

## Episode VI: The Askala Contract

Vic had to fight back the urge to rip at his face. It stung in several places and in others it was just a constant itch. He had been forced to apply the makeup quickly, transforming himself from an intergalactic outlaw to respected Garnib businessman, Rodbo Valance.

The itching subsided a moment later and he cleared his throat. He looked down the prosthetic nose and pretended to peruse the applications hovering just inches above his desk. The applicants on the other side of the desk couldn't see the forms of course; that was one of the beauties of his "CorporateShark 9000 holodisplay desk".

"Says that you worked out of Corellia for a while and served on several shipping vessels," he said in a deep voice to the human. The man opposite him was dressed in a pair of cargo trousers and an unusually bright floral shirt. He was deeply tanned and had a muss of white hair that sprang from his head. Vic could tell the man had seen some action. He sported a scar that ran along the right side of his face, ending right above an easy going smile.

"Well, yes, thats right. On several vessels, says so right there on the, uh...application. And I'll tell you sir, it would please me to no end to work for such a fine company as uh..." he stopped and looked around. "Jaded Ivory uh...Corp..uh.."

"Enterprises," Vic inserted.

"Yes! I was about to say Enterprises. You guys are the talk of the town in the spaceport," he said and leaned back in the lush golden chair, crossing his arms and grinning widely.

Vic nodded. "Well thank you for those kind words," he pretended to scan the hovering application, "Kalron." Vic then turned his attention to the other applicant, a stout Ubese, clad completely in armor and helmet. His breathing came out in a constant mechanical hiss and Vic studied him a moment. "And you would be..."

"Vanas."

The voice was like screeching metal. The modulator and breath mask Vanas wore caused his voice to come out as an unpleasant metallic sound. Vic pretended to study the application. "Right...Vanas, you don't list your last place of employment here Vanas, looks like a gap of several months...did we have some trouble?"

The stocky candidate tensed visibly and cocked his head to the side slightly. "Vanas does not cause trouble. Vanas simply did not feel that listing short lived odd jobs for various individuals would be an accurate reflection of his work ethic or nature."

Vic stared at the Ubese. He had little exposure to their race, and knew little about them. He seemed competent and Vic almost always trusted his instincts about people. Almost. He nodded and shut down the holoprojector. Crossing his hands behind his head he leaned back into the chair's deep, rich leather. His office smelled of burning incense, a rare Vol Kol fruit blend that reminded him of home; he breathed it in, letting his gaze wander to the large floor to ceiling window off to his right. The harsh white landscape of Garnib greeted him and his eyes squinted slightly.

"We don't tolerate troublemakers here at JIE. We are an honest business and we pay our employees well. We have various incentive packages for good pilot teams and the sky is the limit as far as advancement," he stopped, pulling himself from the chair.

Slowly he walked to the window and looked out, turning slightly away from the duo. He quickly dug a finger into the makeup around his neck. It had begun driving him insane just a moment before. The hells of having to conceal your identity, he thought to himself. Proctor would have laughed...the old man had schooled Vic in the ways of identity concealment several years back, on the streets of Lazhan.

His face was pulled into a comfortable grin as he turned back around. Smoothing the jacket of his tailored forest green business suit, he strolled over to the front of the desk and leaned against it, crossing his arms. "I think you fellows are exactly what we are looking for. You have the savvy and experience necessary to pull it off as a piloting team. Welcome aboard."

"Excellent!" Kalron said hopping to his feet. Vanas followed and Vic shook their hands. Kalron stopped suddenly and peered at Vic. Something was wrong. The hair on Vic's neck rose slightly and he steadied himself. If this spacer had recognized him....

"Ya know Mr. Valance...you look familiar..like..like I've seen you somewhere before."

Vic gave the man a half-hearted grin and chuckled. "I get that a lot, it's the hairstyle," he said slapping the other man on the back and steering him towards

the door, "Now, if you gentlemen will see Cylon at the front desk, he will show you to your quarters and make sure you are hustling cargo by the end of the day."

Vanas nodded to Vic. "Vanas thanks Mr.Valance," he said in that raspy almost chattering voice and walked away with Kalron in tow. The white haired pilot stole one more quizzical look at Vic and they were both out the door.

Vic had just dropped back into the chair when A'sok and Baal barged through the door.

"You are out of your mind! Those droid watchdogs are doing a fine job! You are talking about dropping another several thousand..." A'sok was yammering as they crossed the lush forest green carpet.

"And you do not understand that every time we unload crystals here it is a security risk. There are beings..."

