

## Episode V

### Operation: Windfall

Darkness enveloped him. In the distance a Peko Peko called out to its mate. It was soaring, high now, above the treetops. He pulled his attention back to the here and now. His lightsaber hummed in his hands, causing the hair on his knuckles to stand on end. It would be coming soon...any second now...darkness gave way to a vision, muddled and wavering, it would come from...there!

Klux brought his saber in a downward arc to the left, the blue blade slicing through the air with a hiss. Pain exploded in his left shoulder and he staggered back, tripping over a rise in the landing pad and dropping with a thud onto his rear. His saber dropped to the ground beside him, shutting down before it touched the duracrete.

Laughter echoed through the bay and he snatched the blindfold from his eyes. Vic stood about 5 meters away picking another Galdda fruit from the bag. Behind him A'sok howled in amusement and Baal sat cross-legged on the ground watching intently.

"Yeah, that was real funny, you about dislocated my shoulder that time Vic..." Klux said, rubbing the whelp that was rising under his skin.

Vic looked up and took a bite of the ripe red fruit. "Maybe I'm the one that should be wearing the blindfold," he said smiling. Klux shook his head and bent to pick up his saber. It had sustained no damage when it hit the unyielding bay floor, which was a relief...he didn't like having to fix his saber all the time.

As he approached the group, A'sok was just wrapping up his latest anecdote.

"So I had to bunk with these guys in this old cave for like, a few MONTHS...and this is the type of stuff they did...day and night...'Klux you aren't in tune with the force, Klux open your mind to the future but keep it on the present'...I thought I was going to go out of my mind!" A'sok finished, and turned a lopsided grin towards Klux.

Klux was grinning as well. "Right, and we got to listen to you go on and on about how bored you were too, and let me tell you, THAT wasn't irritating. Noooo" he said, dropping onto the boarding ramp of the Skullduggery and taking his tunic off. He placed it at his feet and began to inspect the damage. A red whelp had come up on his shoulder and in two other spots on his chest. Klux ran a light

finger over them, slowly letting the force make it's way through his body and relieving the slight discomfort.

"Hit three times but you took down at least twice that many," Baal said from next to him. The large cat had turned now and was watching Klux with large green eyes.

Klux shrugged. "Yeah, but if they were blaster bolts I would still be Bantha Poodo."

"I can guarantee that the stormies on De'Jer Prime won't be throwing fruit my friends," Jax said, emerging from the side of the Skullduggery and leading a tech crew. He was dressed in a more traditional military uniform now, a pair of jungle khakis and long sleeved tan shirt. The rebel cell leader struck an imposing figure while at the same time appearing slight, and relatively unthreatening. Klux didn't need the force to know there was more to Jax Sheba' than what he allowed to show on the surface.

Vic, still facing towards the entrance of the cavern, tossed the red fruit out of the bay and watched it disappear over the edge, falling somewhere into the dense jungle below. Tierfon Station was located in a small mountain that jutted up from the jungle canopy like an island amidst a green ocean of leaves. The entire planet, which, to Klux's knowledge, had no real name, was primarily forests and mountain ranges...a prefect place for rebels to hide.

"Is this the team that's gonna check the sensor mask?" Vic asked. Klux watched him lick fruit juice from his thumb and casually drop his hand to his sidearm. The sensor mask, as Vic had described it, was a unique piece of technology that would hide the presence of a ship from other ships. Invaluable, Klux thought, but insignificant compared to the power of the force.

"That's correct....we have had some trouble in the past with the mask's calibrations...our techs should fix that problem," Jax said as the team made their way to the boarding ramp.

"Ya wanna move so we can get by chief?" one of the techs asked. A sense of irritation washed over Klux and he pulled his attention from Vic and saw that the man was addressing him. "Uh, yeah, sorry " Klux said standing and grabbing his tunic.

"Hang on!" Vic called to the crew. They stopped and threw a bored look back at him. "Ten spot! Get out here!" Vic yelled towards the open hatch. A moment later Vic's new armorer droid, Ten Spot, shouldered past Klux and hovered out into the bay. "Yes?" his metallic voice crackled and Klux could almost swear the droid cocked his domed head as he spoke.

Vic walked up to him and motioned towards the tech team. "These guys are just going to do some work inside and I didn't want you getting in their way."

The droid hovered Klux realized, just above eye level with Vic said nothing for a moment.

“Oh really?” Ten Spot replied.

A’sok let out a snort of laughter and played it off as a cough. Baal eyed the droid suspiciously and Klux waited for the explosion of obscenities most sentients would spit at a mouthy droid. Vic smiled that, “I’m amused but you are two seconds away from getting shot” smile and put his hand on the droid’s shoulder. The droid looked at the hand and slowly back to Vic.

“Yeah...really” Vic said, continuing to smile. The droid looked around at the others, at Klux, who just shrugged, and back to Vic.

“I could always do some uh...checks...on the ...ship’s hull plating..” the droid stammered. Vic smiled and brightened a bit, allowing just a bit of the smile to reach his eyes this time. “Great idea!” he said and gently pushed the droid off towards the rear of the ship.

Jax suppressed a smile of his own and gestured towards the interior of the base. “If that’s all taken care of we do have a mission briefing gentlemen...and beings.” A’sok fell in next to Vic and began going on about De’jer Prime and where it might be. As Klux pulled his tunic back on Baal stepped in next to him. The pain was gone now and some of the swelling had even receded.

“I do not trust droids,” Baal said in a low voice, which came out almost like a growl. His eyes were still following Ten-Spot who had hovered around the back of the ship. Klux looked up at the 7-foot tall cat and smiled. “They aren’t so bad, Two-E has never given me any trouble.”

Baal pulled his eyes from the droid and looked down at Klux smiling. “Yet,” he said with a toothy grin.

2

The operations area of Tierfon Station was the only room with a holoprojector. As techs and base personnel worked feverishly around the team a red hologram of De’Jer Prime floated just above the projector set into the floor of the circular room. A’sok squinted at some of the topography on the hologram. On the other side Jax stood and was nothing more than a ghostly image with a pointer. A’sok had no idea what planet it was, just another rock with water and a jungle.

“...Will meet up with a team we already have in place there..Vornskr Pack. Your mission objective is to drop the supplies and get the hell out of there..undetected . That’s it. Any questions?” he asked closing the pointer.

To A'sok's right Vic, the "former" adult holoivid star raised his hand.

"What sort of backup can we expect, if any?" Vic asked, crossing his arms. Vic was a likeable sort. A'sok placed him as some sort of military type though. Maybe a former cop. But now he was an outlaw and no better than any other member of the team. A'sok laughed to himself...outlaws doing what outlaws do...all in the name of freedom. It was laughable really, the stock these people put in concepts like "freedom" and "rights". The Empire was a monster, and A'sok doubted this rebellion was going to make much of a difference in the long run.

Jax cocked an eyebrow and stepped around the projector. "Backup? Why would the 'Heroes of Kadon' need backup?" he asked smiling. Vic rolled his eyes and looked sideways at A'sok. "Great" he mouthed and looked back to Jax, "So that means we get dropped into the meat grinder..."

A'sok could care less about the details. Jax went on to murmur something about ion clouds in the system covering the entry vector but A'sok had already pulled out his datapad and was typing away. Hell, they bombed Akelish hadn't they? In her own palace no less! This was a simple supply drop, no big deal. So some ground pounders get some grub and board games to keep them busy...big deal. His fingers played across the keypad and pulled up his last bank transactions.

Credits were the great equalizer...and really, the only thing he cared about.

"A'sok!" his name being snapped at him brought him back to the present. Baal was up and behind him leaning down towards his ear. "What!?" A'sok responded over his shoulder. It was only then that he realized everyone was watching him. "What?" he asked the group.

"Do you have anything you want to add, or ask?" Klux repeated the unheard question. The Jedi was watching A'sok with a look of aggravation. A'sok rolled the question through his mind a moment. "Yeah, I got a question...what does this gig pay?"

Everyone watched him for a beat before Jax spoke up. "Son, what you are doing will be a great help to the Rebellion. Those troops down there need supplies, badly..." Jax didn't finish before Vic spoke up.

"What the hell is wrong with you...ya got anything better going on?" he asked.

The outlaw stared daggers at A'sok. Baal was simply hanging back and watching with interest and the noise and voices in the command center had grown unusually quiet.

"Hey, no big deal, just asking if, you know, we were gonna get any sort of compensation is all," A'sok said, going on the defensive. "You are asking us to

do something cause no one else can..right? I didn't know we were a charitable institution now....”

Jax shook his head, his white ponytail swinging back and forth.. “In addition to the HIGHLY VALUABLE sensor mask upgrade we are providing, we can probably get some sort of payment together...”

He could care less. With what he was making off of his little computer virus he dropped into the banking system back on Xanath 4, he really didn't need the Rebellion's money. He figured inside of a few years he would be able to retire someplace nice...maybe a planet like Baldin, his homeworld. Rolling oceans, beautiful blue water, just like home. Except he would be calling the shots, and not an outcast like he was from his own world.

3

The hyperspace klaxons were going nuts. Vic dropped out of his bunk and raced barefoot towards the cockpit. He was just pulling on his fatigues when he came through the tiny door.

“What's going on?” he screamed. A'sok was in the co-pilots seat fiddling with the sensor mask. Ball was hunched over the controls and staring intently out of the cockpit into the streaking white lines . “Coming out of hyperspace sooner than expected,” he growled and jerked back on the Skull's controls.

