cover. Burning chunks of durasteel and bodies littered the landscape; she tried to pull her eyes from the gore and focus on what was in front of her as she skittered towards the team. Unholstering her blaster pistol, she gripped it in her white fingerless gloves and dropped next to the team.

Socatoa was up, but dazed. The Wolfman was in worse shape; a large gash running across his face was pumping blood into his dark fur. Snarling he fought to his feet and gripped his carbine. With a growl, Socatoa shook his large wooly mane of hair. His head cleared, he charged towards the building, laying down round after round with his blaster rifle into the smoking crater that used to be a door.

A moment later they were entering the smoky darkness of the building. Triggering the lowlight settings on her goggles she tried to block out the screams of the injured and the report of blaster fire. The world that snapped into clarity in front of her was a greenish tinted nightmare that would make the heartiest Trandoshaan weep.

Bodies of Imperial Army troopers littered the floor, decimated by the violent explosion. They had entered some sort of main lobby with a center console and hallways branching out in four directions. The large central console was afire, filling the room with an acrid black smoke augmented by the smell of burning flesh. In the absence entire bodies, parts of bodies and armor lay smoldering. Before her, a head stared up with no body attached; a datapad peeked through the helmet faceplate of another trooper, who was still triggering off random bursts from his blaster. Gore dripped from the ceiling and coated every surface and Khara fought off the urge to be sick.

“Let move!” Gark screamed, darting down the leftmost hallway with Socatoa in tow. Green bolts of blaster fire lanced towards them, smacking against the walls. Clutching her heavy blaster pistol, she raced up behind them and shot in the general direction where the enemy fire was coming from. Xu emerged a moment later adding his own fire to deadly energy lancing between the two groups.

Spinning, Socatoa grabbed her by the shoulder and took off. She fell into step with him, her shoulder socket screaming in protest. They raced through the lobby and into the opposite hallway. A grim-faced technician stepped from a side room halfway down the hall, brandishing a med pack. Socatoa dropped him with two shots to the chest. Kicking the dead body out of the doorway, they entered the computer room.

Two more techs, clad in gray coveralls, sat immobilized at their computer terminal. One sat hunched over, blood pouring from a wound above his eye while the other held a towel against his partners head; on the console his hand rummaged through a medpack. Upon their entrance he froze, his hand remaining in the medpack.

“Grwo!!!!” Socatoa pointed Khara towards a terminal, covering the others with his rifle. She avoided the piercing stare of the Imperial and began setting up her laptop. Her fingers were dancing across the keyboard in seconds and she was able to access the nav file databank with little trouble. Behind her the Wookiee was growling impatiently while the sounds of blaster fire were grew louder.

“Shut up! I can’t concentrate with you snarling at me!” she snapped. Her eyes wandered across hundreds of file names scrolling across her display. Finally, nav coordinates K-412 & K-474 appeared. Producing a datadisk from her jacket, she loaded it into the terminals interface; seconds later the coordinates were copied to the tiny silver disk.

Movement caught her attention. From her right the tech, face pulled back in a snarl, lunged at her. A scalpel glinted in his right hand and darted towards her, slashing open her jacket and splitting the skin of her right arm. Deep purple blood spouted from the wound and pain racked her for the second time that day. Instinct took over and she spun away, firing a white leather boot into his ribcage. Bones crunched and snapped, doubling him over into a ball. Spinning, she completed a full circle and finished by driving the elbow of her good arm down into the back of his neck. Another snap followed and he dropped lifeless to the ground.

The Wookiee raised his rifle in hesitation from the doorway. Grimacing, Khara snatched a roll of gauze from the medpack and began wrapping it around the bleeding gash. The second tech, already dead, sat watching the combat from his chair.

“You think you can make sure this one doesn’t attack me too?” she spat, gesturing to the corpse. He jerked, stung by her words and began to snarl.

“Shut up and watch the frelling door you stupid carpet!” she screamed, dropping back into the console’s chair. Blood pumped madly from the wound and she had to shake it from her fingers every few seconds.

“Come on, come on,” she coaxed the system. She just finished with the nav files when Socatoa reached over her shoulder, ejecting the disk. “Hey!” she protested, but the he just palmed the info and tossed her another blank disk and a snarl. Not arguing, she inserted the disk and worked on pulling the shipping and cargo manifests from the last year.

Typing quickly, she downloaded at least six months of info when Gark burst into the room, green blood staining his right pant leg. “We’ve got to bug out of here! The Imps have advanced and we got no less than 10 regular army blasting their way down here!”

Ejecting the disk, she followed them through the door and down the hall. Uurl and Xu covered their exit as they sprinted through the lobby and towards the blast point. Stealing a glance behind her for pursuers, she slipped in something and fought to maintain her balance. Looking down she saw that she had slid in what used to be a human face. Revulsion swept across her in a wave and she felt the world going black. Her last memory was of two hairy arms encircling her...

A cabin near the rear of the Trinity doubled as the crew’s medbay. The dingy quarters were stocked with an ancient medbed, several cases of medpacks and a satchel that sat in a corner, loaded with various drugs. Khara was more worried about catching a disease off of the rusty bed than she was about the small cut near her eye.

Above her, strung across the low ceiling was a series of stark white lights. Coming to, she realized she was dead. She had made the final jump and this was the great Guildhouse in the sky. As her eyes adjusted, she realized the “white light” was a bit dim; several of the bulbs were burned out, allowing her to open one eye fully. The other fought its way open about half-way, thanks to several stitches running along her eyebrow. She couldn’t feel her body. When she attempted to move, nothing responded. Even her injured arm, which should be causing her some discomfort, lay numb at her side. That was either very good or very bad, she thought. After several failed attempts to lift her arms, she simply gave up.

“Ah, we are awake...good.” She barely turned her head towards the voice and saw Xu standing in the doorway, hands on hips. She was in no mood for discussion, but questions that needed answers fought to the front of her mind.

“Just barely,” she replied, offering a weak smile. The Quarren came into the room and, leaning over her, inspected the wound above her eye. His tentacles dropped down and one lightly brushed against her cheek. It was not as cold as she thought it would be but it still made her shiver. “You’ll live,” he said leaning back.

“Great. Uh, what happened after I...” she began but Xu cut her off. “Rest. I will be back a bit later and we can discuss what happened.” Her protest caught in her throat as he produced a syringe and quickly slid it into her upper arm.

“What is...” She got no further. Whatever he had injected her with was working quickly, and, seconds later she felt her vision blur once again into darkness.

She awoke in her own bunk to find a meal spread out beside her on an overturned crate. Various fruits, meats and breads were set before her along with a taste of home-Wroonian Ale. She devoured everything on the plate and was on her second mug of ale when she finally pushed the tray away. She would have liked to dine in the lounge but Xu earlier explained Socatoa was on the warpath and staying in her cabin was perhaps for the best. Cupping the mug of ale in her hands, she pulled her legs underneath her and leaned back against the bulkhead. The lingering effects of pain medication still existed, causing her mild stiffness, but physically she felt pretty good. The only real nagging pain was where she had been stabbed- a dull throb that hung on her arm and refused to go away. She was wearing a plain black jumpsuit, having had her work clothes cut off so her various bruises and cuts could be attended. Her right arm lay immobilized against her in a dark turquoise sling.

“Do you require some more to drink?” Xu asked from her doorway.

“No, I can’t drink too much of this stuff...it’s good...but potent.”

He pulled a chair in from the corridor and sat just a few meters away. "Moderation is a noble trait," he said, smoothing his deep maroon robes. "You wanted to know what happened back on Tinfyl," he continued in a low voice.

Khara shrugged. "Sure, all I remember is passing out...and I think someone caught me," she looked at her bandaged leg where the jumpsuit was cut away for a moment. "I guess I was wrong."

Xu shook his head. "No, no you aren't wrong. Uurl, did in fact, catch you. He carried you as far as the top of the ridge. Unfortunately, the troopers that were left at the outpost were equipped with a rocket launcher. They managed to get one off. The explosion threw you and he from the top of the ridge down a very steep, very sharp incline."

"Yeah, looks like I was banged up pretty good."

"You had multiple abrasions and lacerations. Four on your lower body, nine on your upper body and a mild concussion," he said, as if reading from a list. "All things considered, you are a very lucky young woman."

"Whatever you say Doc," she smiled and downed more of the ale.

He nodded. "In the process of tending to your wounds, I was surprised and intrigued by the various tattoos you have on your back and shoulder."

She was ready this time. From the moment she woke on the medbed wearing the jumpsuit she worked on concocting a passable lie. "Yeah, cool isn't it? I was drunk one night and this friend of mine talked me into them. She thought it was cute...one is some sort of sea creature."

"It's a Vorca; a small, aquatic scavenger that exists by stealing the food from larger predators. It is indigenous to Wroona and known for its stealthy maneuvering and ability to camouflage itself for protection." He rattled the info off, not taking his eyes away from her. She watched him for a moment, dropping her eyes back to her mug. The Vorca was the mascot of the Wroonian Thieves Guild, and, as such, every member had to have one tattooed somewhere on their body. She sported hers on her back, just below her neckline.

"I'm wondering," he said, "given the passage of time...why a woman would continue to have such a creature permanently carved into her body." His voice wasn't taunting or angry, simply inquisitive, but it made her angry all the same.

"I like sea creatures," she said, throwing him a smirk.

"Oh really?" he asked, raising an eyebrow, "Any certain species?"

"Yeah, the ones that don't ask me a million questions."

Xu leaned forward, menace darkening his eyes. “There are things about you that don’t add up Shella...things I want answers to...”

Rolling her eyes, Khara waved him off with her free hand. “Yeah, yeah, everyone wants answers buddy, I don’t have to tell you shi...” He moved quickly and was suddenly over her, a holdout blaster appearing like magic in front of her face. “I won’t hesitate to use this!” he said, his tentacles again hanging across her sling.

“So I guess this just went from friendly chit-chat to something else huh?” she asked, narrowing her eyes and meeting his icy stare.

“I don’t want to kill you, but I’ve worked too hard to have my agenda shot to frell because of some wildcard...” his finger trembled slightly and his face hovered only inches above her own. “I have to know who you are Shella, the people I work for...”

An almost inaudible “click” followed by a metallic hum stopped him in mid sentence. His eyes remained locked on Khara, his head tilting at a slight angle. “Is that...”

An evil grin stretched across her face. “Yeah it is, and if you don’t back off, I’ll plunge it so far into you the Wook will be living off of fish food for months.” Hesitating, he slowly lowered his blaster and pushed back off the cot. The vibroblade Khara produced stayed between them until he put his blaster away. Quietly, the weapon shut down and disappeared next to her on the cot.

“You aren’t my enemy Xu and I’m not going to insult you by lying and trying to convince you I’m a college student. But I’m not going to give you my life story either.” She nodded towards the door, “I know you aren’t on the level either. You’re using Socatoa just like me...why don’t you tell me your reasons for crewing on “The Trinity?”

Gathering his robes about him, he nodded and returned to his chair. His shoulders seemed to sag and he cast his hands wide in front of him. “Shella, there is more at stake here than you can imagine. These are hard times...the organization I work for is struggling right now. We need all the help we can get...”

Pieces suddenly shifted into place and the whole picture opened up before her like a child’s Banthabank. “Oh Frell...you work for the freakin’ Rebellion.”

His eyes darted to her and away. “I do. So does everyone on this ship. So do you, technically. I needed to make sure that you weren’t Imperial. I had some suspicion. But when I saw your markings I knew that you weren’t an Imperial, but something else.”

“Most Imperials are Human Xu...”

“Not always,” he shook his head. “I had some good friends killed because they thought the same thing. There are those who would be easily bought, and the Imperials certainly have the credits to spend.”

“Look,” Khara said standing, “I’m not in this for your silly little civil war. I mean, I don’t like Imps...hate em’in fact. But I also have a hard time trusting people who risk their lives for ‘ideals’ and ‘beliefs’...there is only one constant in this universe Xu...cold hard credits.”

“You are wrong...”

“And YOU are naïve’!” she screamed, jabbing a thin blue finger in his face. “I’ve tried trusting people Xu. I’ve tried it and had it thrown right back in my face by an Imperial interrogation droid.” She was shaking now, tears beginning to build in the corners of her eyes. “There is only one person I trust in this crap-hole of a galaxy and she’s standing in this room with you. Everyone else has either lied to me, abandoned me or...frell...tried to kill me even...”

The Quarren stood, stepping towards her, “And that’s the type of people we are fighting against Shella...Tyranny, Darkness, these are all of the things the Empire...” but Khara waved him off.

“Save it, I’ve heard this speech before,” she said composing herself. “I heard it from the mouths of some of your converts and it all starts sounding the same after a while. Here’s a wake up call for ya, EVERYONE has an agenda. These people fighting to overthrow the Imps, they all have something to gain from it,” she was shaking her head now and dropped back into her bunk. “Smugglers join up so if the Imps fall there are less customs to worry about. Politicians join so when the Emperor goes down they can get a juicy piece of the galactic pie for themselves. People like you and the Wook join so when the hammer falls on the Imps you guys can roll in and ‘take your rightful place among the other races in equality...”

“And what is wrong with that?” he asked, his voice almost a whisper.

“Nothing, other than the fact that you are hedging your bets that whatever replaces the Empire is going to be an improvement. Me? I’m not so sure.”

He stood shaking his head slowly, as if clearing her words from it. “I guess I must just have more faith than you do. The Rebellion could use you Shella, I wish you would reconsider your viewpoint.”

Khara crossed her arms. “Sorry Xu, this girl is out to make some rainy day creds and live a full, exciting life...I’m going to leave the political drama to people like you.”

Nodding he turned towards the door. “We set down on Elrood in a few hours. Socatoa wanted to talk to you before then,” he stopped, looking back. “You know, I just realized that I’ve told you quite a bit about us, but you never really told me anything about your purpose here. What’s to stop you from turning us over to the Imperials?”

Studying the bandage on her leg, she shrugged. “Well Xu, I guess you are just going to have to rely on some of that ‘faith’ you seem to have in abundance.”

In the distance, Thunderheads rolled across the Torina landscape. Occasional flashes of lightning left glowing streaks across the advancing dusk while warm wind whipped through the city proper. Standing barefoot on a balcony, Khara overlooked perfect streets and beautiful gardens that seemed to pour from between the nearby buildings.

It felt good to be done with the job. She spent the day shopping, picking up a new pair of white leather pants and a matching halter top- neither of which were paid for. She now sported both, closing her eyes while soft jazz music wafted out of her newly rented penthouse apartment behind her. The movers showed up that morning, installing her new bedroom suite and various voice activated kitchenette appliances. It cost a chunk of creds but it didn't worry her. In addition to being a beautiful planet, Torina, was also a virtual playground for a thief who knew what she was doing. It's nightlife, casinos, and constant stream of tourists insured a good living for someone as smart, attractive and skilled as herself.

“This is the life, about time I got to enjoy it.” As the wind blew through her short hair she let her eyes wander lazily across the city. Three stories down, the aquatic atrium of the “Torina Paradise” jutted from the same building that housed her apartment. The ‘Paradise was a four star hotel catering to those elite tourists who had more money than brain cells. Through the atrium's glass ceiling, the pool appeared closed; the surrounding interior jungle canopy now shrouded in darkness. It really didn't matter, she knew the ‘Paradise had at least 4 other pools.