Vic's head was about to explode. "Guys! Guys! Cripes, can you just hold it down? I'm about ready to shoot you both." A'sok lightened a bit but Baal kept that stoic look on his face. Both dropped into the seats vacated by Kalron and Vanas.

"Heya Vic. Furball here wants to buy more droid dogs to protect the place. I told him it would be a waste of creds." The young man said, throwing his arms over the back of the chair. "And he doesn't even LIKE droids!"

"As Director of Security for this company I..." Baal began but Vic intervened. "Guys, come on, it's not a big deal, let's talk about it later ok?" Vic stood and crossed to the wetbar on the opposite end of the room. "Oh, and it's 'Rodbo' when I'm in this," he gestured to his face, "crap...ok?"

"Whatever you say Boss," A'sok said, leaning over and triggering the desk's holoivid. Applications appeared again in the air and A'sok turned the projector so he could read them. "Hey! Are these the apps for those two guys we passed? Man that white haired guy acts goofy! Like he just ran into his all time favorite shockball hero."

Vic returned to the desk and handed A'sok a tumbler of Frostberry Brandy and Baal a bottle of Garnib Glacier Water. He had fixed himself an "Ivory Dream," a mixed drink he learned to make on his home planet that consisted of cream, alcohol and various berries.

"Yeah, well...we can't all be as smooth with the ladies as you are pal," he said and grinned, taking a sip of the milky concoction. A'sok blushed and hid his smile by taking a drink of the brandy.

The office door silently swung open again and Klux strolled in. He was wearing a deep rich blue tunic and knee-high black leather boots. He almost seemed to float in the room.

“Klux...grab a drink,” Vic said gesturing to the bar. The Jedi nodded and held his hand up. “No thanks Rodbo, I’m fasting right now.”

“Fasting? For what? And why Now? Did you not see that suh-weet rack of Dewback ribs that got delivered just the other day?” A’sok asked looking over his shoulder at Klux who was hovering behind them.

“A Jedi does not let material satisfaction influence...”

“Oh whatever man!” A’sok said rolling his eyes and waving the Jedi off. Klux’s passive face turned agitated and he shot a hand out, slapping A’sok in the back of the head. The young hacker jumped and spilled a bit of brandy on his red silk over-robe.

“Hey! Watch it man! There’s a beverage here!” A’sok said, grabbing a loose hem of Baal’s robe and patting at the stain. Baal jerked his clothing back and snarled a mouthful of fangs at A’sok.

“Hey, are you three done clowning around?” Vic asked. “I called you guys in for a reason, come on,” he said standing and heading for the circular recessed grav couch and holoprojector that was set into the office floor. As the others got comfortable Vic produced a holodisk from the breast pocket of his jacket and popped it into the holoprojector.

The lights in the office automatically dimmed and the holo jumped to life. A beautiful woman, no older than twenty-six appeared and began to turn, suspended in the air. As she rotated Vic could tell she was well off...maybe royalty. Sculpted blonde hair framed her milky white face and makeup did a good job of hiding any other imperfection.

She was dressed in a blue floor length gown that would have been in style maybe 2 seasons ago. Vic had seen her type before, the kind of girl that can cause a whole shipload of trouble if you aren’t careful around her.

“This message is for Terminus the Hunter. Greetings! I am The Assembler” a voice began. The image of the young woman decreased in size and several lingual interpretations began scrolling underneath her. “It has been some time since we have worked together but I have been told that you are taking jobs once again...”

A’sok turned towards Vic and whispered, “You worked with this guy before?”

Vic eyes were still on the young woman. “No. Terminus did...the real Terminus apparently. Oh, and it’s no “guy” he said grinning. The voiceover continued:

“This is the Princess Askala of the House Mecetti-in the Tapani Sector. Your mission is simple. Find her and return her to me. There are interested parties that are willing to pay good money for her return. You are reputed to be one of the best in the business, which is why I’m contacting you. Any questions can be forwarded through the drop location found on this disk.”

The audio cut out but the image of the young girl continued to turn. Vic hit a key on the remote and her face suddenly replaced her body. She stared impassively, her mouth turned up in a polite smile...a smile that didn’t even bother to reach her brilliant blue eyes. Not a hair was out of place and Vic was hard pressed to find any blemish or imperfection.

“Well, I bet she doesn’t have any trouble getting dates,” Vic said finishing his drink. Klux looked bored and A’sok was still studying the pic. “So,” he heard Baal begin from across the grav couch, “you are now a kidnapper?”