The lines disappeared and were replaced with white specks. A'sok hands played over the sensor mask , turning knobs and flipping switches in an attempt to engage it.

“That's it,” he said leaning back...”we should now be invisible.”

Vic felt his stomach drop out when their comm went off. Baal stared at the comm then at A'sok , who had gone completely pale. “We're being hailed A'sok...WE ARE BEING HAILED BY THE IMPERIALS!” he roared, grabbing the controls and preparing to go all out.

As A'sok began feverishly turning dials on the sensor mask, Vic sprinted back down the hall towards the gun turret. His bare feet slapped cold transparasteel as he vaulted for the ladder that ran through the center of the ship. “Klux! We got company!” he screamed and slid down into the ventral turret.

He threw several switches and warming up the guns. Ball was flying insanely, dodging around small asteroids and other debris. He attempted a spin and a bright green lance of laser fire shot past Vic's turret.

“Holy Sithspit!” he exclaimed and brought the gun around to bear. He had no target so eased off of the trigger, searching the blackness with his crosshairs. As

his turret revolved he saw the Skull was heading directly for an ion cloud. Surely Baal was going to skim it, just enough to throw the imperials off of their trail. The Skull plunged directly into the pinkish ion cloud and suddenly alarms sounded throughout the ship. Miniature ion storms lit up the turret and Vic unstrapped and scrambled upwards. Klux was just making his way to the turret. "What's going on?" He asked as Vic shot past.

"Da..uh....get in the turret!" Vic stammered and headed back to the cockpit. Baal was hunched even farther over the controls and peering into the bright pink ion storm. A'sok was staring at the sensors, which now were rendered useless by the storm. "Were going to die," A'sok mumbled and uselessly threw random switches. Vic looked at the large cat fighting against the controls.

"We've got to get out of this Baal..."

"I know Vic..."

"Ion Storms are BAD for starships Baal..."

"I know Vic."

"Having no sensors in an ion storm..."

Baal looked at Vic and he stopped talking. The last thing Baal needed now was for Vic to hassle him.

A snap of energy shot across the bow of the Skull and the ship rocked violently. Vic gripped the sides of the cockpit and A'sok was thrown from his seat and landed at a heap in front of him. A'sok was ok, but stunned. Vic scrambled over him and took up the co-pilots seat.

From behind Vic Ten Spot's voice floated up the corridor. "C-Beez and I will wait in the cargo hold...where it's safe!" his chattery metallic voice exclaimed. Vic stared intently into the pink cloud and suddenly it all went black. The Skull shot out of the ion cloud into clear space and rapidly towards De'Jer Prime. The planet was no bigger than a small moon but was lush and covered with rich green vegetation.

Vic pulled up the topographical display and the cockpit's view port lit up with a green grid overlay. A small red dot appeared in the virtual ravine and Baal piloted the Skull towards that spot on the planet.

A'sok was just getting situated in the sensors station when he spoke up. Vic could hear a sharp intake of breath before he spoke and knew it was bad news. "We've got company, system patrol craft coming up fast on our rear..again" he said flipping several switches. Some of the internal alarms went silent and A'sok started rattling off the damage report. "Sensors seem fried...internal cooling

conduit # 33 is shot..." Vic tuned the rest of it out. nothing to do about it anyway..not now.

Baal leaned in on the controls and the Skull dove towards the planet at an alarming speed. Vic pointed to several places on the map as laser fire slammed into the back of the ship.

"These shields suck..we aren't going to be able to take another hit like that," Vic said, redirecting all available energy to the rear shields and bringing them up to 75%. "Klux! Get your ass in a turret!" he screamed.

Seconds later the Skull rocked as it's dorsal turret spat laser bolts towards the pursuing craft. None struck but it was enough to gain the Skull some distance from the craft. The Ship broke atmosphere and was soon clearing a high mountain range. The small red dot on the heads up began flashing.

"Vic, we are a hundred kilometers from the drop point," Baal said, still jukeing the ship right and left, gaining a meter of distance at a time .

We need a distraction, Vic thought and his eyes wandered around the cabin.

"Thermal Detonator!" he said and sprinted towards his bunk. "Baal...when I tell you, skim the top of that ridge as best you can" he said pointing to a rapidly approaching mountain range, "then dive hard into the ravine and hit the first open spot available...and hug this thing up against some trees...."

Baal threw Vic a "sure pal" look and shook his head. Nonetheless, he did take the Skull in as tight as possible. Vic put a 5 second timer on the Thermal Detonator and tossed it in the escape pod. "Now!" he screamed and jettisoned the pod.

Baal leaned hard on the controls and as the Skull dipped into the valley, a huge explosion erupted behind them, spraying chunks of debris and escape pod shrapnel skyward.

"THE MASK IS UP!!!" A'sok screamed from the sensors station. Still gripping the controls tightly, Baal managed to even out and spotted a clearing a kilometer away. He took the ship in and set it down, using repulsors to nudge it under a decent amount of tree cover.

4

Baal approached Vic who was scrambling around on top of the Skull. The sensor-resistant camo tarp was designed more for a YT-1300 than the Ghtroc and was giving the outlaw some troubles.

“Vic, A’sok and I are going to recon the terrain...we should be back in an hour...maybe more.” Vic barely looked up. “No problem, keep an eye on him and make sure you are back by nightfall. I doubt our little trick totally convinced the Imps.”

A’sok was hunched over his datapad working feverishly as Baal approached. The young hacker didn’t even bother to look up. “Ready?” Baal asked crossing his arms. At first A’sok didn’t respond, but a second later he shut down the datapad and hopped to his feet.

“Let’s go!”

They had been making steady progress despite the dense undergrowth and A’soks lack of experience on jungle planets. Baal was used to it however, experiencing the same element on his home planet of Fibuli. The large cat danced and darted ahead of A’sok, who was trying to disturb the vegetation as little as possible. Every overturned log and tree was a foothold for the large cat and he traversed the terrain with little difficulty.

“Baal! How far out are we going?” A’sok’s voice came through his headset comm.. Somewhere behind him A’sok would still be cutting his way through the undergrowth.

“Another kilometer, no more,” he responded and kept moving. He was at the bottom of a ravine when he spotted the squad of stormtroopers.

They were slightly ahead and moving in the opposite direction. Baal froze and watched as the column of eight, in a staggered pattern made their way towards him. To move quickly would give away his position, so he slowly retreated, never taking his eyes from the enemy.

“Why the hell are these vines so dense..”he heard A’sok grumbling and stole up next to the camouflaged alien. A’sok appeared near human but his face was a pale color and his hair a stark short black cap that sat atop his head. Only his small nose and ears gave him away as not quite human. All of these features were covered in camo paint now, and a pair of startled eyes stared back as Baal emerged from the darkness. . “Quiet...8 stormies...less than a hundred meters away...” A’sok froze.

“Well lets get the hell out of here...”

Baal’s keen sense of hearing picked up crack of imperial boots on underbrush, closer now. H wouldn’t have had any trouble navigating the jungle but A’sok.... “No time, “ he said and grabbed the hacker around the waist. Sinking his claws into the nearest tree he scrambled upwards, relying totally on arm strength and agility. He dropped A’sok into a crook in the tree and sprung to the next tree, some 6 meters away.

He landed without a sound and gathered his flowing gray robes around him. The deep greenish haze caused by the dense jungle canopy made him nearly invisible to the naked eye. But according to Vic, some Imperials had elaborate sensor arrays in their helmets that could detect the slightest movement. He would take no chances and let the force roll over him, calming his body and relaxing his muscles until he was completely relaxed and still.

The squad of stormies were no more than twenty meters away when Baal caught movement out of the corner of his eye. A'sok was slipping. His hands, unable to grip the moist bark had lost their purchase and he was mere seconds away from plunging to the ground. In the same instant Baal made a move to help A'sok. Several things happened at the same time. A dark camouflaged figure emerged from behind A'sok and grabbed him, saving him from a 6 meter drop to the ground. He heard the amplified voice of a stormtrooper exclaim "movement!" And, from somewhere up and behind him, blaster fire erupted from the dark of the jungle.

5

Blaster bolts blew apart the log Vic was using as cover and he scrambled deep into the underbrush, thankful he had re-painted his Terminus armor a flat black.

"Dammit!" he exclaimed and returned fire. Klux was somewhere off to his left still making his way through the brush. He had no idea where Baal and A'sok had gotten to but hoped they weren't anywhere near this carnage. In fact, he was almost sure that he and Klux hadn't been detected until that stormie screamed that he had spotted movement.

As Vic moved up more blaster fire singed the air directly above him. His helmet's imaging system had turned the murky green cast of the jungle to a deep crimson, and he picked up no less than eight signatures out there firing. Then he looked up....peeking directly around the trees he saw A'sok..and someone else....then Baal off to his right...he had no time to process the info and let loose another burst from his lrb.

Suddenly, blaster fire ripped the landscape apart and the ground shook slightly. Trotting like some sort of two legged demon, an AT-ST emerged from behind the stormies, it's heavy metal pads shaking the ground as it advanced.

"Klux! We got a Big Ugly coming this way!" Vic shouted to his left but Klux had advanced and was up against a tree, snapping blaster bolts off towards a group of stormies who were using the walker's legs as cover.

Vic did likewise and watched the stormies scramble farther back. He was about to fire again when Baal gracefully leapt from the tree he was hiding in onto the

leg joint of the AT-ST . “Holy Frag,” was all Vic managed to get out and watched the 7ft tall cat in amazement.