“Maybe I'll take a little trip downstairs tonight, go for a dip in the moonlight,” she mused. A sudden beeping from the living room brought her out of her daydream. Turning from the violet evening she made her way into the bright white interior of the apartment. The balcony's Duracrete gave way to soft fur-like carpet that covered every inch of the room. Strolling over to the grav-couch, she turned and dropped onto it, feeling it dip slightly as her back made contact with several blue pillows.

The holoprojector/communicator sat nearby, sending up a sky- blue projection signaling an incoming call. Sighing, she grabbed the remote from the couch and clicked, bringing the projector to life and ending the constant beeping.

The symbol disappeared and she once again stared into the insane glare of Lotek Skidna. This time, however, he looked almost comical. A grown man wearing some sort of crazy mask amused her, now that he was...

“Hey, where you at?” She asked.

He stared quietly for a moment before answering. “That’s not important. I see you have yourself a nice place. Plan on staying long?”

Stretching she stared upwards at the ceiling. The soreness in her right arm was almost gone, the encounter only leaving her with a small light blue scar below her bicep. “I think I might stay a while. This planet has a LOT to offer a girl like me.” She didn’t add that a guildhouse sat less than a half a mile away, nestled between two popular nightclubs.

“I’ve gone through the material you provided. I noticed that you failed to include the security codes to access the Trinity,” he said, irritation creeping into his monotone voice.

“Oh yeah,” Khara said, turning her head to the side. “See, you still owe me credits. When I get my bill paid in full I’ll be happy to turn over the remaining info.” She offered a sweet smile and a wink.

“That’s not what we agreed on.”

Shrugging, Khara returned her stare to the ceiling. “Too bad. That’s how I work.”

“Fine. That’s just fine. So what did the Socatoa say when you left?” The question caught her off guard and she turned to look at the crimson mask hovering in her living room. “Our documented discussions were in the info packet I gave your man on Elrood,” she said. If this was going to drag on much longer it would seriously cut into her evening activities.

“Again. What did the Wook...” he began. Khara spun around on the couch, already tired of this conversation and his one-track mind. If he still didn’t owe her ten thousand credits she would have terminated the call sooner.

“Look, he just got on my case and went on about some guys he worked with. Told me about how they used to fight the good fight and turned on him, left him high and dry.”

“Did he give you names?” the mask barely moved; a slight twitch under the nose told her his mouth was moving.

“Yeah...Vic somebody. And Ket and ...Buck? Bux? Klugs? Anyway, it was small talk and I could really have cared less. He seemed pretty upset that they took off. Anyway, he’s got a new crew of Nerfchuckers to boss around now, so no big loss right?” She sprung up and let her momentum carry her into a cartwheel over to her new aquarium. It had cost a few creds, but an imported Wroonian baby Vorca swam lazily around in the crystal clear water.

Silence filled the room. She turned half expecting that he had ended the transmission, but he was still there, simply staring at her. “What?” she asked turning towards him. He

didn't respond and she noticed for the first time a small static line running through the projection of his mask

“What the frell? This thing is brand new...” she stomped across the living room and leaned down, smacking the side of the projector. Through the clear top she saw something jar loose. “Great,” she muttered sliding her fingers under the edge of the projection disk. It lifted easily and she stared into the base.

And almost screamed. Staring back at her was a charge of Detonite and a timer. The interior of the projector was lined with four blocks of the gray explosive and the timer was down to 0:04. Stumbling backwards, she turned and sprinted towards the balcony. If she could just make it to the edge...

Behind her a white flash lit up the balcony and reflected in the glass of surrounding buildings. As she sailed over the railing the concussion blast slammed into her as the apartment exploded into a fiery hell. She was thrown violently back, far from the safety of the balcony, which had now been reduced to slag.

She was only in the air for a few seconds but it felt like hours. Falling, she hoped for death. Her skin was flash-burned and mind numbing pain racked her lithe frame as she dropped through the Torina night sky. Above her, fire and debris peppered the black of the sky like so many stars. It would have been beautiful if she hadn't been plunging to her death.

She hit hard. But what should have been unforgiving duracrete was instead tinted glass, shattering the moment she hit. Passing through she plunged another ten meters into a cold wet tangle of branches and leaves. Instinct took over and she shot a hand out, grasping the slick branch of an overhanging palm.

Her body jerked to a stop as every muscle screamed in pain. She drove her teeth into her lip drawing blood, but was able to silence the scream that threatened to escape her lips. Slowly, she let her body slide down the trunk of the palm, carefully listening for any shouts of alarm or noises from below.

After what seemed like forever, she finally dropped the last 2 meters to the ground. The tall Corellian Palm now towered above her, dark stripes of her own blood leading to its base. Dragging herself to a corner, she cast a glance around her surroundings.

Cleaning droids trolled through the now-dark pool, oblivious to her violent entry into the atrium. Behind her, a small crack of light fell between the curtains of a darkened cabana. Crawling along the ground to it, she peered in and saw her savior: A private communication station.

Pulling herself into the hammock-style chair, she slowly keyed in the communication number of a local Pet Store. As the call went through she could feel blood seeping from her body, saturating the chair's terry-cloth upholstery.

The face of a hardened Barabel appeared, scowling. “Zerbar's pets and access...” Khara cut him off. “This is Doone,” she said between cracked and bleeding lips, “I need a pickup.”

Epilouge

The streets of Valex City on Valex 3 were wet with a recent downpour. Unlike the cold wet rain of Gelgelaar Freeport, the rains on Valex 3 hit hard and left quickly, leaving behind a smoldering planet thick with humidity and smog.

Khara hated it almost as much as she hated the Freeport. What made it worse was that she was wearing almost the exact same thing as she had on in Gelgelaar, but for different reasons. Underneath her, a modified speederbike hummed with internal energy. It's black, white and blue color scheme wrapped around erotic curves of machinery; a blue smiley face painted towards the rear set the machine off as anything but conventional.

Her heavy blaster lay warm against her skin, she checked its charge just a moment earlier. She hoped she wouldn't need it. Across the street a nondescript brown building framed an equally nondescript black door. Rain was still evaporating off of the building, leaving mottled dark patterns along the walls. Beside the door a picture window claimed quality medical assistance in 8 different languages, each changing every few seconds.

The door was unlocked and she entered with the gait of someone out for a leisurely stroll. The Carosite doctor sat behind a desk towards the back of the lime green room, barely looking up. He waved one of three furry fingers at her as his muzzle shook back and forth. "I'm very sorry, but we are closed, unless this is an emergency," he said dipping his head back into his work.

Khara slowly walked over to the window and lowered the shade, drowning the room in shadow.

"Excuse me, Excuse me," he said, waving his long face towards her. "I need the light...please..." He was standing now and slowly moving around the desk towards her.

"I wont waste your time Dr. Quay," Khara said, smoothly, unbuttoning her coat and producing her blaster. The squat Doctor stopped, slowly backing away towards his chair. Smiling, she advanced, letting the blaster hang menacingly at her side.

"What...what do you want?"

"Lotek Skidna, I know you know where he is and I want you to tell me."

Two months of bed rest, healing and a world full of pain had eliminated her pleasant disposition. Revenge brought her here and revenge would deliver Skidna's head to her on a stick. She stepped up to the desk and sat on the corner, letting her leg dangle off the edge. Slowly and deliberately, she placed her blaster on the desktop facing the wide-eyed being. No evidence of her smile remained.

"I...he is a patient and I cannot give out that uh...that is, I can not tell..." the doctor stammered. Slowly, she brought the blaster up and took her time aiming. If she pulled the trigger now, his brains and part of his neck would be erased from the planet for good. Wide-set eyes peered back in absolute fear from behind the barrel of the weapon.

"I wont ask again."

Shivering, the small being held his hands up. "He...has a apartment on Jalon Station. He stays there sometimes. I swear, that is all I know..." he replied shaking. Khara nodded and returned the blaster to its shoulder holster. "Jalon Station huh?" She dipped her hand into a small bowl of bright red candy sitting on the edge of his desk.

"Thanks Doc, that's just what I needed." Popping a piece of candy into her mouth, she threw him a wink and a smile. Stepping into the pasty Valex 3 evening, the name "Jalon Station" continued to echo in her mind. "I hope you aren't picky about burials Skidna," she said mounting her bike. "Cause this Jalon Station sounds like as good a place as any." Triggering the vehicles ignition, she roared off towards the spaceport and the rapidly retreating sunlight.

“Set To Kill”

I learned little from the sorry excuses that passed themselves off as teachers on my birth planet. Truth be told, only minor bits of their “knowledge” was actually absorbed, instead, my mind was focused on the two things most kids focused on in school...getting the hell off planet when I was old enough-and girls.

But there was one bit of knowledge that some dreary-eyed, dim-witted biology professor named Jerkins managed to pass along that seemed to stick. According to him, in humanoids, smell was the one sense that was the most directly tied to memories. Standing in the snow on the glacial planet of Garnib, with the clear, unmarred scent of ice tickling my nostrils, I couldn't agree more.

It was important for me to make time to daydream, and remember. After some street doc cuts into your brain and installs moving parts that didn't come naturally with the plumbing, you tend to grip and hold onto things like memories, just to make sure “you” are still “you.”

The memory tied to the snow wasn't a pleasant one. No, Garnib's crisp clean air made me think of snow, and thinking of snow made me think of home, and thinking of home made me think of blood.

So...snow equals blood. Maybe the doc should have chopped even more out of my head now that I think about it.

Some sappy sentimentalist once said “Home is where the heart is.” If that's true, then it's fitting that I have no home. My birth planet however, I know exactly where that is....it helps when you are trying to avoid a place that you know its location.

Why avoid it? Let me ask you a question: Would you avoid a Sarlaac Pit if you knew where one was? Of course you would. So it's no surprise that a place saturated with memories of pain, heartache and betrayal would be a place I could do well to simply forget. But it's never been that easy for me.

Standing on a landing pad beneath a huge fissure in the glacier allowed large fist-sized snowflakes to drift from the darkness, high above, down onto my face. Actually, they didn't touch my face at all; instead, they landed on the blood red lightning pattern that crawled across the surface of my navy colored leather mask, melting almost immediately

before trickling onto my matching blue bodysuit and dripping into the show covered permacrete.

Even through the leather, the cold spread with each frigid strike. Normal sentients wouldn't have been able to feel the cold, the insulated leather bodyglove generally being enough to diffuse the sensation. But, as many beings enjoyed pointing out, there was little normal about me.

I let the snow hit and melt until the mild irritation of cold slowly began to burn. Every wispy fluttering flake that hit felt like someone sticking a white hot blaster barrel against my scalp as my mind began to spin in an attempt to block it out.

Above, the wind groaned through the giant fissure, and what should have been slight background noise became a roar that forced me to seal my eyes shut.

The doc told me it would be this bad, but who listens to doctors? Those I'd met were two bit sadomasochists with fancy letters at the end of their name that gave them license to butcher you without any legal repercussions.

With a hand that remained surprisingly steady given the circumstances, I dipped my fingers into my belt pouch and retrieved a small auto-injector. Pressing the thin metal cylinder against my jugular, it emitted a loud "hiss" as I jammed my thumb against the injector bulb and the tiny needle buried itself into my neck.

Liquid fire known throughout the galaxy as Serinval tore through my body and with every pump of my heart the diluted neurotoxin was ushered along, as if someone were dragging a razorblade along my veins and arteries, laying them open, raw and exposed. The hell lasted for maybe two minutes tops, but you couldn't tell me that; in those two minutes I died with every pulse of blood that hammered through my body.

Eventually, I was able to open my eyes, blinking away the sting of sweat that poured from my forehead. The sensations that assaulted me were less intense, as the deadly toxin did its work. According to the doc I needed this to stave off the sensory overload caused by the implants, but I'm not going to lie-I liked it. The pain, the raw brutal sensation, was followed by what I had affectionately come to call "the drift."

The "drift" was a calming wave of total euphoria as every muscle, every sense, every emotion got dialed back to "0". Deep inside my head the toxin killed off tiny, miniscule parts of my brain so I could operate and function.

It was better than any drug on the street you could get your hands on...why? Because, every time it hit my veins I was knocking back a tiny shot of death.

I'd come to look forward to it, to try to hold out for as long as I could, so I had farther to fall, more pain to relieve when I took my hit.

"Advanced Neurological Decrepitude," I muttered to myself. Fancy way of saying your implants are burning away your brain like a hot coal, is all the words really mean. And like any lump of coal, once it's burned out, it's just another useless chunk of rock.

It would have been nice if the doc told me how long I had before my gray matter went critical, but he didn't know and in the end it didn't really matter. I had enough time to get done what needed to be done, and besides, it's surprising how many people you can kill in a short amount of time if you really put your mind to it.

"Sanpo says you needs a ride?" The voice snapped me out of my euphoria and was attached to an obese Zeltron who sported more hair on his brilliant pink face than he did

on his head. Shaved into a tip, his gleaming black beard made me think of pirates, and his wide mischievous smile didn't help matters any.

Even with my senses dulled, I smelled him before he actually appeared; like many spacers, he drenched his body in cheap cologne to mask "that" smell.

"That" smell was a smell that permeated the clothing and bodies of every long haul spacer that worked the lanes. It was the scent of desperation; of weeks and sometimes months of living in the same stale recycled air that a ship's wheezing life support managed to consume and spit back out. Of hoping for the next big job so you could pay off whatever debt you had hanging over your head. It was the scent of eating the same reconstituted, re-hydrated protein mush that passed for food on these ships, and then dragging your sorry tail back to a cot long since stained with sweat and genetic filth. No amount of cologne or lies can cover up that smell, and most of these sorry nerf herders never even realize how badly they reek of it.

Nodding at the sleek, pristine wedge of starship that he disembarked from, I jingled the credits sitting in the pockets of the black longcoat that hung from my frame.

"Yeah, I need passage to Coyn, in the Elrood System. The sooner we get off of this snowball the better." Wasting time with niceties wasn't one of my strong suits.

The large pilot pulled a piece of stimchew from his orange vest and shoved it into his mouth where he ground at it so hard you would have thought he was trying to kill it first "Huh. Yeah, I know Coyn. Why you wanna go there? Coynites are big mean sunsbitches, they don't take to flashy boys like yerself, especially untrustworthy folks who wear masks...makes em mean. Guess they figure you got something to hide...Coynites don't like secrets much."

I stared at the "pilot" without speaking. A minute passed and his smile slowly disappeared, replaced with a frown and uncontrollable darting of his eyes to anything of interest on the pad besides me. He ran out of options pretty quickly and I let him suffer for a moment more before I spoke.

"Your ship and your ability to fly it are all I require, save your advice and cultural knowledge for the cantina floozies. It takes a bit more to impress me."

His response was typical. First he would try to save face, then show me who was boss; more than likely by jacking up the initial cost of the trip by a few hundreds credits. I didn't mind, predictability made things easy for me.

"I don't like your tone, friend, in fact, I don't think I'm going to even bother with taking you on board." He crossed his thick arms over his chest and tilted his head slightly back, challenging me.

All too easy.

"Of course, but you WILL be taking me on as a passenger...and we will be leaving sooner than you think," I nodded to his sleek flawless ship. "This model is top of the line,

released just a year ago by Corellian Engineering-which isn't cheap. You," I slowly placed my hands on my hips, revealing the low slung blaster belt and lethal pair of weapons that crisscrossed beneath my navel, "are wearing threadbare clothing that smells like it's been packed in a crate of wet Neeks. You've been asking around the Cold Stop Cantina almost daily about passengers or available freight for over a week, which tells me you need money. You don't own a ship like that for long without a stack of credits in your pocket. So..."