“I prefer the term ‘contracted locator’” Vic said. He wasn’t particularly thrilled about the job but he had to re-establish some of his underworld contacts and this was one way to do that; After he had bombed Akelish’s palace he had unwittingly severed many ties.

“Anyway,” he said gesturing towards the hovering profile, “It seems like an easy snatch n’ bag job” the info under the womans face continued to scroll...listing itineraries and departure times for several cruise liners. “Say’s here she is supposed to be on an extended cruise. We hop on board at one of the ports, grab her, drug her, and make our way off the ship in a lifeboat...we’ll leave the Skull’ hovering in space and just jump to it’s coordinates and bang! Mission accomplished.”

Klux sat back stroking his goatee. “We?” “Sure...’We’ ...that is, unless you would rather sit around here going stir crazy,” Vic said. “Of course,” he added, “there is also this little part...” He hit the remote again and the face of an arachnid species sprung in place of the Countess.

“Gah! What the hell is that!?!” A’sok asked, practically crawling out of his skin.

Vic nodded with his glass. “That...is Kud’ar,” he said and the dark bulbous face began to chitter. “Oh...anddd Terminussss. I thought you should know that there are other factions after the Countess. Namely a being that goes by the name of Crotoooo the Crusherrrr...”

Klux leaned forward. “Croto?” The image continued to speak. “...Apparently his arrangement is not for a “live” capture thouuugh. Thouuught you might be interested in knowing that...” And the image disappeared, once again reverting to the beautiful young woman.

“Well, ya know I’m in Boss-Man,” A’sok said, collecting himself. He had produced a datapad and was already jotting notes and ideas down. “And if it is Croto, we can do the galaxy a favor and vape him,” the hacker said without looking up.

“Yeah...I got me a nice score to settle,” Vic murmured.

Baal and Klux exchanged glances. “I’ll go along Rodbo, but just to make sure no harm comes to the girl,” Klux said. Baal nodded in agreement. “Yes, I too will go. Our missions tend to see a lot of “innocents” get harmed. If this Croto is as dangerous as you say I think you will need our help,” the large cat said, stroking his silver goatee. “And Vic,” he added, casting his large green eyes towards the outlaw, “ I do not think this will be as easy as you think.”

Watching the beautiful face hovering above them in the dark, Vic nodded in agreement. “I have a feeling you are right Baal...I just hope you aren’t.”

2

“These clothes make me....” Baal began, but was cut off.

“Uncomfortable, right, I’ve heard it before pal,” Vic said from in front of him. They had landed on the planet Tresidiss a few days earlier and had dropped several thousand credits on a new wardrobe. A frivolous waste of money, but necessary to complete the ruse of a travelling aristocrat, Baal thought.

“Yes, uncomfortable.” Baal snarled and looked around. The spaceport was packed with passengers waiting to board the shuttle that would take them to the pleasure yacht, Lady Mindor. Beings of all size, shape and color stood, surrounded by their entourage.

Wealth literally dripped from their hands. Throughout the spaceport large grey aliens called Herglics kept people moving. The planet was ruled by Herglic gangsters, but, according to what Vic had told him, the Herglics were yet another race who didn’t mind paying to keep the Empire off out of their affairs.

“Now remember,” Vic was addressing him, eyes darting behind dark glasses, scanning the crowd, “You are supposed to be my servant. And according to the brochure, you will be restricted to the lower decks..”

“That figures,” Baal snarled under his breath.

“Yeah, well, just don’t go doing anything crazy like whipping out your lightsaber and renovating the luggage area.”

"I'll do my best, but I make no promises," he replied. Anger welled up in Baal as he cast his gaze across the terminal. The wealthy were taking immense pleasure in insulting and degrading their servants, causing waves of depression and sadness to wash over him.

"It will be good to see the Empire fall one day," he said aloud. A sharp jab to the ribs brought him back. Klux was staring at him and Vic was already leaning in close to him.

"Uh, you might want to curb those remarks pal, most of these people are VERY wealthy because of the Empire...not to mention," he said, nodding towards a group of well dressed older men, "that batch of stuff-shirts appear to be Imperial advisors."

Baal nodded, keeping his eyes on the group from Corsucant. It was going to be a long and tiring trip.

The baggage checker was tired. Vic could tell by the slump in his shoulders and the weary look he gave the other handlers as he checked off suitcase after suitcase on a datapad. Winding his way through the crowd with Baal behind him, Vic subtly grasped the man by his elbow and guided him aside.

"Hey," the man began to protest, but Vic cut him off.

"How ya doing? Look, look, I know you are busy but uh," Vic slipped a One hundred credit chip from his pocket into the mans sweaty palm. "I could really use your help."