The red glow of the lightsaber blade lit up the murky green dimness of the battlefield and cut into the AT-ST. Sparks erupted from the leg joint as Baal cleaved through it. Hydraulic hoses and wiring opened up easily and sprayed mist and liquid into a noxious cloud. Baal dropped from the leg and landed easily on the ground, rolling away to avoid the toxic shower.

The giant monstrosity teetered back and forth for a moment before falling forward and smashing turret first into a huge ancient tree. The top hatch popped open and the operators scrambled from inside. They had just steadied themselves against the tree when two huge blaster bolts reached out from the darkness and blew them completely off of the walker, flinging their bodies up and off into vegetation. Baal scrambled back towards Vic as some unseen entity begin picking off stormies with a mixture of sniper and small arms fire.

A camouflaged soldier appeared then, several meters away from Klux, who was embroiled in a fierce firefight with two stormies. The soldier turned to assist Klux and was hit, a blaster bolt hitting his leg and sending pieces of armor and flesh flying. He went down in a heap screaming and Vic then noticed the figure next to A’sok quickly descend the tree. Vic ducked his head and charged forward, almost losing his footing on the treacherous grade.

Baal had intercepted A’sok who dropped down and was caught by the cat. The unknown soldier was attending to his partner when he spotted Vic. Klux had fallen back and was still trying to lay down cover fire, but would soon be out of ammo. Stormies were approaching their position and would reach the mysterious camouflaged soldiers in a matter of minutes. Vic slung his LRB and readied his forearm mounted integral line slinger...it would be their only chance. The uninjured soldier saw what Vic was up to and reached his hand out.

Taking aim, Vic fired the line slinger at the duo. It struck the ground directly in front of the soldier and his injured partner and he grabbed it. Vic triggered the wench and the duo shot across and above the harsh vegetation. It was a bumpy and rough ride, but considering the alternative, well worth it. Seconds later Vic helped the soldier with his injured comrade and they retreated back towards the top of the small valley.

Vic had just helped stabilize the soldier with a medpack when Klux appeared beside him. Baal and A’sok scrambled back to the position and fell in next to the group.

“Hey..V..Terminus!! Someone stepped in and took out the rest of...” A’soks voice trailed off when he saw the severity of the soldiers wound. The wounded soldier was out of it, Vic having administered some pain killers and applied some synth-gel to his damaged leg.

"Is the stormie squad taken care of?" Vic/Terminus asked while applying the last of the bandages.

"Yeah, all taken care of...no thanks to you," A female voice came back. Emerging from the underbrush and dressed in camo armor was a stunningly beautiful twi'lek woman, brandishing a A-280 blaster rifle. Her face was covered in a mishmash of camo paint and dirt but it didn't lessen her striking appearance and poise.

"Hi, are you Vornskr Pack?" Klux asked standing, " We're here to deliver..." but was cut off by her icy stare.

She glanced down at her comrade and back "What you did was compromise this mission you dimwits!" she snapped and lunged forward, grabbing Klux by his tunic. "Two months of eating crap rations and living off of insects just so you could come in here and screw it up..." she shook her head. The soldier who attended to the injured one stepped up behind her and pulled her away from the stunned Klux.

"Deuce, take it easy," he said, putting a hand on her shoulder. He turned to the rest of the group. "We tried to jam their comms, that might buy us some time. Our base camp is located up on a ridge about three clicks northeast from here. Given Hobbies condition I would appreciate your help in covering us while we get him up there." he said and turned towards Vic.

Under the camo paint, grit and bitter scowl, Vic recognized the man.

"Perfo!" he said in his metallic Terminus voice and grabbed the man by the shoulder. Staring blankly at Vic, Perfo stepped away and walked towards a grim-face klattoonian who was emerging from the jungle. In the blink of any eye Deuce was between them, shoving her A-280 against Vic's armor.

"Who are you?" She asked, her mouth turning into a snarl. Vic looked at his own gloved hand, still hanging where Perfo's shoulder was and realized that Perfo had no idea Vic had picked up the Terminus persona.. He stared down at the twi'lek , who, for some reason looked very familiar to him...perhaps it was the eyes....

"I'm...I'm...nobody," Vic said, watching Perfo's back This could wait he told himself and turned to make sure his own team was alright.

6

Darkness enveloped him again. This time he could hear her breathing, almost feel her heartbeat. In front of him, somewhere, her lekku slowly slithered around her shoulder and across the rise of her chest..., an erotic and disturbing sound. It

was the last thing he heard. Pain exploded in his jaw and he dropped to the ground on one knee.

“Ugh!” Klux exhaled as the blindfold slipped down around his neck. This time A’sok wasn’t laughing. He had gone head to head with Baal in sparring practice earlier and was pressing a cold compress against his ribs. He now sat with his back to a supply crate in the large mouth of a cavern Vornskr Pack was using as a base, located on the upper half of a small mountain.

“You know, if it helps you can keep your eyes open while I kick your ass,” Deuce said holding a hand out to the prone Jedi. Klux dusted off his pride and smiled up at her. “Better to be beat by someone as attractive as you than by a big blue furball,” he replied.

“Eat Poodo, Klux,” Baal said from his perch on top of a cargo container.

Deuce hauled Klux to his feet and playfully clapped him on the shoulder. “Flattery will get another tooth knocked out, rookie,” she said, a hint of mischief in her eyes. “I will say this, if you guys fly the way you fight it’s no wonder the Imps trailed you all the way here.”

Klux was massaging his jaw and threw a thumb back towards A’sok. “Hey, he’s the screw up, not me. He’s the one who couldn’t find the sensor mask’s “on” switch. Deuce looked over Klux’s shoulder. “Are you serious? Those things are a breeze to operate...what an idiot.”

“Yeah, blame me...thanks a whole friggin lot,” A’sok said and slung the compress towards Klux. It slapped the cavern’s floor and the hacker dropped off and limped towards the back of the cavern.

“I’m glad to see Deuce doesn’t hold a grudge,” Vic said and took another sip of the steaming hot chocolate. Perfo stood next to him on the outcropping of rock above and to the left of the caves entrance. From here they could see down into the mouth of the cave and also into the distance, where a massive thunderstorm was moving towards them.

“She doesn’t, most times,” Perfo replied. His camo paint was gone now, revealing a slightly older and battle hardened soldier than Vic had served with in the Ivory Brigade. “In fact, I think she might even be more forgiving than her brother.”

Taking a step away from the ledge Vic turned and watched the storm. “Who was he?”

“Sadik.”

Vic stopped the steaming mug in mid rise and kept his eyes focused on the storm. "That's his sister? The last time I saw her..." he trailed off and Perfo could tell that his mind was away, back on Vol Kol, perhaps in Lazhan even. He finished his drink off in one gulp and turned back towards Perfo, his face a melancholy mask. "It's been a long time since I heard that name Perfo, a long time since..." but he was unable to choke the words out.

Perfo stepped over and took the cup from his hands. "I know LT, it's been a long time for all of us."

Vic turned back towards the storm and watched it light up the approaching clouds like a glowball in a Nar Shadda nightclub. Occasionally a bright white streak would break from the cloud cover and make it down to the planet.

"Sadik..Rico..Zarius..my family...your family..." Vics voice trailed off. Perfo took his eyes away from his former commanding officer and focused them on the storm. They stood in silence for a time just watching the clouds creep across the night sky.

"They are going to pay Perfo...before I draw my last breath I'm going to see the Empire crumble like a sandcastle," he said, gritting his teeth. Perfo finished his own drink and let the words sink in. When the silence grew uncomfortable he slapped Vic on the back.

"Well LT, you are in luck, because when you guys came in detected, our mission parameters changed. We aren't watching anymore...as of right now, our mission is to go in and deal a blow to the Empire, one that's gonna hurt like hell."

When Vic turned back around he was smiling, in a dangerous way.

A'sok was sitting atop a storage crate working feverishly on his laptop when Deuce approached. He almost had the code written for his new program, one that could potentially unlock and bypass most Imperial database security protocols.

On the crate next to him the Klatoonian lay curled up in a ball. His name was Rontak and apparently he was the sniper responsible for all most of the kills on the battlefield today. It didn't matter to A'sok, he just needed to program in a few more lines of code....

"Whats up?" Deuce asked dropping on the crate next to A'sok. She was carrying two tin field cups full of something black. "Here," she said holding out one of the cups. He took it and felt a shot of pain race up his arm. He almost dropped the cup but her hand was soon under his, stabilizing the drink. He could feel her fingers trembling slightly, but her hand were surprisingly soft and warm.

"It's no problem. I saw Baal hit you pretty hard in the shoulder during the sparring...I'm surprised you can still use it." She said climbing up on the crate with him.

Her armor was gone now and she had washed up after her bout with Klux. She was now clothed in dry green fatigues and a brown tank top that rose with the swell of her chest.

A'sok tried not to notice and focused back on his program. "Yeah, we'll I guess I'm tougher than I look," he said and took a drink. Liquid fire raced down his throat and he almost screamed. He choked it back and cleared his throat, feeling the drink settle in his stomach and turning into a ball of warmth.

Deuce smiled from behind her own cup. "Lazhan Ale...private stash," she said and took another drink.

"Wow...really packs a uh..wallop," A'sok sputtered. After the initial shock however he did feel the warmth spreading through his body. It wasn't an unpleasant feeling. Deuce had leaned back against some crates and was letting her gaze drift. Someone had turned down the small lantern they were using as a light and now the cavern was almost totally dark, illuminated only by a distant glow rod and the occasional flashes of lightning outside.