He fidgeted, and I could see his chest begin to rise and fall at a faster pace. My assumptions were hitting their mark. Bullseye.

"Are we going to continue this pathetic display of machismo, or are we going to burn atmo? Cause I have business to attend to on Coyn and you need to get busy with the business of getting my ass there."

If his cheeks could have turned any redder I'm sure they would have. He stared hard at me for a minute, his eyes finally falling to the flat black modified DL-44 blasters that hung easy off of my hips.

"I don't allow blasters on my ship."

"Then good luck selling your ship when the credits run dry."

"No, wait!" he stopped me before I had even stepped from the landing pad. Turning around, I allowed a smile to crease my lips...not that he could have seen it-my mask concealed all but my eyes.

"You can stow your stuff, we'll uh, we'll leave whenever you are ready," he lowered his head, just a bit, and I almost felt sorry for the fat, sad pirate.

"Sir." I said.

He looked up as if someone just asked him to run a Garnib marathon in the nude.

"What?" he asked.

"Sir. You will refer to me as Sir. From this point until we terminate our business arrangement." My arms crossed of their own accord. I almost cracked into laughter when the chubby pirate began shaking with rage.

"FINE! SIR!" he spat at me through clenched teeth. A respectable double chin jiggled around his neck as if filled with a liter of water. Making a 180 turn in the snow he stormed off, kicking aside an unfortunate frostbunny that happened onto the landing pad, the small white creature scurrying beneath the white carpet of snow and disappearing from sight.

We arrived in the Coyn system a little over a week later with little trouble. One thing the fat spacer was right about was the planet. While just a temperate ball of mud and water like many planets, when you looked close you could tell that Coyn had a rugged look about it. Vast mountain ranges, broken apart by plains and marshland covered the planet, and if one didn't know any better they might even find it inviting. They would be wrong. In many ways the planet was just like its native population- a violent brutal warrior breed who realized the only way to avoid extinction was to fall in line with the whims of galaxies governing body-The Empire.

So they play nice-hire themselves out as mercenaries, warriors, what have you. The Empire handles the Coynites like they handle every other planet and species in the known galaxy. They nod, smile and get what they can out of you, then, when you have outlived your usefulness, you are discarded like so much trash. Unless you are the troublesome sort; the Empire has quick and efficient ways of handling you if that's the case.

We descended on the bluish-green planet and the Zeltron dropped the sleek ship onto a landing pad in the Dum'akk'a Province Starport. The facility was crafted from bleached white stone and polished glass; if you took a big whiff you could even smell the faint incense they pumped throughout the facility. Patrols of single Coynites roamed the premises to keep order, not that there ever seemed to be a real danger of someone tangling with or even near the natives. The Coynite warriors were nothing if not intimidating.

Towering sometimes three meters tall, their tight muscled bodies were covered in fine smooth fur whose color ranged anywhere from blonde to black, while their faces were ridged with bony protrusions that encircled their eye sockets and divided their wide foreheads. Many wore topknots and braided beards that hung down to their chest-a source of pride and honor among these steely-eyed killers.

I paid the Zeltron and advised him to forget he ever saw me. He promised he would and beat a hasty retreat back into his ship. I'd considered killing the man and taking his ship, but now was not the time, nor place. I had business to attend to and a corpse this early in the game plan would simply cause more trouble than I was prepared to deal with-especially on Coyn.

Strolling through the immaculate streets, I had to give the Coynites credit; they took care of their home. The skyscrapers that towered dozens of stories into the air were as spotless as the streets and crafted from the same white rock and glass as the spaceport. It seemed on every corner there was a security officer or planetary security booth willing to lend assistance and keep order. That they managed this without making their planet look like police state or prison was pure magic. But if you knew what to look for, if you could...feel...things like I could, you saw the danger that waited, just below the surface, for anyone who had trouble on their minds.

The midday sun cast everything in a hazy warm glow and I felt the humidity causing sweat to pool beneath my dark leather. The implants fought against my attempts to

mentally block out the nuisance; in the end the discomfort was a small price to pay for the benefits.

It was going on about three hours since I hit planet when I finally found my destination: Studers Café and Grill.

Nestled beneath a monorail overpass, the small two-story restaurant was run by overweight human female named Studer Five. Specializing in gourmet Rylothian cuisine, Studers was supposedly one of the planets best kept secrets.

It was easy to see why the planet's occupants would want it to remain a secret. Besides the crappy location beneath a roaring monorail, the building was old and its exterior was in dire need of repairs. It was a stark departure from the clean sterile city I'd been wandering through for hours-and I immediately remembered why Whatley had been so in love with the place; it was quiet, nondescript and very, very good.

I ignored the crumbling mortar and the wooden front door whose knob threatened to come off in my hand and stepped into the darkness beyond.

Letting my eyes adjust to the dim interior, the neural implants snapped everything into focus and the scent of roast meat slapped me in the face and I realized I hadn't eaten in days.

Throughout the circular restaurant candlelight danced atop dozens of tables and the quiet whispers of diners dipped a bit at my entrance. I couldn't blame them, a man in a long black trenchcoat and leather mask enters you know he's not there to sell you a book of poetry.

A small wiry girl in her teens with a ringed protrusion of vestigial horns about her head pulled away from a podium to my right and approached gingerly with a menu tucked beneath her arm. Someone to the left of me was being served overcooked Ryloth Rycrit with Dornean Brandy Sauce...burnt, yes, but it still smelled delicious.

"Dinner for... one?" the girl quietly asked, glancing behind me to make sure I was alone.

I was already scanning the two dozen tables scattered beneath the low ceiling, searching for Studer.

"No. I'm here to see Studer Five," I said without bothering to look at the pale girl. She smelled of cheap hand lotion and poverty-this was likely the most exciting her life would ever get.

"She's upstairs but I'm afraid...uhm..." she trailed off and I bothered to throw her a glance. She was staring at my hips and the blasters that hung there. I gently placed a finger beneath her chin and tilted her face back up so I could lock my ice blue eyes on hers and stare deep into her soul, well, what she had left of a soul anyway.

"Yes child?"

The sweet musty scent of fear overrode the Rycrit. Her eyes trembled and I could feel her heart quicken through her skin.

“We don’t...blasters aren’t allowed in here sir,” she blurted out and bless her she even let loose with a small tear that raced from the corner of her large brown eyes down her cheek. On a planet like Coyn she was a gentle dandelion amid a field of boulders.

Adorable.

“But sweetheart, what if I need to kill someone?” I asked. I thought she was about to faint. I let loose with what I thought sounded like a genuine chuckle and placed a reassuring hand on her shoulder.

“Kidding! I’m kidding, look,” I slowly unclipped the gunbelt and tossed it over my shoulder where it dangled like a coiled snake. “See? I’m just joking...and I promise not to put em’ back on till I leave.”

With a delicate brush I removed the tear trail from her face. She sniffled slightly and gave me a tiny smile.

“Stud-Studers upstairs in the bar mister, just follow the stairs,” she gestured to a wooden staircase positioned in the center of the restaurant. A golden glow poured from somewhere above and I could hear laughter mixed with clinking glassware.

“Thanks Precious,” I said and slipped the girl a five credit coin. She smiled wide and returned to her perch behind the podium.

Strolling upstairs I spotted Studer behind a circular bar nestled in the far end of the room. Navigating around a dozen tables and twice as many revelers I finally made it through the crowded maze to the bar.

The large older woman was barking orders at three serving droids who wheeled around trying to take and fill the orders of the crowd gathered around the polished synthewood.

“Studer!” I shouted, loud enough to be heard.

Swiveling her white haired bouffant towards me, the woman threw me a curious glance and kept barking orders. “Whatcha want fella? Make it quick!” she said in a voice that sounded like a wheezing hyperdrive engine.

“I’m looking for someone,” I shouted.

She sneered and squinted in my direction. “Looks like you’re here to rob me,” she bellowed to the amusement of the crowd.

I flashed a hundred credit coin at her. The light from a dozen lum signs situated throughout the bar caught the coin and locked her eyes on me like a tractor beam.

“Keep working, and open another keg!” she snarled at an unfortunate blue droid to her right. Tossing a soiled bar towel over her shoulder she squeezed her rotund frame from behind the bar and gestured to a nearby table occupied by a thin Arconan.

“Beat it Lyllle, you’ve nursed that one beer long enough,” she said and physically picked the anvil headed alien up by the arm and threw him towards the stairs. He stumbled, hitting the ground and sliding out of sight among the legs of the other patrons.

“Sit,” she said and parked herself in the recently vacated seat. I obliged and slid the cred coin into the center of the table. It disappeared into her apron almost immediately.

“So? Your friend got a name?” she asked, fishing a thin cigarra holder from her apron and lighting the white protrusion at the end. Smoke the same color as her hair curled into the air.

“Whatley.”

“Whatley huh? Lots of folks named Whatley kid, you going to have to do better than that if you want your creds worth.”

“He’s a slinger. Used to come here a few years back-almost every two months. Raved about the Elrood Salmon-said it was the best in system. Used to make special trips here just to buy that dinner and then would purchase three kegs of your homebrewed lager.” She drug on the cigarra for a long while and slowly nodded. She knew who he was-knew the second I mentioned his name. Her body language, her eyes, the way they subtly narrowed into slits when I first spoke his name-reading her was easy. But she had info I needed and was going through all of the motions to protect her friend-I respected that; I tend to be patient with those who have something I need and I wasn’t in any hurry-I had plenty of time to get my revenge ball rolling.

“Right. Whatley, Twi’lek, blue, maybe old as me. Haven’t seen him...”

“Around in a while but you have an idea of who might know him and you’ll make a call,” I finished her sentence for her. It was the same response with every go-between you deal with these days, it’s almost like they send out scripts or something.

Old hard eyes stared at mine and glanced briefly at the gunbelt slung over my shoulder. “If I did know how to get ahold of him how do I know you aren’t here to kill him?”

“You don’t. I don’t have time to lie, but I also know you aren’t simple enough to really believe that just because I man has a sidearm he’s an assassin. I just need to ask Whatley some questions and then I’ll be on my way.”

“Come back in four days...around six or seven am,” she said, taking a large draw from the cigarra and letting loose with a massive coughing fit. Once she hacked up something yellow and spat it on the floor she shrugged, “I should have a lead on where you can find him by then. Oh and you wanna leave me your name kid?”

“Lotek Skidna,” I said, staring down at the floor and back. “He used to tell me this place was one of the finest restaurants on Coyn-I find that hard to believe.”

Her smile was filled with a smattering of teeth soiled yellow with tabacc stains. “Things change Boy, you can’t stay on top forever, ya know?”

Standing, I strapped my weapons back on my hips. “No, I don’t. See you in four days.”

Sleeping came hard to me now. With the new hardware wired into my brain every creak of the bedsprings, every groan of the support slats brought me out of my slumber, wired as if someone had just taken a shot at me.

So I didn’t bother. Oh sure, I mean, I HAD to sleep...but usually it was sitting bolt upright in a quiet room with little external stimuli, and even then the most I could hope for was maybe three hours a night.

I didn’t waste time with a hotel room, as I didn’t have anything other than the clothes on my back and my weapons. So I spent the next three days moving from cantina to cantina, grabbing a shower at the local starport and generally killing time and getting a layout of the place.

Wandering the artificially lit streets the night before my meeting with Studer I tried to think back to the last time I actually got a good nights sleep.

The best I could come up with was pre-implants, when I was crewing with a Wookiee named Socatoa on his crappy little ship, the “Trinity.” I had my own cabin, being first mate and all, but that wasn’t saying much. The cot smelled of vomit and mildew but when we were in the deep of space going from planet to planet I at least had a door to lock and I would sometimes sleep for nearly ten hours, lost to my dreams and nightmares. He called us heroes; I called us mercenaries. He claimed we helped out the Rebellion to end the despotic rule of the Empire, I reminded him I did it for credits and the chance to shoot people. I guess we both had our own reality we were operating in so I didn’t push him too much. When I did he threw droids at me-had I known how to pilot his ship I would have shot him a long time ago and been done with it.

Everything changed when we met up with a group of characters on Valex 3. We’d taken on a passenger named Klux Martin who turned out to be a Jedi- I thought they were all dead but this fella swung a lightsaber and seemed to have the walk to back up his talk. The next was a hacker named A’sok Thurgood and finally a legbreaker named Vic Palisades.

When all was said and done we screwed Akelish the Hutt out of around a million creds and hauled ass off that planet faster than you can say “deathmark.” The Jedi and the hacker went their own way, while the rest of us went ours.

Stopping back on the planet Greymoore was the Wook’s idea. I was still recovering from the new implants the Hutt’s money bought so I wasn’t able to put up much of an argument. I wish now I had of course; going back there led to our capture at the hands of a scumbag bounty hunter who turned us over to the Imperials. The hunter was on my trail for a while; Socatoa and the human were just unlucky enough to be associated with me, and got collard as well.

I figured us for dead, and was going to wait for my opportunity to take some of the Imperial scum out before they killed me. Prison cells and Ket don’t mix you understand-

turns out in the end I didn't need to kill but a few people, and wound up getting my freedom to boot. As luck, if I believed in it, would have it one of the Imp guards was an old friend of Vic's and helped us escape. Once again we were on the run and decided to try a different planet to lay low on this time-Garnib.

I wasn't fond of settling on the iceball but Vic insisted it was the safest place-cold, remote and of little interest to anyone but the big white furry freaks that populated it-the Balinaka.

The planet got old within hours. I tried to wander around and find something interesting to do or maybe locate some ladies interested in some horizontal refreshment but had no luck. The only clothes I had was my bodysuit and to be honest with my head still shaved from the operation and the scar tissue crisscrossing my scalp I wasn't much to look at. After sitting one evening in the Cold Stop Cantina and listening to these stupid tall white aliens bay and swoon at the jukebox I wanted to shoot myself. The food was cold, the planet was cold and I came to find that most of the women were cold too. See, Garnib is famous for one thing-it's crystals. They mine these really beautiful crystals that the galaxy goes crazy for-but that's it.

So, that being the deal, the planet attracts artisans who like to shape these crystals into works of art.

Artists. You ever dated an artist? All they want to do is sit around and get in touch with their feelings and try to get you to get in touch with YOUR feelings before they will even give you a first date. They want to be friends and not jeopardize that by getting romantically involved. Blah, blah, blah.

I'd been on planet less than a week when I finally made my mind up to leave. And Vic? That thug was going on about starting some sort of shipping company and moving crystals around the galaxy or some nonsense. He had some grand master plan that would funnel money into rebellion missions and how it would help him liberate his planet and all that. I let Vic rattle on about his plans while sharing the two-bedroom apartment we secured when we first landed on the giant glacier.

No thanks pal, I had enough of the Rebellion when I hooked up with Socatoa and all it got me was a pleasure cruise on an Imperial prisoner shuttle.

Then one night, when Vic was asleep, and of course I wasn't, I packed my things and wrote him a note telling him I would see him again but that I had things to take care of. A forged set of docs later and "Lotek Skidna" was just another transient looking for a way off that rock.