The tired eyes now grew with interest as he glanced to his hand and back to Vic. Suspicion soon followed the interest. "What you want me to do? I ain't gonna get fired again."

Vic threw the man a smile and held his hands out. "Course not! Look," he said, gently taking the cargo manifest from the mans hand in one quick motion and passing it back to Baal, "Let's talk, you seem like a smart guy..."

As Vic led the man away he glanced over his shoulder. Baal was quickly skimming the datapad and Vic figured the cat only needed a few more minutes. When he turned his attention back the handler had stopped. Coming up the ramp from the spaceport were several herglics pushing 4 large containers labeled "Seafood-Handle with Caution."

"Boss! We got these containers in at the last minute. Where you want em?" One of the herglics shouted. The handler looked back to Baal and nervously towards the containers. "I don't remember any extra foodstuff..." he murmured under his breath.

“Just uh, Just stick them down on level 2 in the refrigeration section,” he snapped, jerking a thumb towards the shuttle. The handlers, showing as much enthusiasm as their supervisor, nodded in compliance.

As they passed he turned back to Vic. “Look, I need my...” but was cut off when Baal shoved the manifest into his chest. “This,” the cat purred.

“Uh, right. Look, the shuttle leaves in a second, I got work to do,” he said moving away from the large cat. Vic nodded to the man as he scurried off and turned towards Baal, all business. “Anything?”

“No,” the Trianni shook his head, “Croto is not listed as a guest. But several Rodians are. I think he is using an alias.”

Vic rubbed the false goatee on his chin. “Maybe. Look, since you are stuck downstairs, why don’t you try to poke around and see what you can uncover. If he’s on this ship then her life will be in danger till we deal with him.”

Baal nodded and they moved towards the shuttles boarding ramp. “And where will you be?” he asked as they moved next to a group of well dressed Duros. Vic turned to him and snarled. “You will address me as Master Neen, and I” he said, tossing a silk scarf across his neck, “will be in the upper levels dancing!”

The Grand Ballroom of the Lady Mindor was beyond elegant. The walls, which seemed to stretch on for miles, were adorned in rich glitterpine paneling. A soft Corellian symphony being played in one corner by the house band drifted throughout the room, causing most guests to sway and twirl under Garnib crystal chandeliers.

Vic was used to it. During his days as an Ivory brigade soldier he used to guard such occasions, so he easily slipped into his role as Sklez Neen, Coruscant aristocrat. Beside him, Klux was still marveling at the suspended ice sculptures that hovered several meters above the dance floor.

“This place is...” Klux began, then stopped. “I haven’t seen anything like this since I was a kid...my parents had some money ya know.” He reached forward and took a sip of his Light Fizz drink.

Vic nodded. They were seated towards the edge of the room at a large round table with a drunk human couple and their female consort. Off to their left, on a raised platform sat the Lady Mindors Captain and Countess Askala, along with several other passengers.

The consort, a brunette with a lavish amount of makeup, turned her attention from her retainers and focused it on Klux. “Really...and where would you be from?” she asked, her hands wandering, Vic noticed, from her snifter of Coruscant Brandy to Klux’s upper thigh. The Jedi’s eyes widened and grabbed his drink, glancing to Vic with pleading eyes.

“He’s from some little dumpy planet honey,” Vic said, lisping, “don’t let his lies fool you,” Vic whispered to the woman and gently moved her hand away from Klux’s thigh and replaced it with his own. Klux’s eyes almost bulged from their sockets and he spat fizz across the table.

“Oh dear!” Vic exclaimed and quickly dabbed at the Jedi’s navy blue tunic with a napkin. “Come on Martini, let’s get you back to the room and into something...comfortable...” Vic purred.

He grabbed the Jedi around the elbow and hoisted him to his feet. They murmured some goodbyes to the table and slowly made their way through gyrating bodies towards the Captains table.

“Look, Vic, I know you are an experienced guy and all that, but I’m not really into...” Klux began but Vic’s attention was elsewhere.

“Shut up. Look, there are no less than four knuckle-draggers around that captains table,” Vic whispered. He cast a glance over his shoulder and back to the Countess.

She was quietly conferring with the Captain and casting angry glances towards the man on her right. The man seemed disinterested and quietly picked at something on his plate. “I’m going to try to get close and gauge the security, you try to raise A’sok and tell him to get down here.