"Big day tomorrow...think you're ready?" she asked.

A'sok saved his file and shut the lid to the computer, setting it aside. "Yeah, I think so...seems like a good plan...what, with the disguising ourselves as stormies and everything..."

"Yeah. A'sok...about what I said earlier..." The lights were turned low so he could just barely see her but he felt her looking at him. He was tired, this cave was damp and since it had started raining outside various small creatures had scurried into the cave for protection. He was not in the best of moods.

"Look Deuce, I screwed up , I realize that, can accept it even..but the only thing I can do is to get past it and try not to screw up again. I know how important my role is in tomorrows raid...if I don't hack that datacore and get those plans to the experimental shield generator, we are all screwed," he finished, envisioning his nest egg going to waste in some bank somewhere while he finished out his remaining days in an Imperial Garrison's prison.

Next to him Deuce drew closer and he could feel her warmth as her body pressed next to his. Her voice dipped low so the others couldn't hear.

by Tracy Hart & Bob Rodgers

"I know, I just wanted to make sure you realize...I'm sorry." She said her voice trailing off. He realized how long it had been since he had company, someone

just to talk to, about things other than war or the Rebellion or being a fugitive...and he missed it. It was easy to forget sometimes how nice it was just to be normal and not have to worry about life altering missions and Imperials and the rest of it.

He leaned back against the containers stacked behind them she dipped slightly, her shoulders slipping into the crook of his shoulder, her lekku delicately twirling up around his arm and shoulder. They sat in silence watching the rain falling in sheets across the jungle's canopy.

"I was just a teenager when they killed my brother," she almost whispered to herself. Thunder rumbled outside, a deep low sound that rolled across the hills and filled the tiny cave, drowning her out for just a second.

"...thought that when I got old enough, I would get payback. Thought...foolishly, that the Ivory Brigade would always be there. That Sadik would always be there. Some days I would come home from my daily studies on Vol Kol and he would be there, cooking up a large pot of Sen'te'lana and making my mother laugh with stories about how Vic and Zarius would undress Perfo and leave him tied to the courtyard water fountain. Or how Rico would smuggle some Vapine Ran-bats into Vic's locker." Tears were running freely now, causing her soft pale-blue cheeks to glisten in the darkness.

A'sok felt his heart dip into his boots. He fought back tears himself and instead just sat stone still, not wanting to pull Deuce from her memories. She sniffled, quietly, and continued. "When I was old enough I left my books and studies behind and picked up an A-280. Every time I kill an Imperial...it's for Sadik. When Perfo told me earlier that it was Vic hiding under that helmet...I almost shot him. It's...hard...to believe he's innocent. Even harder to forgive him...I've just hated him for so long, blamed him for so long for Sadik's death, for his betrayal, to not hate him..."

Another rolling round of thunder muted the rest. She fell silent, closing her eyes against more tears. A'sok sat staring at her wishing she would keep talking. Tomorrow he would walk into an Imperial garrison, and if he didn't pull off what he was there for...if he didn't help Vornskr Pack retrieve a file of shield generator plans...people would die, just like Deuce's brother. Just like his own people, hundreds of people on his planet Baldin, all because he made a stupid mistake in his youth and an evil Krish warlord took advantage of him.

"I know how it is to lose the ones you care about," he said, quietly. He reached into his pocket and handed her a small towel he used to clean his datapad screen with.

She quietly dabbed at her face and looked up at him. "Yeah...my family died...because of me..." he continued. Emotions he thought were long buried raced back to the surface.

"I thought I was helping...thought I was making credits that would help my family...instead, instead I just led murderers to them and was forced to watch as they died..." He felt Deuce shudder next to him, and not just from the cold chill seeping into the cavern.

"Maybe...what we do, tomorrow, will make a difference. Maybe we can make a difference in someone's life..." she said, her voice trailing off.

They sat watching it rain for the remainder of the night. Never speaking about the past or the present or the mission or their lives. Darkness closed in around them with a cool grip and they pulled closer, relying on each other for warmth.

In the morning, as a grayish dawn crept across the planet, A'sok awoke to find himself alone and crumpled up in a fetal position on the weapons crate. The taste of Lazhan Ale coated his mouth like syrup and as he stretched the morning stiffness out of his arms he spotted Deuce charging up energy cells against the caves far wall.

His eye caught hers and for a moment held it. The hardness in her gaze softened and they stared at each other for several heartbeats. She flashed him a small private smile and went back to recharging the cells.

It was the morning of one of the most important days of his life and he felt great. He hoped the day would end just the same.

"You look good...just like a traveling magician," Vic said. In front of him Baal stood, adorned in a costume of garish silk sashes and trinkets. Deuce stood behind him, as Perfo finished stitching up a seam on her similar brightly colored outfit.

"This isn't going to work and I feel like a fool," Baal snarled.

“Sure it will,” Vic said around a needle he had clutched in his teeth, “the Imps will think you and Deuce are lost entertainers and that was your ship that went down. We’ll ambush the stormie hunting party, get some uniforms and walk into the garrison like it was a Celanon marketplace.”

“What if they imprison us? I do not like the thought of that...”

“They won’t imprison you, they might hold you for some questions, by the time they figure out you are lying your tail off we will be bugging out...at that point you and Deuce just kill your captors and...”

“Kill?” Ball asked.

Vic looked up from the hem of Baal’s baggy purple silk pants. “Baal...these aren’t some swoop scum out for a good time....these are Imperials, it’s very likely that we are going to have to kill a few people on your way out of there.”

Baal wrinkled his nose at the idea but remained silent, crossing his arms in defiance. Deuce, from behind, snickered. “Don’t worry Vic, if the big lug has a problem relieving some Imps of their heads, I’ll take care of it,” she said, smiling evilly.

Perfo stepped back and inspected his handywork. “The Imps normally drop off several creatures and hunt them for a few hours for sport,” he said, adjusting Deuces bright Gold lame’ collar, “We will hit them shortly after they set out...at a small creek they normally use to get ahead of their prey.”

“Perfect....lets get you guys out of these monkey-lizard outfits and get em’ stowed till we need em. We head out in an hour,” Vic said, looking out into the gray, wet De’Jer prime dawn.

Klux hunkered down into the cold wet bush. The temperate climate of De'Jer prime had turned and what was once just a wet muggy morning had turned into a cool wet muggy morning. He gripped the wet Firelance rifle in his hands and calmed his breathing.

Da'Jonys voice drifted to him across the span of time and space. "A Jedi does not let his surroundings control him, rather he controls himself and his surroundings become immaterial," he once said. Klux let his muscles relax and felt a soothing calm come over him.

In front of him, in a swelled creek bed, he could just make out a small hump in the water that was Vic's helmet before it disappeared completely. The team had set up along both sides of the creek for the ambush. Less than a half an hour earlier they had watched the Imperials unload a number of large saurian creatures with remote collars and set them loose in the jungle.

They had arrived at this position and picked ambush spots. Baal on one side of the large creek, Vic, A'sok and Perfo in the creek and he and Deuce on the other side. And Rontak? They had just told him that Rontak would be around...and Klux didn't question it. "The only thing you need to know, is if you hear 'RONTAK' in your headset, drop!" Perfo had told him over breakfast. Klux got ready. They would hit the unit of stormies as they crossed the river.

Several fat raindrops fell from the bush above Klux and slithered down the neck of his camo poncho. He would be surprised if the stormies could even see in this mess. The morning showers had grown worse and a fog had come up, covering

much of the jungle in a misty haze. He began to let his mind wander, thinking about something Da'Jony had said about weather control...

Movement. Directly across and above where Klux sat. He gripped his rifle and noticed ghostly white figures silently making their way down a worn muddy path towards the creek. They were moving slowly, picking their way carefully along the hazardous trail. Klux couldn't see Baal but knew his team mate was somewhere on the other side, waiting for his opportunity.

The stormies must have been talking but the rain drowned out any sounds. Vague gestures and head movements told Klux enough. However... He let his emotion drain and opened himself up to the force. It came slowly, but it was there. The first thing he felt was excitement and apprehension...this from Vic and A'sok in the creek bed. Then, just faintly, he received a feeling from one of the troopers. Bored, tired, but still full of aggression; a random feeling of distrust and anger towards anything and everything.

Klux then realized that he was picking up the surface feelings of other troopers as well. They were out to kill, for no other reason than because it was something to do. Not because they needed food, or because they were in danger. Anger sparked in Klux but he shut it out. The squad was almost to the river now. With grim determination he slowly brought the weapon up into his shoulder and waited.

They had just waded into the creek bed, keeping the rifles at chest level. Soon...very soon...

Vic exploded from the water behind the trooper. With the vibroblade humming in his right hand, he grabbed the startled trooper from behind and brought it slicing down towards the troopers exposed neck.

Then the trooper did two things. Dropped his head so his helmet concealed his neck and brought his rifle up to block the deadly weapon. Vic's forearm clashed against the trooper's and the next thing he knew the trooper was firing his left elbow into his ribs.

This was going to get messy.

Water rushed around A'sok's ears. He had been sitting in wait for nearly 4 minutes and was going to be running out of air soon

He readied the vibroblade in his hand. It was an awkward clumsy weapon that didn't feel totally natural when held. He felt the water close to his stir and realized it was time. Vic should have his trooper down by now. A'sok moved to spring up from the water, but his boot became lodged under a rock and he barely broke the surface.