Those "things" I had to take care of drove me from home. They caused me to get the implants that now buzzed in my brain like angry wasps and slowly rotted my brain. These "things" captured me and turned me over to the Imperials, and now the deposited me on Coyn, wandering the nearly vacant streets as a cool fog settled near the ground and reflected orange streetlights back into the black star filled night sky. As my boots clicked against the damp duracrete I realized these "things" needed to be taken care of before I could move on with my life or what was left of it at least.

I was leaning against the front door of Studer's at 5 am, having just injected a dose of death and enjoying the "drift". A small Sullustan wrapped in a light jacket and carrying an apron approached, and when I told him I was instructed to come in at seven he

nodded his smooth domed head and locked black bulbous eyes on me like he'd heard it all before and allowed me to sit upstairs while I waited.

Exiting the restaurant's central stairwell I crossed the worn wood paneled floor to a line of seven droids standing behind the bar waiting to serve.

"Juice," I said to the leftmost droid. The blue sleek model stared back with a domed head and said nothing. I almost repeated my order when I noticed its eyes were a dull gray. Deactivated.

Shaking my head, I leaned across the bar and retrieved a bottle of warm juice from a crate parked on the floor. "Thanks," I said to the sleek droid, turning my back and heading to my left towards a row of tables lined against the wall.

I selected a table in front of one of several circular windows and took a seat, turning so I could stare out past the monorail's supports as the navy strips of night sky grudgingly gave way to the orange flame of dawn.

Watching the approaching sun glint off of distant snow covered mountains I realized it had been over four years since I had been home; four years since I last saw Whatley. The old man's face and kind smile was forever burned into my brain, and no amount of neural butchering could ever get rid of that.

Strength comes from knowing your own weaknesses, my father, himself an accomplished gunslinger told me once; of course this was before he was outdrawn and gunned down like a piece of nerf meat in a bar by a young wannabe blaster baron. Turns out Pops' weakness was that he was too slow and drank with his back to the door.

Anywhere else in the galaxy that combination might not have cost you your life, but on the planet of Valhallan Falls, where the pastimes include daily marksmanship and quickdraw competitions, being reckless was like bathing in Bantha dung-everyone smelled it and everyone was ready to take advantage of it.

"I always figured I was paranoid Ket, but watching you makes me feel like I'm sleepwalking," Vic told me just a few weeks back when we first set down on Garnib. I snickered at the outlaw, not bothering to respond to him. He didn't understand...and unless he spent any real time on Valhallan Falls, he never would.

My birth planet was a violent place. Not chaotic, it wasn't that at all, in fact we had the lowest crime rate of any planet in the four surrounding systems; people generally obeyed themselves and our planetary security forces kept most of the settled continents in line. But people are animals, pure and simple. You give them the ability to cause pain, to injure, to kill, and they will do it, every time and with little hesitation. On Valhallan Falls, evolution took care of that pesky hesitation gene.

Rumors abound on who first settled Valhallan Falls; some say it was a ship full of prospectors striking into wild space looking for ore deposits. Others tell of a company purchasing the planet in the days of the Old Republic and trying to colonize a new location for their home office. Those are quaint little theories, but you only need to grow up on the planet's harsh polar cap and look into the eyes of the heartless bastards who

live in the village of Valiz-Taraa to know the truth- Valhallan Falls was once a prison planet for the criminally insane.

If we had a tourist bureau you can bet Credsticks to Caffebears that they would have omitted that juicy little tidbit out of the vacation brochures. And who could blame them? Who wants to visit a planet full of gunslingers descended from mentally unstable murderers and rapists who got lucky one night and overran their prison and captors in a bloody wave of violence and retribution?

Not exactly a place to take the family during Fete Week.

In the end it was good dear old Dad was gunned down when I was only fifteen. When he wasn't drunk he was bored and when he was bored I was a target. Literally.

My earliest memories weren't of warm family holiday mornings or playing in the schoolyard with other kids- it was of dodging stun bolts while I scurried through the tall grass in the rear of our homestead's conservatory trying to collect lum bottles from the parties my parents threw the night before.

When I was lucky it was just Dad taking pot shots from the comfort of his worn lime-green conform lounge. Most of the time however, he and his six closest friends would wager on who would be "lucky" enough to hit me first.

Funny story, the day after my fifth birthday I hesitated too long in the tall grass, thinking I spotted a cred coin, when three of pops best buddies drew a bead on me at the same time.

I got out of the hospital just in time to celebrate my sixth birthday.

So I didn't weep when some snot nosed punk caught the old man with his trousers down and shot him in the chest. The story I got was that the kid didn't intend to kill the old man-no slinger on Valhallan Falls kills by accident you understand-he just wanted to get the drop on Pops and boost his own rep. I can respect that; trouble is, that the old man was soaked in cheap booze from a night of heavy drinking and super-heated stun blasts and liquor don't mix. Pop went up like a funeral pyre and burned to death on the floor of a piss stained cantina filled with prostitutes and pirates.

Seeing as Mom kicked off due to dementia just a few years before, I was left as next of kin. Captain Berol-Da, a thin rail of a man who passed for our local constable showed up sporting a thick blue parka and asking me if I wanted to press charges against the kid. I could have cared less, but by Valhallan Falls law I was entitled to everything the kid had on him when he committed the crime. I picked up the goods while the killer cooled his heels in the local jailhouse.

Turns out Pop's death kept paying dividends: the kid not only had two grand in creds, he'd also recently purchased a pair of Sentinel IV Blaster pistols. The silver plated death dealers were known throughout the galaxy as one of the deadliest blasters a slinger could own; crafted by the artisans on the desert planet of Socorro, the pistol was instantly recognizable by unsavory types-the type I aspired to become. While I figured the kid didn't have anything else of worth, there was one thing that he had that I DID want-experience.

While I wasn't a bad shot I wasn't a quickdraw artist like the real pros were. While sitting and staring at the charred skeleton that someone unceremoniously dumped into the snow behind the cantina I decided right then and there I wanted to learn how to shoot-well, and needed to start someplace.

Making a quick trip to the prison I tossed my proposal to the Rodian who sat on the other side of the crackling blue electrical grid.

"Why should I even bother with you Koochoo? You come in here wearing my tools and walking like you think you are a man, I find that damn disrespectful," the Rodian snarled, peppering his native tongue with snipits of Huttese. I wasn't impressed.

I shrugged my shoulders and pointed to the wall of sizzling death. "Sorry about that. I guess I could just walk away and let them go ahead and execute you next week like they are planning on- just thought you might want to live a little longer is all."

The Rodian may have been unlucky but he wasn't stupid. He stared for a moment and then thrust a hand through the humming shafts of energy towards me. "Croto the Crusher, gunslinger," he offered. I took his thin scaly hand in mine and shook it, careful not to bump his arm against the grid and sever it in the process

"Ket Adkins."

"Haku?!?" Ket? The first step is going to be getting you a new name," he snorted.

Surprisingly, Croto and I got along pretty well. I sold the family home and gave him his credits back. We shacked up together in a dingy one-bedroom apartment on the outskirts of Valiz-Malaga, Valhalla Falls third largest city and at least a hundred kilometers from Valiz-Taraa. The cocky Rodian taught me everything he knew and I tried to teach him how to anticipate a draw and dodge to safety. While scraping credits together working at a local mine, he and I found ourselves competing in local back alley, non-lethal duels for extra blow money. Given that Croto was using a crap blaster, I loaned him one of the Sentinels, not that it mattered much. The realization that we both needed a lot more polish if we were going to become professional slingers hit us like a Wampa claw.

Valhallan Falls had no shortage of slinger academies-the planet was renown for supplying the galaxy with a respectable share of bodyguards, hitmen and assassins. Problem was, most of the academies wanted an arm and a leg for tuition-creds that we simply didn't have.

Asking around led us to track down a Twi'lek named Whatley. The grizzled teal colored slinger had long thick headtails that he curled around and beneath his arms, and the scars of a thousand blaster duels etched into his body like a Coruscant streetmap. For most of what I sold my home for he agreed to take Croto and I under his wing and teach us the ways of the blaster.

Whatley was just getting his "Academy" off of the ground and gave us a bargain basement deal on our tuition. The Whatley Slinger Academy was run out of an old military bunker set high up in the snow-capped mountains far from Valiz-Malaga. Along

with twenty other students we were given a lumpy cot, a battered spacers chest and two meals of processed protein a day. The food sucked but I wasn't there for gourmet meals. The old man gave us over five decades of knowledge and experience, which to me, was the most priceless of gifts. For four years me and Croto slept, ate and lived the life of gunslingers in training; Mornings were filled with exercise and drills in the courtyard of the bunker, while afternoons were dedicated to learning how to repair and upgrade our weapons. Evenings found us enjoying personal time or, at least three times a week, lucky enough to attend one of Whatley's impromptu seminars.

I drank these in like an elixir, absorbing the man's words and committing his teachings to memory. Even today I'll find myself reciting things he said or taught in that clear articulate voice of his. I guessed he used to live in or around the core worlds at one time; he had way too much culture to be brought up on a dump like Valhalla Falls.

"There are two main rules you all have to remember," he told us one night in the main mess hall. Most of the lights were killed to conserve energy and the group was huddled around a flaming barrel that cast deep shadows on Whatley's worn scarred face.

"The first is that you never set your weapon to kill unless you plan on following it through. Stunning a person is one thing, you knock someone out, a drunk husband or wife, put them on the ground, hell, thy might wake up few hours later and thank you for it. But..." he let the word linger for a moment. "You set your weapon to kill, you commit to it," he eyeballed everyone nearby in turn. "And you commit not just to shoot, no, you set your weapon to kill it's not just a dial on a blaster. You set yourself to kill; to follow that decision through to the end, no matter the outcome. Know what you are getting into when you Set to Kill folks, measure that responsibility with every ounce of soul you got."

He nodded and refilled his mug with steaming caffe, allowing everyone to absorb what he'd said. The second rule, is 'Don't make it personal.' A man who enters into the business of killing for vengeance or anger is setting himself up for a costly fall, a fall that he won't ever get up from."

"But why Captain? What's the difference between business and personal?" asked a new recruit, a female Lorridian with large blue eyes and a tight white ponytail that sprung from her scalp. "Captain" as some of the students had taken to calling Whatley, looked over to me and nodded.

I'd heard the speech over a dozen times by this point, and had even asked the same question the first time I heard the seminar.

"It's a matter of distance," I told the girl, whose name was LeMoyne Divir. She looked at me with her perfect flawless face curving into a mask of curiosity. I continued.

"When it's just business there is enough distance between yourself and your objective so you can see the whole picture and maneuver yourself into the most advantageous position. You allow it to become personal," I shrugged and leaned back, sipping at a mug of milk, no alcohol you understand, we had class in the morning, "you get too close, you lose sight of the big picture, you become vulnerable."

“Ket’s learned his lessons well, you all would be so lucky as to reach his level in just four years,” Whatley told the students. Nodding at the compliment I smiled at LeMoyne, glimpsing Croto staring daggers at me from the edge of the group. I ignored him, the short green headed punk always did have a jealous streak-I was used to it.

That night LeMoyne and I stole away in one of the school’s snow speeders and spent the rest of the evening parked beside a frozen lake and teaching each other lessons of a different sort. Even now, I can’t help but think of the tight cramped space in that speeder without smiling. LeMoyne was gentle and attentive and the first woman I ever really got to “know” with any intimate familiarity, save for some sorry misguided attempts during secondary school.

Exhausted, exhilarated and very late, I raced back to the school and rushed to prepare for morning classes. Scrambling from the communal showers I frantically pulled on the black coveralls of a Whatley Slinger Academy instructor.

In the four years since I’d joined word spread that Whatley was producing actual results and the school blossomed from twenty students to nearly fifty, with Croto and I being promoted to Instructors in the quickdraw and accuracy classes.

I was strapping on my single Sentinel IV when Croto rounded the row of drab gray lockers and leaned up beside them. He was sporting the matching Sentinel low on his hip and was twirling a com cylinder between his fingers.

“You’re late. I had to take the first session by myself,” he said, his wide green snout dripping irritation.

“Yeah, hey sorry about that partner, I uh,” I double checked my weapon and shut the locker door. Croto waved me off before I could finish; six years of friendship tipped him off when he knew I was stalling.

“Save it Adkins,” I knew he was pissed when he used my last name, “next time you decide to go and steam up speeder windows with some tramp just stay gone.”

I ignored him. Croto knew how to punch peoples buttons, in fact, even took a particular pride in it. I took pride in not letting him punch mine. “Yeah, sure thing partner. My guess is you’re just irritated LeMoyne has more of an interest in the pink skin than in the green and bumpy. Gee, small surprise there huh?”

Gunslinger reflexes allowed me to catch his fist before it connected with my jaw. It was no secret that he had a thing for LeMoyne, anyone who watched him around her could make the connection. In her presence he walked a little taller, spoke a little sharper-really it was kind of funny to watch and several of the underclassmen worked hard to hide their snickers behind his back when his plume was fully fanned out.

“You should have shot me ‘partner’, would have had more luck,” I said, the green fist trembling just inches from my face.

“Coo ya maya stupa!” He slurred. I’d learned just enough Huttese from him to appreciate the severity of the curse. I let go of his fist and he stepped back quickly, allowing his hand to drop to his holster.

“I can either stay here and kill you or be late for class, and class is more important,” I said, turning my back to him and leaving.

I never forgot that day. Before then, Croto and I had always been friendly rivals, but things changed that day. He had a nasty habit of trying to bed every female slinger that came through Whatley’s...but the most attractive, the most alluring, was by far LeMoyne-and she’d shown zero interest in him. He and I didn’t speak for weeks, until one day Whatley came to me to take care a piece of business.

“Ket, there is a slinger competition over in South Modisto,” the old man told me one afternoon from behind the thick wooden crate that passed for his desk. The rest of the office he used was just as nondescript; populated with worn pieces of furniture. Nestled in the rear of the school, the room was both office and living quarters- as cut and dry as the man himself.

It wasn’t unusual for Whatley to send me and Croto to competitions on planet- in addition to allowing us to make names for ourselves we generally did well enough that folks got interested in where we learned our skills. Our success filled the coffers of Whatley’s school and kept students filtering in and out of the bunkers cold corridors.

“Sure Cap, that’s only a few hundred kilometers from here, I can compete and be back by the end of the week.”

He was absorbed in something on his Datapad and didn’t bother looking up. By now I could tell when his headtails were twitching it meant he was only half-listening-and they were both twitching now.

“Yes, that’s correct. There is a slinger named Avarice Trips competing-I want you to take him down. He’s the prize student of the Cherri Academy south of the equator. As close to a real pro as you can get and still be considered an amateur.”

The name was a familiar one. Trips was one of the best rookie slingers on Valhallan Falls and the Cherri Academy one of the finest slinger camps. Whatley told me he always aspired to be what they were-rich, successful and renown. By giving their top pupil a black eye in a public competition, my victory would go a long way towards fulfilling that dream.

“No worries Cap, Trips will be just another example-in fact I’m surprised it took you this long to send me after him. I’ll pop him in the chest and give him a severe case of heartburn.”

Cracking a smile, Whatley still focused on the Datapad, now tapping away at the small narrow keyboard. "That's why I'm sending you Son, I know you will get the job done. Head out in the morning, and take speeder number seven."