Even in the lower bowels of the Lady Mindor, Baal could smell the greed. It rolled from bags and cargo trunks like some sort of gas, tainting everything it touched; he despised it, and had to mentally force the negative thoughts from his mind. The cargo and baggage storage area was vast. It stretched out for hundreds of meters and resembled nothing short of a warehouse. Baal was fascinated that an area so large could fit in a ship, but then again this was also the first time he had ever been inside of an MC-80 Mon Cal starcruiser.

He had been wandering around for the better part of ten minutes when he came upon the cargo supervisor he and Vic had encountered earlier. The man was seated on an expensive leather trunk eating a sandwich and tapping away on a datapad. Baal quietly strolled up to the man, making sure to make little noise. “Greetings,” he whispered into his ear.

The handler jumped a foot off of the trunk and dropped his sandwich. It spiraled towards the ground but Ball easily caught it, handing it back to the man who sat frozen in shock.

“Da..uh...thanks,” the man managed to stammer. He pulled his wide blue eyes from Baal and looked down at the sandwich and back. “Hey...” lines of anger crossed his face, “there’s fur on this!” he spat and tossed it to the side, where it landed on an open suitcase containing a silk ballgown.

“Oh, sorry about that,” Baal replied sheepishly. He produced one of the hundred credit chits he had left over from his clothes shopping and handed it to the man smiling. “I’m sure this will...” but the handler had already snatched the money and was nodding.

“Yeah, yeah, take care of my dinner as long as I look the other way. Ya know, between you and your buddy I might be able to afford this suh-weet speeder bike like the one Chance Mul...”

“Friend,” Baal interrupted, placing his large three fingered hand against the mans chest, “I don’t care. I just need to see the luggage of any rodians that have boarded.” The mans face dropped and his jaw went slack. “Uh, pal, do you not see the MOUNTAINS of luggage we got here?”

Baal nodded and produced another chit. “I do, and that’s why I want you to pull your face out of the sports reports and help me find them.”

The handler wiped his sweaty palms against his grey coveralls and cast a nervous glance towards the front of the cargo area. “Yeah, ok, as long as it’s not...”

“Illegal...I know,” Baal finished.

“I’m a friend of the Countess, and I DEMAND you let me through you frelling gamorrean!!” Vic spat in the thugs face. The man towered almost 2 feet above Vic and peered down in disinterest. He wore a ill-fitting teal suit and his head sat like a cinderblock on top of a neck that was as thick as Vic’s waist.

“Ya ain’t getting by Sugerplum,” the thug murmured. Vic had been at the man for several minutes, beginning with a series of lies and now moving on to outright demands. The Countess had cast several glances at him but never acknowledged his existence enough to permit him near the table. Most of her attention was focused on the captain and she was making an obvious attempt to avoid the older man seated next to her.

“Well, I never....I’VE NEVER BEEN TREATED LIKE THIS IN HOUSE MELANTHA BEFORE, I’LL TELL YOU THAT!” he screamed towards the table. The thug was moving Vic away now, and he had captured the attention of several onlookers.

“Come on Sklez, it’s the booze talking,” Klux said from next to him. Vic pretended to stumble and caught himself spinning around towards the crowd.

“I’m not ..\*hic\* drunk!” he exclaimed and allowed himself to be led out of the Ballroom by Klux. Many were still coming and going and the large crowd allowed the duo to slip into a side hallway unmolested.

“Look, I’m guessing she’s none to happy with Uncle hairpins in there,” Vic whispered to Klux. “If we could get between her and him...” he was interrupted

by the sudden beeping of his comm. He plucked it from his three-thousand credit topcoat and triggered it.

"...Come in..Vic get your.."

"Baal, it's me what is it?" Vic snapped into the comm.

"We got a suitcase down here with a concealed blaster. I think it may be your pal Croto."

Vic threw a concerned glance at Klux who was unconsciously running his hand along the concealed shaft of his lightsaber. "Ok, I'll tell A'sok to meet you to the entrance of the baggage area. You guys wait for me and Klux," he said and clicked the comm to call the hacker. Surprisingly his comm answered back to him.

"Already on my way Boss, I was just hanging in the casino monitoring this frequency," he heard A'sok's voice emerge from the silver cylinder. "We'll be down shortly," Vic responded and dropped the comm back in his pocket.

3

Baal switched off his comm and turned his attention back to the open bag. "Looks like someone is worried about security," he said. the handler stood next to him shaking his head back and forth.

They had gone through dozens of bags before Baal had found a small holdout blaster wrapped in ladies undergarments.

"Oh man, this is...man, I don't need this kind of hassle. I'm going to have to report this, and how am I going to explain my rooting through someone's bag for no good reason?" he mumbled.