The trooper directly above him spun. Having turned to fire towards Vic and his teammate, the Imperial was caught off guard and luckily, had his weapon pointed away. As the white clad stormie turned his full attention to A'sok, A'sok lunged with all of his energy and blindly thrust the vibroblade into the back of the trooper's thigh.

White armor split and the blade dove deep, a geyser of red exploding from the wound. The trooper reared back in pain but never dropped his weapon. A'sok, still struggling in the creek had just enough time to cover his face when the trooper jammed the barrel of his rifle into his forehead...

Red flashed brilliantly in the misty dawn. Baal had leapt from where he had been hiding and had dispatched two troopers with a vicious martial arts nerve punch, rendering them unconscious inside of mere seconds. He now stood on the slick trail, watching the drama unfold in the creek bed.

Below him, Vic was entangled in a life and death battle with a stormie. Both were grappling, but the outlaw looked like he was going to prevail...despite several missed attempts to plunge the deadly vibroblade into the soldier's larynx.

A'sok however was another story. He was just coming up and about when the stormie turned on him. Baal was moving before he realized what was happening. The stormie jerked harshly in one direction, his blaster slipping from A'soks wet forehead. Baal could feel Klux pulling the trooper in one direction with the force, a move that had saved A'soks life. A blaster bolt screamed from the barrel and sizzled into the water a mere meter away from it's target. Baal then reached out with the force, jerking the trooper from the water and lifting him skyward.

The startled trooper hung suspended above A'sok for mere seconds. To A'sok it felt like an eternity. Things seemed to slow down; the trooper hanging there, Vic off to his right plunging the vibroblade deep into his targets throat, Klux emerging from the underbrush opposite of him, having shouldered his Firelance and hand reached out towards the suspended trooper.

Blood dripped from the trooper's leg and fell along with the rain from the jungle canopy...both splattered against A'soks face. Then the blaster bolt hit.

It wasn't an ordinary blaster bolt. The rifle it came from was developed on a planet that took extra special pride in their weapons. A series of focusing crystals enhanced its accuracy while never jeopardizing its power. The bolt would be equivalent to several standard blaster bolts. A'sok knew this because it was all Perfo and Vic talked about over rations the night before. It was a bolt from a rifle handled by Rontak, possibly the deadliest sniper in the Rebellion.

Armor exploded and the trooper jerked back, arms flailing out to his side and going limp. A'sok wished it was only armor that rained down on him but it wasn't. Gore fell around him in clumps, great charred pieces of flesh and charred plasteel dropped into the surrounding water in a grisly downpour.

He had just enough presence of mind to dive out of the way as the body splashed heavily into the water, sending up a crimson wave and resurfacing several meters downstream. Silence fell across the creek. Stormtrooper corpses lay everywhere and a sick stench of blood and burned flesh mixed with the morning mist. A'sok thought he was going to be sick.

The orangeish blaster bolt struck the suspended stormie. Baal's eyes flew open and horror gripped him. A wave of pain and anguish hit him in the chest like a physical blow. The seven foot tall cat stepped back and shut his mind out to the silent scream. This wasn't supposed to happen...he had planned the entire scenario in a nanosecond in his mind. The stormie was supposed to be dropped back onto the bank where Baal could have disarmed him and rendered him unconscious, instead he was literally torn apart by a lancing orange bolt of death..

Baal felt sick, having made the stormie nothing more than an available target to the sniper who was hiding out in the woods somewhere. This was not what he was taught. This is not what the Trianni people were; ruthless killers who took

opportunities to make others targets. Not a race who manipulated the force to be nothing more than a weapon of opportunity, a weapon of the dark side.

“Beware the dark feelings Baal...they may well up and overtake you before you can stop them...and once they do, it is few who have ever made it back...” His fathers words from long ago echoed in his ears. He repressed the darkness that threatened to overtake him. “The sniper didn’t know...only did what he was trained to do...I won’t give in to anger...I wont be like him...like Grent...Greta..” he didn’t finish the sentence. He relaxed and opened his eyes and saw that things had resumed in the creek bed.

3

“Tell me if there is any sort of special code or call sign I need when I report back in,” Vic said to the captured stormie.

The tanned black haired man scowled up at the outlaw and spat. “I’ll tell you nothing you piece of trash...”

Vic looked around. Perfo shook his head and shrugged. Baal and Klux had gone back down to the creek bed to clear out any evidence and the rest of the team was busy stripping armor from the corpses they had dragged from the water.

“These stormies are tough, but I bet he will talk if I loosen a few of his teeth,” Deuce said stepping away from her corpse.

“I’ll tell you nothing you blue freak!” the man snarled. “When the rest of my team...”

Vic turned around and drew a blaster pistol from his hip holster. He checked the charge and walked over to the kneeling prisoner. The man didn’t flinch, instead a small smile crossed his lips. “What, you think waving a blaster at me is going to make me talk?”

“No, I don’t,” Vic said and fired two blaster bolts into the mans face.

Everyone stopped. Deuce’s snarl had been replace with a look of surprise. Rontak watched Vic silently; Perfo turned away. Vic holstered the blaster and surveyed the area. “Lets get these bodies stashed and get on with this thing,” he said, reaching down and grabbing the still twitching prisoner by the waistband.

The team picked their way towards the troop transport. Rain fell in sheets, periodically creating small waterfalls that poured through the thick jungle canopy. Vic and Perfo were in front, Klux and A’sok in the rear. All wore stormtrooper armor, with minor cosmetic changes masking the small tears in the throat and rib areas.

Baal and Deuce were in the center of the group, dressed in their garish outfits pieced together from robes and clothing they had stowed on the Skull. The outfits were soaked now however, and both were miserable. It made the ruse all the more convincing.

“We are damn lucky they had disabled their helmet comms or would have the entire garrison down on us,” Perfo said next to Vic.

“Yeah, well, lets just stick to the plan and maybe we’ll be able to walk away from this alive....well, some of us...” Vic replied as they entered the clearing.

The transport sat a hundred meters away in the middle of a soaked clearing. The large Imperial Gray vehicle stood out like a sore thumb amidst the lush green vegetation that covered the jungle ground. As the group neared a squad of stormies appeared from the rear of the vehicle. An officer, sporting a orange shoulder pauldron, stepped up and addressed the group as it approached.

“What’s going on here? We’ve been trying to raise you for over thirty minutes. And where is the rest of your squad?”

Vic finally activated his helmet comm. His voice sounding foreign and strange as it emerged from his helmet. “Comms were down sir, we didn’t want to spook the creatures, that’s when...that’s when they attacked sir...”

The officer jerked his head from Baal and Deuce back to Vic. “What!?!?”

“They attacked sir, the creatures we were hunting today...I don’t know what happened but they came out of nowhere...the control device,” Vic held up the now disabled black box, “was useless. I lost 4 men in the attack sir...there ...there wasn’t much left of them.”

No one said anything for a moment and the officer turned back to the other troopers. “Radio the garrison and let them know we lost some men,” then, turning back to Vic, “And what of these two? What is their story?”

“We came across them earlier in the day sir...I had two men stationed to guard them, they were one of the reasons I was short handed when those creatures attacked. They claim to have crash landed sometime yesterday, part of a traveling magic act.”

The info was almost too much for the officer. “Ok, look, get those prisoners secured on the transport, we are going to pull out of here, get back to the garrison and get a team together to come out and check for remains, and look for their ship,” he said gesturing towards Baal and Deuce.

Without missing a beat Vic nodded. “Yes sir,” he said and gestured the team towards the transport.

The Imperial Garrison loomed into view less than twenty minutes later. A'sok tried not to fidget but the sight of the garrison almost floored the young hacker. He had heard stories about them before, had been on planets with them even, but had never seen one up close. Now that he had, he felt doom creep into his stomach.

A thirty foot-high fence stretched around the complex. This would be charged with deadly electricity he thought. Beyond that a series of watchtowers and catwalks surrounded the building along the perimeter of the fence. The white armor of stormies could be seen walking back and forth. Several stopped and watched the vehicle as it approached.

Moments later they were inside, moving slowly towards the actual garrison. It was imposing to say the least. Over a hundred meters high and bristling with weaponry, it was one of the most intimidating structures A'sok had laid his eyes on.

"Good night..." he whispered, not aware that his voice came out a crackling hiss in the tight troop compartment. He guessed it was Vic's head that swiveled around and just stared for a moment. A'sok realized the slip up and shrugged his shoulders. No one else seemed to notice.

"I hope I don't die today, I hope I don't die today," A'sok mouthed to himself as the transport passed through the heavy blast doors and into the vehicle bay. He looked to Deuce and saw that, while she was obviously cold and miserable, she was ready. Her strength astounded him and he drew some comfort from her resolve.

4

They climbed out into the impeccably clean dull gray of the vehicle bay. Aligned along each of the walls sat all varieties of Imperial transportation. Techs scurried around several speeder bikes while a group of scouts sat off to the side conversing. They had stepped into the dragons mouth, Vic thought, pushing the rising fear out of his gut.

"Request permission to take these...creatures...to the detention block," he said to the stormie officer, trying to inject as much disdain into his voice as he could muster.

"Acknowledged, and report back at once..." but the man was cut off abruptly by the soft purr of a females voice.

"Belay that order Sergeant." The woman said. She was strikingly beautiful, with coal black hair pulled back in a severe ponytail. She wore a black leather jumpsuit with a steel breastplate and a chain mail sash that hung from her belt. A

belt, Vic noticed, that had a lightsaber dangling from it. The white and blue saber hilt slapped easily against her thigh as she approached.