Bowing, I smiled at him, even though he didn't see it. "Yes sir." Turning, I was almost out the door when he stopped me.

"Oh and take Croto along as well."

Hesitation was as natural as spitting fire, but at that moment I froze in place and stood stock still. Behind me he set down the Datapad on the desk's scratched surface. "Yes?" he asked.

"It's just that, well, Croto and I have been...we've had some troubles lately."

He was silent for a moment, and the creak of his chair reclining back echoed off of the drab duracrete walls. "I know. I believe the name of the trouble rhymes with 'LeMoyne', does it not?"

My shoulders dropped of their own account and I turned to face him. He was leaning back and watching me with an expressionless face, his small pot belly dipping slightly over his hip holsters.

"It's not her fault, she didn't..." He held up his hand and I clammed up.

"It's no longer a problem. LeMoyne transferred out this morning after lunch, so you and Croto can get back to the business at hand. Problem solved."

Air had trouble getting to my lungs and the room seemed to contract, closing in like a tight cocoon. Whatley gestured to a chair parked in front of the desk. "Ket, sit down before you fall over Son." Following his orders was always second nature to me so I plopped down and shook my head clear.

"Why? She didn't do anything wrong..."

"Just her being here was enough. When I saw how Croto eyed her and I saw how she looked at you, I should have sent her packing then," he shrugged and held his hands wide. "Better later than never, as they say."

"That's not fair!" I exploded. My heart felt like someone had crumpled it like an empty fizz can and easily tossed it aside. "I loved her! Croto had no right to tell you about us! I've always done what was asked of me..I never..."

"KET!" Whatley practically came out of his seat, throwing his bulk onto the desk, his right hand slapping the thick wood. His explosion shut me up and made me almost soil my coveralls. I glanced away, hoping to avert his stare, but training forced me to look into his steely blue eyes.

“I run a school here, not a nightclub. If your goal is to meet women then I suggest you turn in your gear now. If however, your goal is to be the best slinger’ in this system, then I suggest you pull yourself together and put this behind you. I’ve given Croto the same speech, so we are all on the same Datapad. You Scan me?”

The pain of my broken heart forgotten, I pushed LeMoyne from my mind and gave Whatley a curt nod, saying nothing. He held my stare for a moment, then leaned back in his chair, retrieving the Datapad from the desk.

“Good. You need to pack for your trip, see Quartermaster Talbot for spending creds and any additional gear you are going to need. Dismissed.”

I sat for a moment, trying to get myself together, and finally forced myself from the chair, focusing on just making it through the door.

“It’s easy to mistake lust for love Son, you’ll find out the hard way that lust is a lot easier to give and take.

I didn’t bother stopping or acknowledging him, I simply walked from the room and left him to his Datapad.

The trip to South Modisto was a long one, most of it filled with an uncomfortable silence and endless hours of staring out at the surrounding rock faces and vegetation. Besides the hum of the Repulsor engine, Croto had popped in an audio disc of one of his favorite Jizz bands and the easy smooth kloo horn notes ushered us through the mountainous terrain.

Almost six hours into the trip Croto turned down the music. “Sorry about LeMoyne- I never intended to get her kicked out of Whatley’s” he said, bundling his orange parka up around his shoulders for warmth.

I didn’t respond for a moment, and he began to shift uneasily beside me. Finally, I shook my head.

“I know you liked her, I just wish you could have cut me some slack, you know?” I said.

He began to speak and I could tell he was still sore about the whole situation. But before he could shove his boot in his mouth he stopped. “You’re right,” he said. “I mean, I had how many of the female students in my bunk? We’re friends, the least I could do was give you you’re own shot at some trim.”

Had we not been navigating down a treacherous pass, I would have bothered to roll my eyes.

“Thanks pal.”

The Rodian snickered and slapped me on my shoulder. “Come on Ket! Look partner, we got spending money, a competition tomorrow where we are going to take top prize and are the best slingers this side of the galaxy! Our round in the competition tomorrow won’t come till late, I say we hit Modisto tonight we party!”

“Not before a competition,” I said, smiling.

“Oh, come on sport! Just one drink! I need it and I know you need it!”

Of course I agreed, like a koochoo-an idiot. The rivalry didn’t end with women and blasters you see, it existed in everything we did. From how clean we kept our weapons to how fast we could knock back mugs of lum...friends, rivals, brothers, Croto and I were all of those things.

We glided into the parking sub level of a local inn and quickly checked in. After the long drive and tight fit in the speeder I wanted nothing more than to soak in a tub of real hot water and go to sleep. But Croto was bound and determined to do some drinking, and with a town packed full of slingers’ looking to make a name, I felt it was too risky to leave him on his own.

The night went by pretty smoothly, until I started drinking. Croto began wagering and I couldn’t let it slide. Looking back it was the sort of foolish mistake my old man made—fortunately I didn’t get shot and the worse I wound up with was a massive hangover the next morning.

“You look like someone scraped you off the heel of a Bantha,” Croto informed me as he handed me a mug of caffe. Stumbling from the uncomfortable cot, I mumbled a “thanks” and wove unsteadily around the tiny room locating my clothes and blaster. Eventually I was as ready as I was going to be and we left the inn and slowly made our way down the main drag of town, avoiding the massive waves of sentients heading for the coliseum. The morning was cool and the sun had just come up, sending golden light glinting off of the tops of the rounded domes that made up the bulk of the skyline. The morning chill helped to wake me up and chase away a bit of the hangover.

Ascending a small mountain of duracrete stairs led us to the massive gray circular building and a series of archways that led to the interior foyer. Upon entering the main foyer we were directed to an unassuming set of double doors guarded by a pair of sec guards. Once we gave our names we were ushered by the armed security to the lockerroom where the rest of the slingers were preparing. I recognized several from previous competitions; some I’d fallen victim to but most were notches in my belt as a slinger. Generally the only greeting was a locked stare and a nod.

“Trips isn’t here yet,” Croto informed me as I sat on a bench and tried not to throw up.

“Don’t matter, I won’t be getting to him till the semifinals at least,” I replied.

A snort left the Rodians snout and he stared at me with his huge black bulbous eyes. “What makes you think YOU’RE going to be the one that gets to him first? Whatley sent us both to take him down, I intend to do just that.”

“Yeah, sure, whatever. Who do I have in the first round?” I asked. Someone in my skull was banging away and they wouldn’t stop.

Croto, strapping his Sentinel to his hip, nodded towards a short anorexic Givin who seemed to blend into the white permacrete wall. “Kizito. Word is this is his last tournament...he’s tired of being everyones free meal ticket to the second round.”

Guilt almost hit me for the thin pale skeletal alien. Wrapped in a common pair of coveralls, his face was a perpetual frown and his large darkened eye sockets carried a look of doom. I didn’t let the guilt get too far however, as this was my opponent and someone that needed to fall for me to fulfill my objective. He made a choice to be here, and I made a choice to take him out.

The tourney field consisted of three hundred slingers from all across the sector. Those not there by invitation only were placements from over forty slinger academies in the system. Kizito was a six-year student of a small academy run by his great uncle. That his uncle’s academy continued to earn spots in the tournaments was a testament more to his uncle’s political influence rather than quality of instruction.

Kizito caught me staring at him and we locked eyes. Something in him was already beaten and he knew it. With a visible shudder and sigh he shuffled out of the room and into the corridor.

“Cripes, they should just let him go on home and move you up in the bracket,” Croto said from beside me. I gave him a weak grin and strapped on my own weapon.

“It takes a lot of guts to show up and take a beating, time and again,” I said cinching my leg strap tight.

“You never know though, he might get lucky,” Croto said.

“Nope, never happen,” I said sitting on the ground and beginning a stretching exercise. “You go into these competitions already beat in your head, ain’t no way you are ever going to beat the other guy.”

The caffee was finally doing its job and Croto and I left the locker room and headed out into the long climate controlled corridor that led to the circular competition area. The stadium was enclosed, with a dull grey dome covering it’s roof and an elaborate lighting rig illuminating the large dueling area.

The floor of the arena was divided off into a dozen “lanes” by rows of orange two-meter tall rods buried into the artificial turf . The “dampeners” as we called them created an invisible wall of energy that neutralized any blaster bolt that passed through them. From the stands spectators could see every duel while the competitors were separated from one another with no danger of a stray blaster bolt from one competition hitting the participants in another.

With time to kill before my own first round match I watched Croto face off in his first duel against a lanky teenager with a mop of dirty blonde hair and a confident look in his narrow brown eyes.

The “Judge”, went over the rules for the duel for the benefit of the slingers, just in case one of them was new or had forgotten. For professionals they were burned into our brains and could be recited by memory if asked: Stun settings only on the blasters-kill settings were never allowed and anyone who forgot that would be subject to Valhalla Falls law-imprisonment or death. Personal responsibility for one’s actions was paramount to the populace of the planet. Some underground organizations were known to sponsor duels to the death, but the planetary law worked hard to shut those down and keep them at bay. At the Judge’s hand dropped, the two duelists would draw and fire. They would continue to do so until one being’s shot made contact with the other competitor; stunning another competitor into unconsciousness was not the goal, accuracy and speed were. Each duelist would stand in the center of a three-meter diameter circle; dodging was allowed but if you went out of the circle you forfeited the match.

I could tell Croto wasn’t listening, but the kid was-it must have been his first real tournament. Stepping behind the protective barrier of the dampeners, I watched Croto roll his neck and stretch his arms out. Slowly, for the benefit of the crowd who was now easily thirty thousand strong, he walked over to the kid and offered his hand to shake. The kid, giving a crooked smile, went to shake it and Croto pulled it back before the kid could make contact, turning the hand into a vile single fingered gesture-typical intimidation tactics. Any slinger worth his salt would have spotted it but this kid didn’t-instead he made the typical rookie mistake. He got mad.

“I’m gonna pop you in the face for that greenie!” I heard him shout.

My partner did nothing, instead he just turned his back to the kid and flexed his long thin fingers.

“Take your mark!” The Judge ordered from the edge of the firing lane. Croto turned to face his opponent, letting his right hand dangle easily beside the butt of his Sentinel. The young kid did likewise, his face a mask of anger and rage. Both stared at the other for what seemed like an eternity, until finally, the Judge dropped his hand in a short chopping motion.

I didn’t bother to watch Croto-I knew his routine by heart and had seen him shoot a million times before. Instead, during these competitions I always liked to focus on the other duelist-to see if there was anything worth learning or how to avoid similar mistakes. The kid must have figured he was outmatched and dropped to one knee, his blaster clearing its holster in a smooth motion. The weapon was almost level with his chest when the deep red bolt from the Sentinel caught him square in his throat and flung him back to the turf.

Gripping his neck, the kid tried to scream but only managed to lie in a heap and twitch while he made gargling noises. A medic peeled away from the group I stood with and administered a cold pack to the wannabe slinger, making sure the bolt had done no real

damage. Satisfied, he gave a thumbs up that drew some sympathy applause from the crowd. Most of the applause however was directed to Croto who had already turned and was waving to a group of young females screaming unsavory offers at him.

Kizito stood ten meters away staring at me with his large sad deep-set eyes. I tried to always look my competition in the eyes before I shot them, but this time it was hard. The sorry bastard knew he was going to get beat, get shot and more than likely have to be helped off of the firing lane by a medbot. Off to our left the Judge positioned himself and looked at us both.

“Take your mark!” He ordered.

We both already had. I didn’t give in to the kind of foolishness Croto enjoyed so much and Kizito looked like he simply wanted to get the whole ordeal over with. In the last moment before the judge dropped his hand I realized what I had to do.

The judge signaled and my right hand was already in motion, the Sentinel clearing the smooth worn black leather with a whisper. Time stood still and I felt as if I could do laps around Kizito before he could even move his arms.

I fired without even bringing my arm up all the way, simply clearing the holster and turning my hand upwards. A rookie mistake was trying to bring the arm up all the way to fire-most who did this didn’t last long in the slinger business.

The red blaster bolt reached out from the Sentinel and slammed into Kizito’s left foot, sending a small puff of smoke up from the worn leather.

“Ow!” he exclaimed, stumbling backwards. His pistol still in its holster, Kizito stared down dumbly at his foot and the realization that he lost without getting knocked on his rear finally clicked.

“Match!” the Judge declared, stepping over and raising my hand.

Kizito looked at me with a mix of embarrassment and relief. He nodded a thanks and even managed a small smile. I returned it as I dropped the weapon back into its holster and headed back towards the locker room.

“What the hell was that?” Croto asked as he intercepted me leaving the field. Beneath one of his arms was a wide-eyed Rodian female wearing little more than swatch of yellow silk wrapped about her body.

“Just taking care of business.”

“Yeah, we’ll me and Dimples here are going to be doing some of that as well, I’ll see you in the morning,” he said and they both disappeared into the crowd exiting the arena.

The next two days was more of the same, with Croto and I advancing in the tourney. On day three he went up against a seasoned Klatoonian named Junkyard and the dog faced alien put a stun bolt into Croto’s left leg after he had already drawn and fired-and missed. I tried to talk to him afterwards but he was in a surly mood so I didn’t push my luck. He was spending his nights with “dimples” in a flophouse on the outskirts of town so I wasn’t seeing him much at night either.

On day four I found myself as I predicted, in the semifinal round against Avarice Trips. Our duel was early in the morning, not that it mattered in the cool controlled environment of the stadium. Night, day, those concepts lost all meaning when you removed any trace of the planet’s external habitat.

Just over a dozen slingers were left and sitting in the silent locker room I started to contemplate the victory that was within my grasp.

“Hey, good luck out there today,” someone said as I focused on securing the straps of my boots. I looked up and into the deep black eyes of a pale yellow humanoid with a mop of red hair.

Avarice Trips was of average height and carried an easy smile on his face. His trim body was wrapped in a red nylon jumpsuit that advertised the Cherri Academy on both sleeves. Hanging from his left hip was a blaster that, to my surprise, was scuffed and worn from age and use; I guess I expected the sidearm to be as sharp and flawless as his reputation. I realized he was extending his hand and quickly took it.

“Hey! You too! Sorry, I guess I was just in my zone, ya know?”

His smile was infectious and his grip was like shaking air. ‘I know how it is right before a big duel. You’re Ket Adkins. I’m Avarice Trips, mind if I sit?’

Nodding, I moved over and allowed him space on the bench. “Sure, sure, I was just getting ready for...Hey, I really like your jumpsuit,” I said, trying to make small talk and change the topic.

Trips rolled his eyes and jokingly tugged the red fabric. “Cripes, it’s LOUD isn’t it? But Cherri told me if I wore it he would cut me some slack on tuition.”

“No, no, it’s good,” I said, but couldn’t hold my lie and we both shared a healthy laugh together. Despite my own rules I found myself liking this dueling machine that I’d heard so much about.

Whatley had purposefully kept me out of competitions with Avarice, and I was quickly finding out that the expectations I’d built up over the years were nowhere near the reality.

“I just wanted to take a second and say hello. You made quick work of the competition at last years Normando Crevice Tourney, I saw some holo’s...you are damn impressive,” he said, nodding with what I could tell was genuine admiration.

“Thanks. And hey, I’ve heard nothing but great things about you! Whatley says you are probably the best slinger on planet!” I told him. At the mention of Whatley’s name, Trips got an odd look on his face as if I just stepped on his feelings. “I’m sorry, did I say something wrong?” I asked.