Grabbing a pair of satin bikini underwear, Baal roughly shoved them in the man's pocket. "Tell your supervisor you couldn't help yourself," he sneered. The man's comm went off and he spoke into it, dragging the panties out and staring at them dumbly.

"It's Vasolo. Yeah. What? Leaking? Ok, I'll be right there," he said into the comm. He shut it down and threw the panties disgustedly back into the case.

“Look, we got some leaking seafood containers in the back. If I see anything else weird I’ll let you know, and I’ll uh, contact security about this bag,” he said gesturing to the open case.

“Make sure you contact me if you find anything odd,” Baal said as the man stormed off towards the rear of the cargo area.

Eleven minutes and several wrong turns later Baal rounded a corner and saw A’sok near the entrance of the cargo area. The young hacker nodded and closed with him. He was wearing an elegant silver topcoat and shimmering black trousers.

“Man, this place is HUGE! I had no idea..” he began but the cat waved him down. “Keep your voice down, we aren’t even supposed to be back here.” A’sok nodded and leaned in close.

“Yeah, I know. Look, Vic and Klux are topside scouting out the mark, what have you got?” Baal was about to reply when his comm went off. “This little device is about to get swallowed,” he snarled and flipped it on. “Yes!?!”

“Hey, this is Vasolo. You wanted to know if we got anything weird. I checked the manifest and we got four containers of seafood that were unregistered. I think they may have weapons in em’. I got one of my guys opening one now...” Baal was about to protest when he heard the screams. Vasolo’s voice began as a shout, mixing with several growling noises and what sounded like someone hacking into a ripe melon.

A’sok was already moving, pulling his holdout blaster from a fold in his jacket. Baal spun and moved as well, dropping the comm in the same pocket as he retrieved his lightsaber from. They sprinted down several aisles of luggage and supplies, getting lost at least once. When they rounded the corner to the cold storage room they froze in their tracks.

The door to the refrigeration room hung ajar on it’s hinges. Vasolo’s body lay in a heap next to some overturned crates, his head removed and nowhere to be found. A’sok’s eyes bulged from his head as Baal’s lightsaber snapped to life. Bracing himself, the large Trianni advanced into the storage room.

It was worse inside. From what he could make out there were no less than three mutilated corpses shoved into a corner. His breath coming out in clouds of steam, Baal could smell the gore assaulting his senses. Using the force, he blocked the smell and tried to shut the brutality out of his mind. Searching, his eyes came to rest on four seafood containers. They were open and empty, no sign of cargo whatsoever. “A’sok he called over his shoulder. “Comm Vic. We’ve got problems.”

Vic shut down his beeping comm and dropped it into his pocket. Whatever it was would have to wait. Countess Askala had emerged from the ballroom and was chatting amicably with several guests as her three watchdogs set up a perimeter.

“Ok, last chance, I’ll try to get close enough to get her attention, try to convince her to talk to me, if the thugs move in, you get their attention” Vic said to Klux.

The Jedi nodded and Vic moved off towards the throng of people.

“It’s you!” he exclaimed as he drew near the countess. One of the thugs stepped up but Vic snaked his way by the man. “Askala! Don’t you remember me? From that club on Coruscant!?!?”

The beautiful young woman pulled her gaze from another guest towards him, but he could feel the thug’s hand already circling his forearm.

“Come on Wannabe, the Countess isn’t interested,” he heard the muscle whisper in his ear. Vic spun, hoping that Klux would step in so he could close with Askala, but the Jedi was quickly retreating in the opposite direction down the hall.

“Blast!” Vic thought, and as he turned, saw Askala retreating down the hallway along with her advisor and two guards. The guard still holding his arm smiled down at him. “Ya know, if you need some company, I get off in 30 minutes,” he sneered.

Vic stepped back and let his voice drop to a growl. “Trust me Nerf-Chucker, you wouldn’t last thirty seconds.” The man recoiled and went to backhand him but Vic stepped in and rotated, bringing his knee up to crush the man’s groin and in one swift motion he brought his knuckles up under the mans chin.

The thug dropped to the ground and backwards. Vic spun, ready to take out any reinforcements but the hall was surprisingly empty and Vic straightened up, looking back. Klux had disappeared.

“Only one way to go,” he said to himself and headed back towards the hall Askala and her entourage headed.

The hanger bay inside the Lady Mindor was deathly quiet. That was the first thing Baal noticed. Well , quiet, except for the volume of A’soks breathing behind him. They had followed a faint trail of blood that disappeared several corridors back, but that Baal’s keen sense of smell had no problem picking up on.

“They are in the bay,” he whispered to A’sok over his shoulder.