Flanking her was two stormtroopers, but not your standard ground pounding troopers, Vic noticed. Bands of crimson ran across their shoulder pauldrons and he would swear that these stormies were slightly larger than any others in his group.

“Mistress Darkmoon,” the officer replied, almost bowing, “Of course I will belay the order.” Nomi approached Baal and Deuce and stared at them for a long moment. Baal stiffened but tried not to look directly at her. Deuce simply tried to put on what Vic interpreted as an innocent look.

“And what is...this?” she asked still staring up at Baal. Vic had a bad feeling creeping up his spine. If she had a lightsaber then she was a Jedi and if she was a Jedi...

p>

“These are ‘entertainers’, apparently their ship crashed several kilometers away, we have yet to verify that,” the officer began. Nomi let her gaze linger for another moment and turned away, her ponytail swinging tightly around.

“Bring them both to Interrogation Room A-2,” she spat not breaking stride.

“Uh...we were going to take them to the detention block...” Vic heard himself say. Time stopped. Imperial stormies did not speak when not spoken to and they NEVER disputed an order. Vic’s slip had just closed the dragons mouth.

Nomi stopped and turned slowly. Her eyebrow arched upwards and she slowly strode over to Vic. He straightened up and kept his helmet straight, trying not to look her in the eye, even though the tinted eyepieces insured she couldn’t see what he was looking at anyway.

“And you would be...”

“Trooper 1138.”

“And you are in command of this squad?” she asked, gesturing to A’sok, Klux, Perfo and a few others.

“That is correct.”

“And I take it you have completed all of your required Imperial Protocol training?” she hissed.

“Yes.”

She stared at him for a long moment, never blinking. Vic felt sweat trickled from his brow and weave it’s way down the side of his face and along the collar of his bodysuit. Nomi suddenly sank a well-manicured hand into the top of his torso armor and jerked him forward. Her face was pressed almost against his helmet and her breath fogged up his optical lenses as she spoke.

“You obviously haven’t learned well enough! You and your men will report for re-conditioning at once!” she screamed, her ruby lips turning into a snarl. She pushed him off and Vic just barely retained his balance.

With that, she spun and stormed off. The officer tilted his heads towards Vic but didn’t say anything. Baal and Deuce were led off by Nomi’s personal guard while Vic and the rest of the team marched off in the opposite direction.

Ditching the rest of the group was a snap and soon Vic, Perfo, Klux and A’sok were on their own. Perfo led the way, having smuggled a hard copy of the garrison’s layout in with him. They were in a abandoned hallway, lit by dull white lights and void of any sound other than the clacking of their boot heels.

“Ok,” Perfo said turning to the team, “The computer room is at the end of this hallway, then go right. It’s the first door on your right. I’ll stay out here and cover you guys...”

“What about Baal and Deuce?” Vic asked, checking the charge on his blaster rifle.

“We’ll get them on the way out...we are almost through with this operation...we got in here, now we just need A’sok to grab the plans for the experimental shield generator and we are out of here...”

They split up with A’sok taking the lead. Rounding the corner they stood staring down another deserted hallway. To their right was a nondescript gray door set into the wall. A’sok slid a passkey into the slot and the door slid upwards. With a final look over his shoulder to Klux and Vic he walked into the room.

Klux felt something was wrong a mere instant before A'sok entered the room. It was a light feeling of unrest, but it was there. He was about to open his mouth when the siren went off. A'sok had just passed through the doorway and froze. Beyond him two techs were seated at a large computer console with another already making his way towards the door.

"Warning! Intruder Alert! A Non-Human life form has..." the loud metallic voice rang out in the hallway. Klux quickly brought his blaster up to the intercom located directly above the door. One shot took it out, blowing it into sparking chunks.

A'sok was already moving. The tech who had stood facing him had now turned and was about to make for a gunbelt slung over a nearby chair. A'sok brought a blaster pistol from out of nowhere and emptied a blaster bolt into the back of the mans head. The body jerked and fell, collapsing to the ground at the foot of the console.

Vic shot past him and instantly rendered the remaining techs unconscious. A'sok thought he had merely grabbed the men by the neck but apparently he had tapped some sort of nerve and their limp bodies slumped to the ground.

"Klux! Seal the door and keep a look out," Vic snapped. A'sok had already produced his laptop from under his armors chestplate and had jacked into the main system. "This is gonna take a minute," he said as his fingers played across the keyboard. Imperial firewalls and security screens began to appear but A'sok neutralized them just as quickly.

From behind him came Vic's voice, foreign and metallic. "Hurry, I have a feeling that Jedi-woman we ran into wasn't going to offer Baal and Deuce a fruit basket just for showing up."

5

Somewhere behind him Deuce lay subdued. Baal could hear her ragged breathing, coming out now in short gasps. He continued to lay on the gurney, his large bulging arms strapped down by leather restraints. He could easily use the force to break his binds, but curiosity and discipline kept him calm. This Nomi person was an enemy, one he needed to study further before he attacked.

He shut his eyes against the bright overhead lights. The room was sterile and clean, a slight smell of sanitizing foam still lingering in the air. The walls were

duracrete and painted a flat drab white color while the floor was tiled green, a small drain hole set into the center of the floor.

If he stretched his senses he could just pick up the faint hint of Deuce's blood where the interrogation droid had pierced the skin between her fingers. To her credit, she had told them nothing, standing by her story until she temporarily blacked out.

The door to his right slid open and he swiveled his eye towards it. Nomi walked in and motioned for her bodyguards to stand aside. "Well, since we got nothing but lies from your companion, I guess we will see how high your pain threshold is," she said smiling.

Baal watched as she produced a nasty looking vibroblade from her belt and tossed her black cloak over one shoulder.

"You may do what you wish, but I assure you, we are simple entertainers who..."

"Shut up!" she screamed, sounding almost like an angered little child. An angered little child who was trained in the force but not aware of its power, its true power...the light side. He saw her then as her master must have seen her: A spoiled childish brat who possessed enough power to be dangerous but not enough to be a threat. A mere pawn to be moved around a game board.

Baal remained quiet and she slowly began to circle the gurney. "I know what you are, and I know how powerful you think you are..." she began. She was behind him now and he felt her cold leather glove tracing a line across his scalp. "You think you are a Jedi...but...the Jedi...are dead...."

Baal evened his breathing to a slow, consistent rhythm. The others would still be somewhere in the garrison and he had to buy them more time. To attack now would endanger he and Deuce....

"I answer to no one. You may make whatever assumptions you wish.."

Her face appeared from his left side, centimeters away. The thin steel of the vibroblade emerged between them and instantly hummed to life. Baal could feel it's energy causing the hair on his face to rise. Her breath was warm and wormed it's way into his fur, making him feel unclean.

"Oh you will answer to me Balthazar, or you will experience just how painful the dark side can be..."

"Got it!" A'sok said and slapped his laptop shut. Several minutes had passed and Vic was growing more impatient by the second. "You sure?" he asked, heading for the door.

"Positive," A'sok said slipping the thin board up under his chestplate. "Now lets get out and find Deuce and uh...uhh..."

"Baal," Vic said triggering the door. He felt somewhat better, now that they had actually downloaded the schematic, but this wasn't over yet. A'sok always knew something could -and usually did - go wrong.

Klux was outside covering the hall. He spun around, blaster at the ready when Vic and A'sok emerged. Vic sealed the door and they headed back from where they came. Rounding the corner they almost ran into each other. Five

stormtroopers stood in the hallway in front of a generator room motioning up the hall.

“Blast!” Klux snarled and gripped his carbine.

Vic, who was in front of him turned slightly. “Quiet! Lets play this cool...” he hissed, and with a military gait approached the gathering. One of the stormies was gesturing to the group as they approached.

“...sent them to check the hallway. Well? Anything to report?” he said turning to Vic. Vic realized it was Perfo and shook his head. “Negative sir, that hallway is clean.”

“Very well. The leaves only one other place the intruders could have gone,’ Perfo said motioning to the maintenance door. The trooper Perfo had been talking to nodded. “Agreed. Lets split into groups and check out this room.”

All eight entered the room and split into pairs. Vic was coupled with another Stormie, as was Perfo. As the four teams made their way through the cavernous generator room, Vic made a point to lead his partner deep near the core reactor. “I don’t think anyone has...” his partner began but never finished. Vic had plunged his viborblade deep into the base of the mans skull and lightly took his body to the ground. Several drums sat nearby and Vic carefully took the trooper and stuffed him in one, sealing the top.

He quickly returned to the main door and saw another trooper emerge a moment later alone. Vic made a subtle hand gesture the Ivory Brigade used to use when they were doing infiltration jobs. To a civilian it would look like the stormie was picking something from his shoulder, to an Ivory Brigade soldier it meant “all clear”.

The other soldier responded with the same gesture. "We need to get out of here, where are Klux and A'sok?" Perfo asked, approaching Vic. Vic shrugged and was fishing his comm out when two troopers emerged.

"Vic! Come on lets get..." Klux began but Vic held a hand up. "Whoa pal, how did you know it was me?"

Klux smiled and shrugged. "You wouldn't believe me if I told you...now come on those other two stormies are still patrolling back by the cooling coils."

Moving quickly now, all four exited the room and headed back towards the turbo lifts.

"Why don't you tell me Baal....tell me why you resist the dark side!" Nomi spat into his face. His muscles were bulging now and his vision blurred. Anger was quickly consuming him and he fought it back, but just barely.