Shaking his head, Trips gave me a crooked smile and his jovial eyes went melancholy. “No...it’s just that...” he glanced around and when he was satisfied no one was listening he leaned forward. “I was Whatley’s first student, he took me in as a favor to my parents and I haven’t seen the old man in, man, it’s been years. How is he?”

You could have knocked me over with a lantern bird tail feather. “Uhm... he’s good, you know, keeping things running and all. He never...I never knew you were his first student.”

The younger man shrugged and stared at the ground. “It’s not widely known. He took me in when I was just a child and treated me like his son; I was just too young to appreciate what he was doing for me. Youth and impatience as they say...” Trips trailed off and shook his shoulders, forcing a smile onto his face. “Ancient history. I went my way and he went his...I’m sure it was for the best.”

Not knowing what to say, I listened and nodded. “Hey, he talks about you all the time...nothing but admiration. Maybe I can tell him you said hello and he could give you a comm. Or something.”

That smile reappeared and made it way to his eyes as he clapped me on the shoulder. “Thanks Ket, I would like that, just a chance to say hello, you know? Again, good luck to you, I think you and I are going to put on one hell of a show this morning.”

I smiled and wished him luck. He was gone no more than a minute when Croto dropped beside me on the bench. Smelling of perfume and booze, he seemed sober enough; even without implants I could tell he hadn’t showered in days.

“You reek, we’re gone from the Academy for a few days and you turn into a hutt. What gives?” I asked, trying to breath through my mouth.

“That’s real nice. I came to be your second,” he said rubbing his head.

I snickered and mocked looking around. “Where is Dimples? Is she going to be my third?”

“Funny, look this is a big morning and Whatley wanted me to be there for you...plus,” Croto shrugged. “We’re brothers. This is an important duel and I want to be there for you. I’m not the sentimental type, so thanks for making me come right out and say it.”

Despite our past problems his words hit a chord and I couldn't stop myself from smiling. "Thanks man," I said and slapped him on his knee. In semifinal duels competitors were allowed to have "seconds"-friends who would escort them to the dueling field and handle their preparations.

The ritual was a throwback to the lawless days of Valhallan Falls when duelists needed someone they could trust to handle burial arrangements and make sure their corpse wasn't robbed and desecrated in case of a loss.

Standing, I zipped up my blue leather trousers and tucked my white shirt into the waistband. Croto pulled my gunbelt from the inside of my locker and we both headed towards the corridor.

"It's weird, Trips came up and wished me good luck, right before you showed up," I said, pulling on a black leather vest-an early birthday gift from Whatley.

"Humph, really?" Croto asked. He was trailing behind me with his head dipped low...still getting over a hangover the big goof.

Up ahead the corridor opened up to the arena and I could already hear the low roar of the crowd. "Yeah. He said he was Whatley's first student. I never heard that before, kinda caught me off guard."

From behind Croto snickered. I half turned and kept walking. "What?"

"Same old Ket, always believing what people tell you. That's going to be the end of you, you know," he shifted the holsters to his other shoulder. "Whatley's never even met Trips."

I stopped and turned. "So Trips was lying to me? How the hell do you know?"

Croto drew an arm across his snout removing a thin line of saliva that threatened to drip onto his coveralls. "Trips was playing you brother, didn't Whatley give you the filedoc before you left?"

"Filedoc? On Trips? No...I didn't get anything," confusion and anger were slugging it out in my head to see which emotion was called upon first. "I thought this guy was a mystery, no one was able to get any info out of the Cherri Academy in the six years he'd been there."

Croto gently took my arm and turned me, pushing me on towards the arena. "He was a transfer from an off planet military academy when he was a kid. Cherri recruited him and gave him a free pass as long as he would come and attend his academy. Cherri saw Trip's talent and knew the kid would be a perfect mouthpiece. It's all in the filedoc-I've got a copy back in my gear, not that it will do you any good now. We discussed this for an hour the first night we got here...don't you remember?"

“The only thing I remember was watching the night disappear through the bottom of a lum mug,” I snapped. Feeling like an idiot I bit my lip till I could taste salt and iron in my mouth. Dammit!!!”

Shrugging, Croto slapped the leather of my holsters draped over his shoulder. “No worries partner, he’s just playing some Cherri Academy mind games...they drill that stuff into them from the get-go. You just learned your lesson that hard way-don’t believe everything you are told.”

Continuing to the dueling lane, I spotted Trips and his second, a young Nikto female in a matching jumpsuit who seemed to be wrapping up a pep talk. Trips spotted me and gave a polite nod and smile. I stared vibroblades back at him and raised my arms as Croto strapped my gunbelt on, making sure it fell snug against my body. Trips smile faltered and he slowly turned away from me.

As the announcers made the introductions I closed my eyes and tried to block the waves of anger and rage from my mind. So Trips had tried to play me, had lied to me so I might go easy on him. Well it wasn’t going to work, and I wasn’t going to allow myself to get angry either. This was typical of what I’d heard of these Cherri students...lies, deceit, head games...it figures Trips was the best at it. His fake smile, his easy going attitude, the Whatley story-just one big lie.

“Take your mark!” The judge shouted.

Snapping my eyes open, I focused on Avarice Trip’s face and the cocky smile settled beneath his beedy eyes. I hope he liked eating supercharged gas, cause I was going to put a stun bolt right into his smarmy little mug. Steadying my breathing I imagined a large red dot appearing in the center of his forehead. Normally during competitions I aimed at the chest- it was a larger target and easier to hit. But not this time, this time I made the target a personal one.

Motion occurred to my right and the Sentinel was in my hand firing before I even had time to concentrate on what I was doing. Thirty meters away Trips’ arm was a blur of crimson nylon.

Heat passed so close to my ribs I thought for a moment he scored a hit, while a red bolt crossed the distance between us, slamming into the center of Trip’s face-just centimeters from where I was aiming.

His body remained standing as he jerked to the left, his face appearing to liquefy, spraying superheated gore into the nearby crowd. Screams pierced the air as the corpse of Avarice Trips collapsed to the ground in an unceremonious heap.

A medic sprinted to his side, joined quickly by the famle Nikto who was shouting something unintelligible. I looked down at the Sentinel, now trembling in my hand, to make sure the weapon was set to stun-it was always set to stun...

Blue electricity arced cross my body and pain racked me into a fetal position. I hit the turf as it was repeated, and tried to roll away from the judges who were now jabbing me with stunbatons.

“Stay down you murdering dog!” one screamed as someone planted a boot in the center of my back and slapped a pair of binders on my wrists. I wanted to tell them they were wrong, a mistake had been made, but no words would come out.

That didn't stop them from hitting me with the batons a few more times.

While someone read me my rights I lay on the ground staring into the wide shocked eye of Avarice Trips before it was covered by a thin white tarp.

The gleaming Sentinel IV lay between us off to my right and the last thing I saw before a thin green hand closed around it was the power setting set to “kill,” not “stun.”

I just managed to turn my head up and take in Croto, now sliding the weapon into his waistband and shaking his head. “Whatley always told us to check the piece before we used it,” he crouched down, so his treasonous face was less than a meter away.

“I guess your rage made you forget a lot of what you learned, huh? But, Ket,” he raised his voice so others could hear him, “I never thought you would kill Trips just to make a name for yourself. You're scum,” he spat at me, and before his boot connected with my face I caught the glimpse of his snout curling into the slightest hint of a smirk. An explosion of pain erupted from my face and I bit back the urge to scream before I passed out, blood sputtering from my mouth onto the clean crisp turf.

Dawn was in full effect on Coyn and it hurt to stare directly at the distant snow, now a glaring white strip of light that divided the sky and the rocky crags of the mountains. My juice bottle was empty and I realized that it was well after seven o'clock and Studer was more than slightly late.

Irritated, I stood, intending to track down the Sullustan, when the click of several pairs of boots moving cautiously on the center stairwell perked up my ears. My pistols were in my hands and I was moving before my mind could catch up and form a plan of attack. Crossing the room, I vaulted the bar in a leap and came to land beside the row of deactivated serving droids.

The footsteps ceased and the slightest murmur of conversation licked my ears. I could make out three distinct voices and whoever the leader of the band was shouted, instructing the other two they weren't leaving without me. I wasn't surprised; my laundry list of crimes brought a steady diet of bounty hunters and cops-it was the nature of the lifestyle. I was just wondering what they were after me for. Would it be sector rangers trying to collar me for my crime on Valhallan Falls? I didn't stick around long after my arrest, escaping before they could even get me to a real prison.

Or maybe it was a group of Imperials that tracked me here after I escaped the prison shuttle with Palisades. The possibility existed it was mercs hired by Akelish to take me out for helping to rescue a rebel operative she was holding ransom.

In the end it didn't matter; they would come up here and I would systematically gun them all down like dogs; one thing I could count on was the predictability of hired henchmen. When they work in groups one is the lead dog but the others want to show they can't be intimidated, so everyone jockeys for position and tries to get themselves a piece of the action-reputation is the most valuable currency in the hired thug business.

So when several minutes passed and the thugs hadn't made a move, I started to get curious. After the murmured voices I was sure one of them would be foolish enough to charge up and get shot first. Slowly, I raised my head up and let my eyes crest the top of the bar.

Bright morning sunlight reflecting through the large circular windows to my right bathed the plain wooden tables and chairs in a yellow glow as the approaching monorail hummed along the tracks outside. From the stairwell in the center of the room, something sailed through the air from the stairwell, arcing high into the air and catching light along its round surface.

Small, black and about the size of my fist I recognized the frag grenade before it struck a nearby tabletop and bounced off, hitting the wooden plank floor and rolling unevenly near the bar. I ducked for cover as it exploded, the roar of the shockwave dismantling several chairs into firewood and spraying the back of the bar with deadly shrapnel that reduced the wall of alcohol bottles behind me into an shower of glass and booze.

What I normally would have been able to shake off was amplified by my implants and I dropped to one knee, just barely catching myself before I hit the ground.

Shattered glass bit into my knee and shin as the world swam in front of me, my brain threatening to shut down from the sensory overload of sound and pain. Gritting my teeth, determined to make someone pay for screwing up my morning, I wiped my eyes free of the alcohol spray, and, gripping my pistols with a vengeance, stood, unloading several shots towards the stairwell. Fiery red blaster bolts lanced through the smoke and shafts of sunlight, slamming into the far wall and the banisters of the central steps, splintering wood and setting several small fires that added to the smoke in the room.

Lanes of emerald blaster fire answered my barrage, burning holes through the bar and incinerating bottles of liquor above me.

"Come up here and finish what you started," I growled to myself. The smell of alcohol was making my head swim and I turned to scramble from behind the bar when I heard the click of several blasters directly behind me.

"Drop your weapons on the floor," a metallic voice ordered from behind me. Keeping my weapons poised in front of me, I turned my head just enough to look behind me. Three of the "inactive" droids had me covered with small palm sized blasters, while the sleek blue droid leveled a pair of thick arms at me. Mounted beneath its forearms two wide black blaster barrels locked onto my body, begging for me to move.

"Move a muscle and we'll see if you are as fast as your rep claims you are," it said, it's eyes burning a deep crimson.

Something in me snapped and I spun, the pistol in my right hand spitting lances of hot death into a gold 3PO model to ole' blues right. The first bolt caught the droid in its

circular chestplate while the second severed its head at the neck joint, sending a fountain of yellow sparks erupting skyward.

The scream of blaster fire deafened me, and as the flurry of green energy arced from old' blues blaster pounded me into unconsciousness, I dropped to the ground with the satisfaction of knowing at least one of these bastards would spend the rest of his days in a scrap heap.

I smelled sewage. It didn't hit me all at once, although in some ways I wish it had; instead, it gradually built-the smell-over time. It started out on the periphery of my mind and slowly, gradually, over the period of days, hell, maybe even weeks it just got stronger and stronger.

If it had hit me all at once I could have tried to fight it off, hold my breath, something. But it didn't. It slowly built up, this constant reeking stench as I passed in and out of consciousness. It wasn't until I clamped down on my own tongue and severed the tip that I was able to force enough clarity into my mind so that I could figure out what was going on and try to get a grip on my situation.

My legs and arms were bound to a chair...this much I could tell by the sore stinging that erupted when I tried to move. My chest still throbbed from where ole' Blue shot me point blank- that close even stun blasts tend to leave their mark.

Sitting on that uncomfortable chair, body throbbing from pain and atrophy, I fully realized that something weighed on my head; not heavy mind you, rather something that felt like a helmet, and when I shook my head it had the same physics as a helmet.

Whatever it was I couldn't see and I knew my eyes were open. Sound was also removed. I at least expected to hear running water or some thugs talking back and forth, but the only thing I could make out was my own haggard breathing. I tried screaming once but the noise made my head erupt in a blossom of fresh pain so I didn't try that anymore. Dreams. When sleep came I dreamt of Dad. In some of them he's shooting at me again, and in others he's drinking, and in time his face morphs to the hideously charred visage of Avarice Trips. I don't waste apologies on him-he knew the risk he was taking when he became a slinger-this logic applies to the old man as well as Trips. No credit given, none taken as they say. I hated dreams; foolish things that people tried to read meaning into or worse, tried to make a reality. Follow your dreams we are told as children. Bull-drek. Dreams are fantasies and those knuckle draggers that chase after fantasies generally learn too late that reality has a nasty habit of crushing fantasies into dust.

Someone grabbed my head and a pop-hiss filled my ears as the helmet was pulled away. Light burned into my retinas as I forced my eyes open, quickly shutting them again. Nearby someone coughed and the sound nearly popped my eardrums. Sensory violence assaulted me and I began incoherently screaming and babbling for it to stop. Dropping my head into a food mincer and turning it on high would have brought less pain. Something pierced my thigh and I felt liquid fire once again racing through my body, killing off little bits and pieces of my brain so I could function.

It took longer than usual for me to fall into the “drift” but when I did I managed to stop babbling and open my eyes a crack.

In front of me, clad in an olive suit of Rodian bounty hunting armor so new it actually gleamed, sat my friend, enemy and all things in between: Croto the Crusher.

“Take your time, we don’t want you to do something that is going to jeopardize your health,” he instructed with a smirk. The same smirk he gave me when I lay stunned into submission on Valhallan Falls.

“If I were you I would be worried about my own health, ‘pal’,” I spat at him.

Looking up and around I realized only a naked bulb illuminated this dark hole of despair. Behind him, a rusty fence divided my “cell” from the rest of the room and possibly the only way out. The floor, a mesh of metal bars, was caked with something dark and brown and the walls seemed to pulse with corroded rust and mildew. Beyond the fence two guards, partially obscured by shadow, stood silent in black armor with weapons drawn and aimed at my face-rookies, my chest was a bigger target.

Leaning back, Croto smiled and crossed his legs, tossing and catching the belt pouch that held my medicine into the air; inside the tiny metal vials clinked together. Across his hips the chrome of my Sentinel IV’s, stolen from me so many years back, glinted in the dim fluorescent light.

“See, we can’t have you hurt, because, to be honest, I’m, saving that privilege for myself,” his slimy snout curled into a smile. At his feet a black helmet sat, but and upon further inspection I realized it wasn’t designed like his armor-it was configured in an odd way, and had several narrow protrusions arrayed around various areas-the mouth, the ears....