“Who?”

“The ones who murdered the baggage attendants,” he hissed. “Right. And who would that be?” A’sok hissed back. Baal ignored him and kept moving.

Vic turned a corner and stopped. Less than ten meters away the body of Askala’s bodyguard lay crumpled in a heap, bleeding from over a dozen places. Further down the hall two monstrous aliens were shoving the Countess into an open ventilation shaft.

“Hey!,” Vic screamed, heading towards the creatures. They were easily two meters tall with creamy brown skin. A pronounced ridge ran along the top of their head, disappearing under a mane of shaggy black hair. While one followed Askala into the duct the other turned towards Vic and snarled, showing row after row of razor sharp teeth.

Vic skidded to a stop and slowly produced a pair of vibroblades from his robes. “Damn, I thought they outlawed Ugly-Asses on the yacht,” he said. The alien approached Vic with caution, producing a large double-bladed vibro-weapon from behind his back. He spat something in his native tongue, which Vic didn’t understand and lunged. The sudden attack caused Vic to dodge the weapon and he just barely managed to parry the blade with one of his knives.

They danced a lethal dance for several seconds, but the creatures ferocity and skill eventually won out. As the outlaw spun and parried the large glittering vibroblade the creature shot a boot out, catching Vic in the mid section and driving the blade towards his stomach. Vic just barely turned in time to prevent the weapon from gutting him completely. Instead, it sliced neatly through several layers of clothing and plunged into his stomach, opening a six inch gash. Vic dropped to the ground still clutching his vibroblades.

“Ack..you...suck!” he spat as his opponent raised the weapon for a killing blow. With one last lunge for his life, Vic raised up, ignoring the searing pain that exploded throughout his abdomen, and buried his two humming vibroblades deep into the creatures groin.

As he lay looking up at the stunned creature, Vic heard a familiar sound from behind him and turned. Klux leapt over top of him and in a mad blur of blue light the would-be kidnapper was cleaved in two, his upper body simply falling backwards as his bleeding lower body dropped on top of Vic. “Ack! Blast it...Klux...these were good...clothes..” Vic managed. Darkness was closing in on his vision and he felt himself dipping into the abyss.

“Come on Vic, I need you up...A’sok and Baal commed and said they tracked the other creatures to the docking bay...come on..” he had shut down the lightsaber and Vic could barely hear him.

While Vic lay there bleeding he felt something warm on his stomach, and it wasn’t blood. He managed to crack an eye open and Klux was above him, eyes closed, with his hands crossed over his bleeding wound.

Several moments passed and Vic opened his eyes again. The darkness was gone and Klux was hustling him to his feet. The pain in his stomach had subsided , and, while he still felt sluggish, realized that he was able to move on his own.

“What the hell did you do?” he managed, as they sprinted towards his cabin. His Terminus gear was stowed in the false bottom of his spacers trunk and he needed the protection his armor would provide.

“Just more Jedi crap...you wouldn’t understand,” Klux said as they turned into he room.

Baal dropped to the ground. He had charged ahead towards one of the kidnapers and the ugly alien, drawing some sort of pistol, leveled a shot at him. His chest felt as if it were on fire and searing pain continued a slow agonizing burn. The Trianni warrior shut the pain from his mind and clutched his lightsaber. Behind him A’sok had dropped behind a row of containers and was exchanging fire with the two remaining kidnapers. One had the Countess by the waist and was dragging her towards an access hatch at the far end of the hanger . The other had dropped to one knee and was drawing a bead on the prone cat.

Gripping his lightsaber, Baal tried to bring the weapon up in a defensive position but had no luck. As the creature aimed, A’sok let loose with a shot from his hold-out blaster, piercing the creature’s forehead and dropping the alien like a sack of wet sand.

“Yeah!” the hacker exclaimed from behind him.

Artwork by Tracy Hart

Struggling to his feet, Baal staggered towards the open access hatch the kidnapper has disappeared through. The hatch sat a meter off the ground and Baal just barely squeezed through, dropping into a metal shaft that dipped sharply and caused him to begin sliding uncontrollably into the darkness.

The hanger appeared a deep red through Terminus's helmet as he and Klux rounded the corner. Dropping to a defensive position he was able to pick out the prone body of a kidnapper and movement towards the rear of the hanger. Several shuttles obscured his vision but he was just able to make out Baal dropping into an access hatch. Terminus's heads up display isolated him and magnified the cat as he slipped out of site. Klux said something behind him but Terminus was already moving. The cat dropping through the hatch told him one thing: That the kidnappers were somewhere ahead, and they still had the countess.