Nomi's taunts and attacks bored into him. Her arrogance, cynicism and brutality were all products of the dark side and as tangible to him as a blaster or vibroblade. A trickle of blood matted under his eye where she had slowly brought the vibroblade across his muzzle.

"Go eat sith," Baal spat back at her, snarling.

Anger turned what would normally be a beautiful face into a distorted and gruesome mask of rage. "Fine! If you wont talk then I'll just kill your girlfriend, we'll see how much your tongue loosens after that!" she screamed and turned towards Deuce, igniting her lightsaber's crimson blade.

Sorry Vic, Baal thought to himself and summoned all of the strength he could. He forced all negative thoughts from his mind and a calm serenity settled over him. He had no idea the restraints snapped until he heard them. His bright green eyes flashed open and he was up and on the ground, landing a solid kick to the nearest trooper without making so much as a sound.

Nomi had spun and was already screaming orders at the remaining trooper. "Secure him!" was all she managed to get out before Baal landed a shot to the mans solar plexus, crunching armor and dropping the stormie to the ground.

Baal rose up to his full height of 7'plus and stared daggers at Nomi. "You will release us now I think, you dark corrupt child." He went to take a step forward but Nomi switched her lightsaber to her left hand and brought her right hand up in a flash as something on her palm glowed to life. Baal felt his body literally rise from the ground and go crashing into the wall behind him. Wave after wave of pressure slammed against him, keeping him at bay. He fought against it but every movement was a struggle.

"You silly creature, did you really think the only thing I was armed with was a simple lightsaber?" she laughed.

The turbolift doors opened and revealed another eight stormies.

A'sok was behind Vic and just caught himself before he let a string of expletives gush from his mouth. Somewhere, up above them Deuce was fighting for her life. Hell, she might be dead by now, he thought to himself and felt anger rising up like bile in his throat. If she was dead, he was going to paint this entire garrison with Imperial blood...he swore it.

In front of him Vic was running a scam on the newly arrived detail. "...have potential intruders. You four come with us, you four guard these turbolifts," he heard Vic say.

The stormies seemed to buy it and they were once again heading back up the hallway. But what about when they found the bodies Vic and Perfo left in the maintenance room? What if they take them back for debriefing? A'sok's mind reeled at the possibilities and he tightened his grip on his blaster carbine and let the image of Deuce return to his mind. The curve of her face, the way her eyes danced with a mischievous light when she was making a joke. All of these things calmed him and steeled his resolve.

They entered the maintenance room . The detail fanned out and they all now stood shoulder to shoulder facing the maze of pipes and wiring and ventilation ducts that sat roaring in front of them. One of the stormies stepped away from the group and turned. A'sok realized it wasn't one of his team. "I suggest we split up..." he heard the man say. His stomach dropped, but before anyone could object, the two stormies they had lost in the room moments earlier rounded a series of large square steam exchangers.

“Imposters!!!” He heard Vic scream and the outlaw raised his blaster rifle and began unloading. All of the detail took his cue and suddenly, the room was full of red blaster bolts slamming ruthlessly into the two stormies, who never had a chance. Every trooper had fired at least eight shots before they stopped, leaving two burning corpses crumpled at the base of the exchangers.

No one said anything for a moment. Then the stormie who proposed the search looked at Vic, at the corpses and back at Vic. “Who did you say your commanding officer was?” he said.

Vic looked from the corpses to the stormie and towards Klux and A’sok who were standing next to each other.

“Run” he calmly said and broke into a mad sprint for the door. The stormies, caught off guard, did nothing. They were out the door and sprinting down the hall before they heard the first sounds of blaster fire erupt from the room. They rounded the corner into the other 4 troopers, still standing guard at the turbolift.

Vic ran up to the closest and grabbed him by the shoulder. “We’ve got imposters! Come on son lets go!” he screamed and practically threw the trooper into the hallway. The remaining detail, pumped up on adrenaline and looking for action after months of hunting complacent beasts sprinted up the hallway towards the maintenance room.

A’sok, Vic and Klux fell in behind them just in time to see Perfo, without his helmet, come skittering out of the maintenance room, spraying blaster fire from right to left. The 4 stormies were just raising their rifles to fire when Vic and Klux began to fire. A’sok picked his target and unloaded into the trooper, sending several crimson bolts directly into the base of his spine.

“Lets get the hell out of this place!” Perfo screamed, diving over the crumpled corpses and racing past them, headed for the turbolift. A’sok followed suit and soon they were rocketing upwards. Then the base alarms began to wail.

The waves of gravity hammered against Baal mercilessly. He fought to compose his mind but it wasn't working. Mustering every muscle in his body he readied himself for one last attack.

Nomi had closed with him and was just a meter away now. Anger, fury and pleasure contorted her face as Baal crouched towards the ground, seeming to shrink right in front of her.

"It hurt's doesn't it you mindless creature!?!?" she screamed at him.

Then he sprang.

Almost too fast for her to even comprehend, all seven feet of the cat sprang forward, uncoiling his body in one last attempt at freedom. He slashed out with his claws and severed several fingers on her left hand. Blood sprayed from the severed digits and the lightsaber dropped to the ground, shutting down.

"GAHHHH!!!!!!!!!!!" She screamed. Bewilderment and pain exploded on her face and she closed her eyes fighting back waves of nausea. Baal immediately took advantage of the situation and backhanded her to the ground. Nomi dropped unconscious to the tile floor as blood began to seep from her hand towards the drain in small crimson rivers.

Baal was up and over to Deuce in a second. She was just coming around when he unstrapped her.

"Can you move?" he asked. She nodded and he helped her to the ground, grabbing one of the stormies blaster rifles as they went. Then he stopped. Reaching down he scooped up Nomi's lightsaber; it was too small for his large paw, but he felt the darkness that pulsed from within it. A buzzing in the back of his mind snapped him back and began growing louder. Someone was coming close, very close....

“Vic,” Ball muttered, and triggered the door.

A meter away a door suddenly slid open and A’sok almost emptied his blaster into it. Stumbling out was Baal, clutching a lightsaber and Deuce, who looked like she had recently lost a fight with a Rancor, with a blaster rifle tucked into the bloodied silk of her shirt. He and the others sprinted up to them. He grabbed Deuce under the arm and pulled her close. “Are you ok?” he asked, his voice coming from the helmet a mechanical rasp.

Her face twisted in anger and then softened. “Oh, A’sok....yeah, I’m ok...come on, lets get out of here...”

The team was moving quickly and had almost reached the vehicle bay. They encountered little resistance and what they did encounter were merely techies who scurried out of their way. Vic, up ahead, suddenly stopped and turned towards Perfo. A’sok wasn’t sure what they said but Vic grabbed a bag Perfo had been carrying and sprinted off an adjacent hallway.

“Where the hell is he going?” he hissed at Perfo, who continued moving.

Perfo didn’t stop but just yelled back over his shoulder, “you’ll see...heh...”

They reached the vehicle bay and Perfo was already heading towards an Ubrikkian skiff. Several techs and a few scout troopers were in the bay and opened fire, but were no match for Klux, A’sok and Perfo. The repulsor engine roared to life and Perfo brought the large machine up and around. “Get in!” he screamed and the team began to scramble aboard.

Vic appeared from the hallway and sprinted madly for the skiff. As he leapt aboard, A’sok heard a loud roar erupt from somewhere in the garrison. Vic spun around, his face a mask of intensity. “Keep your heads down!” he screamed and the Skiff rocketed from the bay. They had just cleared the blast doors when everything around them began to shake. While everyone else strapped into the skiff, A’sok spun around to see what the commotion was.

Fire and debris exploded from the tie-fighter launch chutes on top of the garrison. The sensor tower, a structure that reached far and above the installation, began to collapse in on itself. The Imperial Garrison was effectively exploding from the inside out. Somewhere in the skiff he heard Vic snickering.

“Remind me to pack more Thermal Wells on the next mission,” the outlaw said.

A'sok was so busy watching the raw carnage he never saw the repulsormine that went off nearby, causing the skiff to jerk violently.

He heard a woman scream...Deuce? The he was airborne. As his body turned he waited for the impact of the wet ground. More than likely his neck would snap and he would die instantly.

It was over quick. Warmth wrapped around him and the next thing he knew he was being hauled back to the skiff. As he soared through the air he realized that Baal had him clutched tightly and the crazy cat was latched to the skiff by a length of bungee cord.

As they Collapsed back into the skiff Perfo spun the machine around and they were heading backwards at a ridiculous speed. Vic was manning a heavy repeating blaster on the back now and blowing a large hole in the death fence.

He had come crashing down on a crate when he landed but Deuce was quickly next to him, pulling a restraining strap around his waist. Something warm and wet dripped down onto his neck and darkness moved along the edges of his vision.

“Lay there , we are gonna be out of here soon,” she said and dipped her head close to his as they shot through the hole in the death fence. When she rose A’sok saw her grit her teeth and fire several rounds over his head. He didn’t need to see to know what was out there, speederbikes. And something else...an unmistakable whine of a single Tie Fighter. It was the last thing A’sok heard before darkness took him.

“We’ve got company! Turn this mother around Perfo!” Vic screamed and let loose with another blast from the HRB. Perfo hit the brakes and jerked the controls, sending the skiff in an angle it wasn’t meant for. Everyone tilted, and Vic’s grip went white on the cannon.

As Perfo straightened out, two speederbikes appeared behind them and sped ahead, closing the gap. Vic let loose with several more bolts, one catching the lead bike and causing it to spin uncontrollably, plunging into a large tree. He was about to draw a bead on another when a large bolt of green death erupted from the jungle canopy and exploded into the foliage just a few meters away.