Tapping it with his boot, Croto chuckled. “You like my toy? I had a friend make it-he was a former Imperial Dungeoneer,” he dropped my medicine to the ground and picked it up, admiring it’s workmanship. “It uses a simple suppression system to block out whatever sense I wish. Sight, sound, smell, taste...I can turn off what I want and isolate one specific sensation, like, smell for example. Just with the twist of a dial.”

He gestured to the room and leaned forward. “I bet it must have been unbearable, you know? Sitting here, with this disgusting SMELL being sucked into your nose every second of every day since you’ve been down here,” he shook his long snout. “I understand this is the room where they used to kill livestock, that’s why the floor is one big grate, easier to hose off the blood when you clean up,” he leaned back and shook his head. “But you know Ket, some smells and stains you just cant ever really get rid of.”

“Yeah, like the one sitting in front of me,” I managed, spitting a wad of phlegm at him. It missed his head and sailed just a centimeter past the flawless surface of his armor. He pretended not to notice.

Snorting in what passed for laughter, he slapped his knee and continued. “Good one partner! Still, I bet by now you are really regretting getting those implants. I mean, I’m flattered that you realized you would never be able to beat me with your own ability. I knew this for years of course, but to go out of your way and have some twitchy, drunk Carosite Doc actually butcher your brain to make you faster? That, that my friend is a high compliment.”

Snorting my own false laughter, I shook my head. “That’s not why I got my senses enhanced.”

“Really, then why?”

“I just didn’t want to miss anything when I shoved my blaster up your fat snout and fried your pea-brain from the inside.”

He didn’t snort laughter at me this time, instead, I could see his body tense and his shoulder muscles stiffen.

“Really? Then I guess you just wasted your credits then,” he snapped back.

“You could have killed me on Greymoore but you didn’t, you leave me alive now and you are going to regret it ‘partner’,” I slurred at him.

He stared at me for a moment, with his head cocked to one side and his large black bulbous eyes giving away no indication of what he was thinking.. One of the many things I hate about Rodians is that you really cant read their expressions. Unless they do something extreme, like curl their stupid snout up in disgust, their emotions are some of the hardest to determine.

“No, no I don’t think so. See Ket,” he set the helmet back on the ground and stood, staring down at me. “I’ve been handed a generous gift. A gift that, you could say, is a once in a lifetime opportunity.” He began strolling around the room, boots clicking against the metal grating.

“The Empire wanted you back on Greymoor unharmed, intact. So to collect the bounty for your sorry hide I had to hold back, I had to tell my boys to go easy on you, and they did.”

Silence filled the room, and somewhere below I could hear rushing water and something splashing about, it’s movement echoing up into my little piece of the world. The heat in the room was unbearable, and sweat rolled from my shaved head in buckets.

“But, just when I thought I would never get to make you pay for treating me like a second class thug, fortune drops you right into my hands again. And now, there is no bounty to collect on you brother. Now I get to do whatever I want to you.”

“Which is?”

He was back in front of me now, his arms crossed like he was afraid the walls would reach out and touch him. “Torture of course. Come on Ket!” Croto twisted his snout at me, “you pride yourself on ‘knowing the drill,’ then surely you know this one,” he sat back down.

“I’m going to torture you, until you beg for me to kill you. Until all of this ‘tough talk’ is reduced to the weeping, begging sobs of a broken man. Then, I’m going to have my doc fix you up, and I’m going to start again. I figure this will go on for at least a month until I get bored, then I’ll just let my boys beat you to death. Or maybe I’ll let some of the in-house scavengers have at you-see the metal plate your chair is sitting on is hinged, in case the butchers who used to work in here needed to dispose of a large carcass that wouldn’t fit through the bars. Maybe when I’m done I’ll gift the wildlife below with a real live twitching buffet.”

Helplessness seized me and I screamed, trying to use my rage to fight my way out of the chair. Stun shocks surged throughout my body from my restraints, racking every muscle until they went limp. I took air in giant gasps, as tears pouring from my eyes; eventually the pain gradually subsided.

“Why? Why not just kill me? Why are you doing this you piece of sludge?” I demanded.

Laughter sputtered from his snout and he shook his head. “Because I’m better than you Ket! Or Lotek, or whatever you are calling yourself these days. I always have been. But you tried to make everyone think otherwise, you tried to convince everyone that some half-assed gutter urchin was better than Croto the-freakin’ Crusher!” he screamed the last, closing the distance to the chair and backhanding me hard across the face.

More pain, this time brutal and sudden and I felt something in my nose shatter. A waterfall of blood poured onto my chest, gliding down the front of my bodysuit and hitting the grate where it began to drip.

Far below something thrashed about in anticipation.

“I’ll get someone to fix that nose of yours,” he said turning away and accepting a stark white towel one of the underlings brought to him. Gently, he wiped my blood from his hand and tossed the item to the ground. “You took my weapons. You took the prettiest student at Whatley’s, you won over every student we taught and convinced them you were the best...you even convinced that old fool Whatley of that, or so he told me right before I shot him in the face.”

“Bas, bastard,” I spat, spraying a mist of saliva and blood towards him. He took a step back so none would reach his armor.

“I guess. It was really funny, when I went back to him and told him about how you killed Trips and all, he actually wept, like a big weak child.”

“Wept...” I muttered under my breath. There isn’t much that surprises me, never has been, but I always thought that Whatley and Croto were working together in my downfall. For some reason, I always thought the old Twi’lek decided to use me to take out Trips-permanently. The news that he was just another victim of Crotos made my stomach churn and I began to dry heave.

“Save it Ket. Showing concern for someone else comes to you about as naturally as piloting a death star. This was all set in motion a long time ago, your capture, your escape, the whole thing, this is just the final act of the sad melodrama that was your life.”

Spitting saliva and bile onto the rusted grating, I looked up through tears and rage.
“What?!?”

“Oh, What? Your big clever mind didn’t figure it out?” he retrieved the helmet and fit it back over my head, forcing it on hard when I tried to resist. Trapped in darkness, with the turn of a dial the inner silence was replaced with his voice.

“I told my new friends you were predictable, we even had a side bet. They bet you would figure out that you were being set up and I bet you were too narrow minded to even contemplate the possibility-looks like they owe me some creds now. But I’m not surprised, they just didn’t get a chance to know you like I did.”

“Who...” my question was cut off by a metal bar he shoved into the helmet’s mouthpiece that forced my mouth open. With a twist he locked it into place and the taste of durasteel filled my mouth, forcing me to pull air through my newly broken nose as my tongue curled back towards my throat.

“My new friends. For the right amount of creds anyone will turn on you like dogs Ket, you’ve said so yourself,” his voice continued in the darkness. “Did you think Vic, Socatoa and the rest were any different?”

Another turn of the dial and the only sound that filled my ears was the screaming I tried to do around the metal bar.

Sometimes, at random, I would get medicine, but not until I had crossed the point of no return and my mind had shut down parts of my brain. They continued torturing me at first with the smells. Beyond the reek of the room, some of Crotos thugs would bring things...dead things...and throw them at me. Already in the stages of decomposition they would slap against me, leaving a slimy trail of blood and excrement before they hit the ground. There, they would lie and rot, and just get worse.
Dry heaving did no good either. Nothing would come out as they injected me with some sort of nutrient supplement when I got my medicine; it kept me alive-but just barely.

Fighting off the sickness, I redirected my mind to other things-like betrayal. Palisades, Socatoa, the rest, all in on it? Why not? At first I thought it was Croto just trying to play head games, but the more I thought about it, with each passing day, as I sit smelling rotting flesh, feces, and filth, that I was turned on by my supposed “friends” made more and more sense.

You see, I knew Croto wasn't smart enough to track me on his own.

I never saw what happened to Socatoa after our capture on Greymoore; he probably escaped and needed creds, needed to get back on his feet. He commed Vic and that scumbag would have suggested they roll over on me in a second, he double crossed Akelish didn't he? He would have no hesitation in turning me over to Croto for a few creds; he claimed he still had credits in the bank from shafting Akelish, but did he? What if he had nothing? I never saw evidence of his phantom bank account and turning me over for a few thou would have helped him set up his little shipping company on Garnib. Hell, he probably even made Croto a partner...

Time lost it's meaning. So inundated with the smell of raw sewage and decomposing flesh, my sense of smell eventually shut down and I smelled nothing, sometimes deliberately trying to snort smells into my nose to see if it even worked anymore. My captors must have realized what was going on. I hadn't seen Croto since our first talk but I could sense his presence nearby. If not for the mouthblock I would have even tried screaming at him to stop, at times even begging for my life, but I couldn't. Pride doesn't mean much when you find yourself holding your breath just to pass out so you don't suffer anymore.

“Calm yourself.”

The voice startled me and I jumped, struggling against my binders that once again stunned me. I tried to respond but couldn't, just mumbled incoherently some more around the durasteel that now carried the flavors of blood and vomit. I froze, waiting for the voice again, thinking I must have imagined it.

“You won't escape this Ket, your destiny was written in blood long ago. You've brought this, all of it, on yourself.” It took me a moment, but I focused and was able to put a face to the voice in my head:

Klux Martin.

The Jedi were known for being able to get in peoples heads and communicate, and now this traitorous scum was inside MY head toying with my thoughts.

<I>Get out of my head you scum!</I> I thought back at him. Silence. He didn't respond and I was sure it was all just my imagination when his snickering cut through my head like an insect rubbing it's legs together.

“I told Vic you would say that. For a man who is alone, beaten and with no hope of survival, you talk tough-right until the end,” he taunted me. “Too bad Vic can’t talk to you himself, but he’s enjoying the perks of working with Croto...see, your old partner sent along a gift for Vic...a beautiful blonde slavegirl named Lemoyne.”

I bit so hard into the durasteel I felt bone crack and the pain exploding from my mouth seized into my brain and the last image burned into my mind's eye was Palisades using my beautiful Lemoyne like a helpless plaything.

Ice water hit me from above and I tried to scream, the cracked chunks of my shattered teeth rubbing against the vile mouth block. Muffled grunts escaped me now, simple, basic animal snarls; I didn't even bother trying to form words. Someone jerked my head forward and as the durasteel block disappeared from my mouth, cool air assaulted my head as the leather collar of the helmet pulled free of my head. For a moment I thought I was back on Garnib, with the freezing drifts of snow blowing across the landscape. My eyes were open but I still couldn't see, and after a moment I realized I was immersed in total darkness. I roared, again, and was met with another cascade of freezing liquid. With the helmet off, the waterfall hit my face and mouth, violently pulling me fully awake as the maddening cold coerced more feral sounds from my throat.

“You were beginning to smell Ket, the boys were sickened by you and wanted to give you a bath,” Croto said from above. Bending my neck upwards was met with a series of snaps and a burst of pain, but I forced myself, staring into the darkness. A ‘click’ was followed by an eruption of pain and white light that forced my eyes shut again. The afterimage burned into my eyes was of Croto looking down through a grate at me, surrounded by several goons with buckets.

“LEMOYNE!” I screamed, spitting shards of shattered teeth and saliva onto the metal grating beneath me. I expected him to begin laughing or taunting or something but he didn't. Instead he remained silent. Flicking my tongue against my teeth I realized at least three on the top were merely crags now, separated by raw nerves and soft gums.

“Did you say something trash?” Croto screamed down. “We were too busy laughing to hear what you said!”

“LEMOYNE! YOU GAVE HER TO HIM! I’M GOING TO RIP YOUR ARMS OFF YOUR PIECE OF TRA...” I screamed skyward. Ice water hit me again and the cold hit my face and mouth, hitting my exposed gums and driving a vibroblade of suffering deep into my brain. Having not had a drink of anything since I'd been captive, I forced my head skyward and tried to swallow the cool liquid. A bitter salty taste locked up my throat and I spit the liquid out, hacking up stomach bile in the process.

“Bad idea Ket. I never said we were giving you a bath with water. I just had the boys take up a collection for you.”

More snickering as the sound of liquid splattering against metal floated down as several goons urinated into another bucket.

Sputtering, I tried to block out the pain and revulsion but my implants were having none of it; the cold shower of waste kept me wide awake while the hardware in my head made me want to die, right now in that crappy chair. I tried to rock back and forth but the chair legs were bolted down; I learned not to struggle, so was forced to sit and suffer, babbling like a lunatic as Croto and his men laughed and shifted tactics, dumping scalding hot water on me. I lasted through the first two dumps before the pain shut my mind down again.

Days? Weeks? Maybe months...how long had I been in that room, living off of pain, insanity and injected nourishment? I lost count, and instead, folded my mind in on itself and tried to block out whatever it was they were doing. Most of the time I was unconscious, voluntarily struggling against the stun binders until I fell into darkness, when I was awake it was because Croto had dreamt up some new game. The worst may have been when they dropped insects into the helmet; they would crawl around and bite, and with my arms bound and my mouth blocked there was little to do but let them wander where they wished, exploring every inch of my scalp and inner ear. Millions of tiny legs, picking along my sweat soaked skin-walking, nibbling, stinging, buzzing...for days...

Klux visited regularly as well. He would pop into my head to tell me how much fun they were having spending the money Croto paid them or how Vic and Lemoyne were really getting along, and how she apparently also had a thing for Wookiees and when she wasn't playing house with Vic she and Socatoa...

I ran out of curses for Klux and instead just listened now, cataloging the different ways I was going to kill him if I ever got the chance. I'd already decided how I was going to kill Socatoa, and Vic...well I had special plans for him too.

At some point, perhaps when I was asleep, someone removed the helmet and I awoke, fully in the grip of the “drift.” Forcing my eyes open, I was aware I wasn't alone, but it took a moment to adjust to the figure leaning against the cells doorframe.

In some religious faiths throughout the galaxy, followers believe that when you are visited by a red-horned being at dark points in your life it is a demon coming to offer salvation. They offer you something you want, something you desire, and in return for it you need only give them your soul for eternity.

I never ascribed much thought or value to those beliefs, but as my eyes adjusted and the figure in front of me cleared, I began to rethink my position on religious superstitions. Dressed in a dark suit that glinted with fine sharp creases, the demon watched me with interest. Large dark eyes sitting beneath a narrow brow played host to two bone-colored

horns that curled from his scalp and pointed skyward. Arms crossed behind his back, he stood motionless, saying nothing as our eyes locked and we stared at one another. Glancing around, I realized there were no guards and the helmet lay unceremoniously discarded on the floor.

“You’ve come to ki-kill me,” I stuttered through shattered teeth and dry cracked lips. No guard bodies, no signs of a firefight, it was like we were the only two beings in the galaxy.

Without speaking he approached, bringing his hands into view. In his right he held a white cloth towel, in the other a black attaché case. Kneeling on the floor in front of me, the demon looked me over with black eyes and gently pressed the cool wet towel against my face, wiping it clear with gentle pressure. Nothing had ever felt so good and if this was how I was going to die I welcomed it. Clean me up and then kill me. Sounds fair.

Unfolding the soiled towel, he began wiping down my leather bodysuit, cleaning the film of waste and dried blood from around my neckline and chest, seemingly unfazed by the stench.

Dropping the cloth to the side, he opened the case and I waited to see a pistol or knife materialize; instead, a clear bottle of water appeared in his hand. Unscrewing the lid, he locked black eyes on me and spoke with a voice that sounded like pure, smooth, sin.

“Mr. Adkins, do not drink too fast or you will become ill. Slow, controlled sips, do you understand?”

I nodded and he placed the bottle gently against my lips. Tilting the bottle, a mouthful of cool clear water filled my mouth and throbbed against the raw nerves. I didn’t mind, and allowed it to slowly snake down my throat. For the first time I realized just how happy the taste of something as plain as water could make me and I began to silently weep. Over the next several minutes he allowed me the rest of the bottle and surprised me further by producing a flavored protein bar and feeding it to me, gently so that it never made contact with my shattered teeth. I never dined at four-star restaurants but I couldn’t imagine them tasting better than that simple flavored nutrition bar. I slowly ground the grains and meal into paste with my rear molars and he allowed me to wash it down with another swallow of water. We sat in silence for what seemed like an eternity while I tried to assemble what was left of my mind. It took some work, but with the benefit of losing myself in “the drift” I was able to put together a cohesive sentence in just minutes.

“What do you want from me? Are you Croto’s doctor? Here to fix me up so he can torture me some more?”

The demon remained silent, meticulously placing the cap back on the bottle and aligning it beside the towel on the ground. “No Mr. Adkins, I’m here to offer you a choice. Your current host is not aware that I am here.”

For the first time in who knows how long I laughed. Of course. “Great. Nothing comes free, huh?”

He was dipping back into his briefcase and stopped, a wide smile stretching across his face. Rows of needle teeth gleamed in the pale dim light of a single bulb. “Nothing ever does,” he said, removing a large hypodermic needle from the briefcase.

Trying to straighten myself up, I set my jaw and prepared myself for his offer. Whatever it was, it would give me a chance to get back at those that put me here and tried to kill me. “So what do you want? My soul?”

Ejecting a small amount of fluid into the air, he refocused his eyes from the tip of the needle to my face. “Your soul? Mr. Adkins, I’m prepared to make you an offer simply because I believe you do NOT have a soul,” he smiled. “Souls are troublesome affairs, prone to making individuals undertake rash and irrational actions.”

Leaning back on his haunches, he held the needle up for me to see. “My offer is this. I can either leave you here, in these pleasant lodgings, to take your chances with Croto, or,” he turned the needle so it caught light along its thin shaft, “I give you your life back, and in exchange you allow me to present to you a mutually beneficial employment opportunity.”

“Mutually Beneficial? To me and who else?”

“My employer, Mr. Adkins. The individual who sent me here to extend the offer.”

I coughed up bit of blood. “So it’s not you then? Who wants me out? Who wants to hire me?”

“That information is not currently available to me. I was simply hired to find you, contact you and make sure you were in a position to either accept or deny the employment opportunity.”

“So you don’t even know who hired you?” I asked. “You’re lying.”

“Perhaps,” he shrugged.

I mentally filed the question away. “Well, you found me alright. How did you get in here?” I asked.

His answer was a look that chilled my spine, and that’s saying quite a bit. “Like you Mr. Adkins, I too have certain abilities.”

“So, what, you are some sort of demon then?”

Smiling, he shook his head. “No Mr. Adkins, I’m worse-I’m an attorney.”

If the torture hadn’t robbed me of my sense of humor I would have laughed. “Whatever. I’m no idiot, I figured Croto would have killed me before now,” I said, drool creeping from the corner of my mouth. “Whats with the needle?”

“It’s a designer microorganism that repairs and stimulates atrophied muscle tissue. In the span of minutes it does what would normally take weeks of rehabilitation. It’s very hard to get and very, very expensive.”

“And you are going to give it to me?” A glimmer of hope sprung inside and I quickly squashed it.

“That decision is up to you Mr. Adkins. Am I?”

Staring at the needle I knew the answer was already made for me. No matter what this demon wanted me to do, I would gladly dive headfirst into my own demise-as long as I was able to get my revenge, as long as I got the chance to make Soctoa and Croto and rest pay for what they did to me. “Do it.”

Sliding the needle into my leg, I could feel the liquid inject into my body and begin its trip through my system. The demon retracted the thin steel shaft and carefully replaced all of the items back into his briefcase. He removed what looked like a pair of industrial strength bolt cutters and, stepping behind me, was followed by a loud “snap!” as the binders that held me into place and repeatedly stunned me into submission clattered to the metal grate.

“You should feel your muscles healing as we speak Mr. Adkins. In ten minutes you should be able to move, in twenty you should be able to function as well as you did before,” the cutters disappeared into the case and a vibroblade appeared. This he triggered on and as the weapon hummed angrily, severed the cord binding my feet to the chair legs; quietly, he placed it carefully on the floor once he was done.

“Your captors are enjoying dinner as we speak. They will return in thirty-four minutes. I recommend you use this time to determine how you will effectively dispatch them and navigate your way to the exit,” he closed the lid to the attaché case and stood, turning towards the door.

“That’s it?” I asked.

“Of course, is there something else?”

“Guess not. Just figured you would follow me out or something, to make sure I didn’t try to get away without honoring our agreement.”

“I’m curious to see if in fact you do make it out Mr. Adkins. Consider it part of the job interview. When you emerge, I’ll be waiting for you, then we can discuss my business proposal,” he gathered his case and turned away, exiting the cell.

“Yeah, who hired you? Who...” I quit speaking when it was evident he wasn’t going to answer. He disappeared into the darkness as quietly as he appeared, and to my surprise I felt, for the first time in weeks, maybe months, my hands ball into a tight fists.

You can tell the level of training of a guard when they are faced with the unknown. Professionals tend to fall into a memorized pattern of behavior drilled into them, interspersed with personal traits and mannerisms specific to themselves. That’s the benefit of experience.

The standard guard will generally follow the same protocols, however, fresh out of military life you won’t see much variance between their methods and what they were trained in the academy.

Then there are my favorites: the novice. Some folks think the novice is more dangerous than anyone because they don’t have a set pattern, and are capable of anything; that at any moment they can disrupt the best laid plans.

Those who think that way have little faith in their own abilities. I love “The Novice Guard” because in addition to being unpredictable, they are usually inept, and at the end of the day are a refreshing change from the norm; used properly they can help one learn to improvise and keep their edge.

The two guards who returned to make sure I was staying put dealt with the unknown in typical boring fashion.

“What the helz happened to de lights?” the largest snarled. From my vantage point hanging directly above, I smiled beneath my soiled mask. The smell that managed to weave through the broken cartilage of my nose didn’t bother me now, and I relished pulling the tight leather over my face with my own hands, breathing deep the sour mildewed scent of despair that weeks of torture squeezed out of my body like a rancid juice.

“I don’t know. Not like it matters, the gimp ain’t gonna notice wit the helmet on and all,” the smaller one said. To these two it was so dark they couldn’t see their hand in front of their face, but for someone with neural sensory implants the faint ambient light coming from a nearby Datapad lit the room up like a floodlight. Something clattered and the voices stopped. I smiled.

“What was that?” the smaller one asked. He was wearing standard armor, hard in all of the right places, soft in the ones that mattered most to me.

“Hang on...it’s round, it feel like...a helmet,” the big one said stooping to the ground. I let loose from the metal mesh I clung to and dropped onto him first, catching the large man off balance. We crashed to the ground in a heap, and I quickly rabbit punched his throat, rolling off of his body as he choked on his own blood and chunks of cartilage. The small guard already had his comm in one hand and was drawing his blaster with the other when I hit him. The first was a chop across his wrist that shattered his bones to powder and knocked the comm to the floor where it clattered and rolled, falling through the durasteel bars and landing in the water far below. Grabbing his other wrist I turned with just enough force to make something snap and reduce him to a quivering sack of poodoo who was already begging for his life.

Slowly, drinking in every whimper and every shudder that licked my ears, I pulled his helmet off and looked down into the terrified eyes of a Neimoidian, his thin noseless face curled into a mask of fear.

“Puh..please...I don’t...”

Gently I put my finger to his lips and silenced him. “Quiet, quiet,” I produced the vibroblade the demon left me and triggered it to life, “I’m not going to lie to you,” I wiped away beads of sweat forming on his forehead with the shimmering blade. He let loose muffled whimpers as the weapon shaved a thin layer of skin off. Finally, in the dark cell his wide red eyes adjusted and focused on the weapons shimmering tip as it traced a line down the center of his face.

“I’m afraid I’m going to have to do some unspeakable things to you.”

It took me the better part of an hour to kill him, and in the end whoever found him would have to spend most of their time pulling what was left of him up through the small holes in the floor.

“Wake up Croto, Cro-Croto,” the concubine said quietly.

Stirring from his slumber, I watched my old partner turn towards the pale white human woman and nuzzle her neck with his snout.

He was bare chested to show off the considerable muscle he’d picked up since adolescence and mumbled something unintelligible to her as he came from his slumber. The concubine, eyes wide with fear, nodded past him in the bed just like I told her. Smart girl...she might actually make it out of this alive. Croto turned and I reached around, grabbing him by his snout and jerking his head towards me. If his black bulbous eyes could have grown any larger they would have, and on cue he tried to raise his arms only to find they were bound together to his waist.

“Hi Croto, I figured with this big trunk of yours you would have smelled me slip in here, but I guess you are used to the trash you bring to bed with you carting a stench,” I said, shoving the barrel of a silver plated Sentinel IV beneath his chin. He snorted something at me that didn’t translate.

“Save it. I figured you would have set yourself in someplace nicer-this is really pretty sad partner,” I motioned to the round small room littered with take out food cartons and empty bottles of booze. Besides the bed, a holoplayer and a case of low grade spice there wasn’t much of interest to speak of besides his armor and the concubine. More than likely this was the bedroom of the slaughterhouse forum. I sat the blaster off to the side and pulled his face close to mine. “I won’t say this twice. Don’t scream, my mind is already scrambled Dazar eggs from your hospitality and besides, I’ll kill you before any of your guards could even get here-the ones still alive that is.”

Slowly I removed my hand from his snout and he snorted and discharged something yellow onto the bedsheets.

“Frell you Adkins! You think you can walk in here and...”

The concubine was already moving, producing a tiny hold out blaster from beneath a pillow and bringing it in line with my head. I wasted no time and in a smooth blur of motion retrieved my own weapon and obliterated her face with a crimson tracer of death. She crumpled like a doll, falling backwards from the bed and landing with an unceremonious thud onto the ground.

“Bastard! She was...”

“She was Narshadda Gutter Trash and deserved what she got,” I said, again sitting the blaster to the side.

“So it’s just you and me, huh Ket? You going to take me outside? You going to let me show you what I’ve always known? What I’ve always said? That I’m better than you?”

I considered blasting the smirk from his face, but discarded the thought.

“No, no I’m not Croto.”

Cocking his head to the side, he leaned away. “Wh-what? I thought you would at least want to prove you were better than me. Aren’t we going to duel?”

From the side of the bed I retrieved a roll of industrial tape and a wad of the concubine’s lingere. This I shoved into his snout before he could protest and quickly wrapped a bundle of tape around it all, securing it tightly amid his muffled screams. Pulling the bloodied vibroblade from my boot, I triggered it to life in front of his eyes, which were growing larger by the second.

“No Croto...just shooting you? Where would the fun in that be? No, I don't have weeks to lay here and torture you...so I have to be more creative,” I placed the humming blade against his throat where it drew a line of blood.

“I had weeks...or has it been months? To decide how I would kill you Croto. At first I was going to make it quick...but the longer it went on, the more and more I wanted to die...the deeper my revenge grew. You should have killed me back on Valhallan Falls partner, you should have remembered what Whatley taught us-finish what you started.”

He tried to scream, tried to say something but I ignored it.

“And when I leave here, I'm going to track down your partners. Socatoa, Palisades, Martin, the whole group. And just like you, they are going to suffer before they die.”

Rhythmically I began to slowly saw away at the bounty hunters neck as green blood pooled beneath his head and the screams intensified.

“I'm curious Croto...do you think I'll cut your head off before you run out of air?”

To my surprise he died of suffocation first...I think....I was enjoying the beheading so much to be honest I never really noticed.

Dropping the remaining guard to the ground like a sack of wet meal, I turned the large circular wheel and forced the blast door open. I wasn't sure what to expect on the other side- a firing squad perhaps? A cityscape filled with the hustle and bustle of pedestrians? I was curious what lay on the other side of the walls I came to know as my personal hell. The last thing I expected was a swamp.

With the last shafts of orange daylight cutting through the high moss covered tapestry, a fine mist hung at ground level as a million insects buzzed and clicked around me, filling the air with an organic hum.

It must have been summer, as the humidity closed around me like a moist fist, squeezing polluted sweat from my pores and into my suit. Twenty meters away, on a patch of cleared grass, a black stretch Repulsor limo hovered above the ground like a glistening steel sarcophagus.

Leaning against the rear panel, the demon took a final drag from a thin deathstick and tossed it to the ground, lazily stamping it out with his polished shoe. For as humid and hazy as the marsh was, not a drop of sweat appeared on his forehead, or threatened to soil his perfect crisp suit.

“It's always a pleasant surprise when your intel turns out to be worth what you paid for it,” he said, smiling a razor smile at me. “I was told you would make it out alive.”

Not moving, I looked around and surveyed the area. Behind me the concrete slaughterhouse Croto kept as a base lay quiet and dark, with no sounds coming from the open blast door. Stenciled across the door in faded red paint were the words “Receiving: Lower Coyn Meat Processing Plant #43.” Creeper vines obscured most of the building, as

if the swamp was slowly reclaiming the property. Off to the corner of the squat facility a line of repulsorbikes and several speeders sat collecting a film of mist and curious insects attracted to the bright paintjobs.

Trees towered high into the sky and far off I could hear the faint rumble of an approaching storm. Somewhere, something was burning and the smell of charred wood carried though the swamp on a faint breeze that ruffled the leaves of a thousand plants.

“Who are you and what is your business proposition?” I asked, eyeballing a sleek red speederbike whose owner recently met an untimely demise.

Smiling the demon gave a small bow. “I am Loose Seifert. The proposition is that you come to work for my employer, as a ‘problem solving consultant’, and in return you will get a retainer fee, salary and whatever assistance you require to deal with any-personal-issues.”

“That’s it?”

He held his hands open. “Of course,” stepping to the side, he opened the limo door and I stared at the darkness within. “Shall we?”

The offer tumbled through my head for a moment. “I’ve got several people I need to kill. Is that going to be a problem?”

“Unlikely. You may be surprised to find that many of those you wish to extract revenge upon are some of the ‘problems’ my employer is hiring you specifically to deal with.

“And who the hell is this employer?”

He crossed his arms and leaned against the open limo door. “Akelish the Hutt.”

“Akelish huh?” I wasn’t as surprised as I should have been.

He continued smiling.

Shrugging, I held my hands out. “Historically, I’ve made some really crappy decisions in who I’ve teamed up with. How about we let fate decide this time.”

Moving on it’s own, my right hand dropped and pulled free the gleaming Sentinel IV blaster I’d used so many years ago to kill Avarice Trips and so many beings since.

Aiming at the center of the demons head I pulled the trigger to see if I was going to add one more to the list.

Click.

Seifert didn’t have time to freeze or scream or drop or any of the things beings think they would do when faced with a professional slinger. By the time the bolt hits you it’s too

late and all you have time to do is die. For the first time since I owned it, the weapon dry-fired, failing to discharge a deadly crimson bolt from its spent power cell. To his credit Seifert didn't even flinch-just kept his narrow dark eyes locked on me the whole time.

"Looks like Akelish has a new employee," I said, returning the weapon to its holster and walking towards the waiting darkness of the limo.

The end