“HOLY MOTHER!” Vic shouted and he heard the whine of the skiffs repulsors as Perfo jerked the large machine hard to port. Had he not been strapped in Vic would have been slung form the vehicle. Turning, he was about to scream instructions when he saw the last thing he wanted to see in a situation like this.

A large clearing, up ahead, and devoid of any tree cover.

“Frell...” He murmured and turned back to the advancing speederbike. He wasn’t sure if it was luck or maybe one of his Jedi friends giving an assist but the speederbike seemed to slow a bit. Vic was able to pull off another shot and landed it right under the bike’s stabilizer, sending it into a mad spin.

Vic didn’t waste time to see what happened. “We’ve got a tie on us Perfo!” he screamed but his voice was lost in the whine of the skiff’s engine. With nothing

left to loose, Vic snatched his comm, hoping the droids on the 'Skull had been monitoring the secret frequency...

Hell was breaking out all around Klux. Perfo was gripping the controls of the skiff and staring intently ahead. Vic was in the rear, causing as much damage as he possibly could. Deuce was crouched over A'sok, shielding his body and, subsequently, his laptop with her small frame. And now a Tie Fighter was about to bear down on them and blow them from the face of the planet. Calming himself he reached into the stormtrooper uniform he still wore and produced his lightsaber.

Next to him Baal, who had been watching the jungle roar by at over 100km per hour turned a wet muzzle towards Klux. They locked eyes for a moment and the large cat drew up and pulled out Nomi's saber. Klux triggered his to life, it's blue blade snapping alive in his hands. He could feel it's power, it's energy coursing through his hands. Next to him Baal did the same thing, rain smacking and hissing against the glowing red blade.

Both were at one with the force. It flowed between them, almost a tangible thing. Time seemed to slow, and Klux saw things not as material objects, not as crude matter, but as living energy, as a life force that existed not only in the skiff but everywhere, all at once...he could feel it and, through his mind, could almost...almost control it.

The skiff broke into the clearing and the Tie Fighter was waiting, clearing the jungle's roof and bearing down on them. Two large bolts of light lanced from it towards Baal and Klux. Klux was not worried. Baal's life force was glowing as brightly as his and, in one smooth motion the two Jedi brought their lightsabers up and together at the same time, crossing them.

One green bolt exploded into the ground next to the skiff. The other lanced directly at the point where the two glowing lightsabers converged. The bolt hit

and sparks exploded into the skiff; The bolt, repelled by the power of the Jedi, shot off harmlessly into space and away from the skiff.

“Crap...” Vic managed. Both of the Jedi had been knocked back into the skiff but they were still very much alive. Vic comm barked to life in his hands.

“Hello! Hello!” Ten Spots voice crackled across. The tie fighter had dipped and pulled up and was in a roll, heading back around for another pass.

“Ten Spot! Draw a bead on our location and..”

“Uh, there is someone here...”

Vic stopped, confused. “What?” he screamed, covering his ear and keeping an eye on the Tie Fighter. The edge of the clearing was racing towards them, a sheer drop off several thousand meters followed.

“He wants me to tell you something...”

“What? Who? What does he want?” Vic screamed, wondering who had infiltrated the ship... Imperials? Pirates?

“He said to tell you...what?...Oh, RONTAK!”

Vic instinctively dropped to the floor of the skiff upon hearing the code word.

Suddenly, in front of them, the Skullduggery rose into view like a phoenix. The Klatoonian was strapped to the loading ramp and opened fire with his sniper rifle,

raining bolts of hot death towards the pursuing Tie. The pilot was not nearly as good a pilot as Rontak was a sniper and took two damaging shots to his starfighter before peeling off and retreating.

Perfo swung the skiff around and brought it up into the cargo bay as somewhere in the ship droids worked manically to shut all of the access ports. Seconds later the ship leapt skyward and was gone.

## Epilogue

Darkness enveloped him. Somewhere, far away a dorger pig muzzled its way through some undergrowth. Calm lay across him like a gentle unseen hand and he wondered if he had ever felt such peace.

The calm was disturbed. Before it even happened, before the agent of chaos was even set into motion his mind and body were moving in synch. The Galdda fruit reached him at the same time he brought his weapon up and his humming blue blade cleaved the red orb in half, then quarters sending four pieces sizzling to each side of him.

In less time it takes to blink Klux had closed down the saber and shot a hand out, snatching one of the small slices as it whirled in the air. Popping the warm delicious fruit slice into his mouth he took off his blindfold and smiled widely at Vic and Baal who were watching him with a mixture of interest and amazement.

“Nice pile Klux, but I’m not cleaning it up,” Baal said grinning. All around Klux charred slices of fruit lay. Not one of the Galdda fruit remained intact.

“No need for any of us to.” As he approached Vic, an invisible wave lifted all of the fruit slices and gently dropped them over the landing pad and into the jungle below.

“Neat trick, ya know, we could have made a pie,” Vic said, tossing one of the fruit into the air towards Baal who caught it between his large teeth and snapped it in half, grinning. Klux latched his weapon onto his belt and all headed for the Tierfon interior. “True, but there are easier ways to roast a Galdaa,” he replied slapping them both on the back.

“Yeah, just like there is more than one way to skin a...” he stopped and smiled at Baal. “Nevermind.” They all burst into laughter that carried out into the quiet Tierfon evening.

Dusk crept across the planet and A’sok watched with renewed interest. Sitting atop a large outcropping of rock above Tierfon Station’s landing bay, he watched as clouds rolled slowly overhead and the sky turn to a deep pink. Somewhere below him he heard his partners laughing.

He smelled her before he saw her. A faint scent of berries and cream floated to him from behind. Deuce dropped next to him and didn’t say anything. They both just sat in comfortable silence watching the sky, much like they did just a few days before on De’Jer Prime. Seemed a lot longer now though, thought A’sok. But at least the view was more pleasant, and the circumstances.

“It’s really beautiful right before evening,” she said in a soft voice. She was out of her armor now and dressed in a loose fitting green cotton sundress. Her aquamarine headtails curled easily across her shoulders and she wore soft nerfhide moccasins.

A’sok shrugged. “There are more beautiful things on this planet I think,” he said, flashing her a small smile.

Deuce snickered. Not a giggle, not a girlish titter that one might expect, but the kind of sound a woman made; a woman who had seen hardships, and would be called upon to do things other beings might not have the stomach for. Deadly things. The kind of things that stole away one innocence. Her smile faded and she turned to him.

“A’sok, back on De’Jer, I hope you didn’t think I was using my...past...to guilt you or anything. I mean, that night, it was just...I hadn’t really talked to anyone in such a long time... and...”

He put his hand on top of hers. Her skin was soft and surprisingly warm. "Deuce, you didn't do anything but clear things up for a very confused hacker," he said, turning fully to her. "When I set out on this mission, it was to see how much the Rebellion was willing to cough up for my skills. It was almost like a game some mindless kid would play. Now, well...now I see that there are more important things in this universe than a stack of credits. You helped me to see that."

She smiled and leaned next to him. Her body, strong and muscular, now seemed soft and pliant, conforming to the contours of his body. The quiet that wrapped around them was as comfortable as the climate and soon the sky had turned to a dark crimson. A thin strip of indigo creeping across the planet appeared on the distant horizon.

"I know you can't tell me what it was I downloaded," he finally said, his mind wandering back to De'Jer prime momentarily. "I know it was some sort of schematic for an experimental shield generator...saw that much at the garrison..."

"A'sok, I..."

"It's cool. Better I don't know actually. I just hope that they go to help someone. I hope the Rebellion uses it for some good and it just doesn't get lost in some folder on a desk somewhere.."

"They don't tell us much," she said, looking up to him. The evening had turned a bit cooler and he could feel her tremble slightly under the sundress. "I asked Jax and he said the plans had something to do with a moon called "Endor" but couldn't elaborate."

"Yeah, I wouldn't expect any less from Jax," he said laughing. He swallowed hard and tried to ready himself for what he knew he had to say.

“Deuce, I know you won’t leave Vornskr Pack...they are like your family, and I would never even ask that of you. I know that given our lives, things between us...”

She pulled back slightly, “A’sok , don’t....”

“Hey, hey,” he said pulling her back to him. She faced him now and he could see tears welling up in the corners of her lavender eyes . “Look, it’s ok. It’s the life we are in, it just doesn’t make room for...well, hopeless romantics I guess,” he said, giving her a crooked smile. “Vic mentioned that we were going to be here for a few more days, then we were heading back to Garnib...”

Deuce drew a thumb under her eyes and sniffled quietly. “Vornskr Pack is leaving In a few days too...we just, I wish there were more time... I’ve just only now realized how much I’ve stopped living, and you...you changed that. You’ve given me something to live for, something more than just pointless revenge...”

A’sok pulled her close, wrapping his arms around her aquamarine shoulders. “There’s never enough time Deuce. The only thing people like us can do is make time for the important things. And you’ve become more important to me than anything.”

She melted next to him and laced her arms around his midsection. He held her close and they watched the sky give up it’s battle with the cloud of nightfall that marched across the planet. Stars appeared slowly, and soon millions lit up the black sky. The Rebellion, De’Jer Prime and the Empire were now just faint memories as they lay among the tall grass and stared skyward.

There will always be light in darkness, A’sok thought to himself as he gathered Deuce into his arms and watched the stars shimmer above. Sometimes, you just have to look for it.