Charging to the hatch, Terminus peered into the darkness. His HUD adjusted to the lack of illumination and the slick walls of the shaft snapped into focus. The shaft went straight down for about 5 meters then took a sharp turn. Terminus climbed in and began to slowly lower himself.

He was just negotiating the turn when he heard the report of a weapon. It wasn't a blaster, he could tell that from the unusual hissing sound the weapon made. The sound of containers being knocked over quickly followed and the bounty hunter dropped, letting gravity pull him the rest of the way to the ground. He hit rolling. A shot from the strange weapon whizzed over his head and he took up cover behind a series of pipes and conduits. Rising slowly, he could see the creature backed into a corner, one thick arm around the countesses' neck. The other hand was pressing the weapon to her temple. His eyes were darting around in the darkness, trying to cover adversaries he couldn't even see. Terminus had no such complication.

They were in a small maintenance room that received only a hint of light from a nearby computer terminal. The alien's head darted back and forth, uncertainty and rage creeping across his face. The countess had shut her eyes, tears staining her bright red cheeks.

"Drop your weapon and let the girl go," Terminus said, his voice a digital echo in the small room. He wasn't Vic Palisades anymore, he was Terminus the Hunter, a ruthless bounty hunter who saw every sentient as a potential mark and business opportunity. He let his breathing calm and moved.

The creature spat something and leveled his weapon towards Terminus' voice. The bounty hunter fluidly stepped from behind the conduits as the creature fired. In one motion he brought up his light repeating blaster and leveled it at the creature's head as the bright red blaster bolt sailed over his shoulder and exploded somewhere behind him.

Terminus pulled the trigger and his Netfali Arms light repeating blaster spat a lance of deadly energy into the forehead of the creature. His head erupted into trillions of microscopic specs and the red mist coated the countess, who slid slowly to the ground.

He stepped over the still twitching body and clamped a black leather glove around her wrist, jerking her to her feet.

"Lets go," he said and pulled her towards the rooms door.

"But...you, who are you?" she stammered, casting large fearful eyes towards the hunter. He didn't respond, instead triggering his helmets internal comm.

"Klux, how are we looking?" he asked. He noticed out of the corner of his helmet Baal was extracting himself from cover and flowing them towards the door, limping slightly.

"Bad...you guys better hurry. We found the last one coming back from a trip to the ventilation ducts. As we speak there is a deadly neurotoxin making it's way through the ship...at least that's what A'sok got out of him before he shot him. " Terminus nodded to himself. "Warm up one of those cruisers in the hanger, we're getting out of here."

Terminus sat staring at the mark. She eventually awoke, pulling herself from the frigid cold of the cargo bay's floor. It took her a moment for her eyes to adjust to the light; when they did she turned her piercing gaze on the armored hunter sitting nearby.

"What are you going to do with me? Kill me?" she spat at him. Her evening gown was ripped and she still wore the dirt and grime of their near-fatal escape from the Lady Mindor. She had mopped away much of the blood from her face, but her hair was still clumped together in spots. Terminus shifted atop the cargo crate where he sat and leveled his ruby-red visor at her. His response came out a harsh metallic sound, amplified in the near-empty hold. "If your contract gave me that option, we wouldn't be having this conversation."

She sat cross-legged now staring at him. Her delicate hands were bound behind her and Terminus noted that she still managed to carry herself as if she were ordering her servant to prepare her speeder for a late night cruise.

"So what then? You drop me off, collect a few thousand credits and that's it?"

Terminus nodded.

She let her gaze wander around the cargo hold. "I'll double what they are paying you."

Terminus expected this, was even counting on it. "I'll release you for fifty-thousand credits...no less," he said. She fixed her gaze on him and stared open mouthed.

"That's it?"

He nodded. Terminus knew only cold hard credits. Reputation on being reliable also meant you were predictable. It was good to keep people on their toes; in addition, there was something rotten about this whole deal, and the sooner he got rid of this hard merchandise the better. She reeked of trouble.

"SHE WHAT!?!?!" the Assembler exclaimed, his face contorting into a gruesome visage above the holonet transceiver.

"Escaped. We had stopped off for fueling and she compromised the security system...not sure how," Terminus said, leaning back in his chair and placing his boots on the console.

"You incompetent! I trusted you to...oh, thiiiiiiiiiiiiiiii will not bode well for future jobs my esteemed hunter!" the arachnid face hissed. Terminus anticipated this conversation but didn't much care...he had fifty thousand credits sitting in his account and was effectively done with this transaction.

Jobs for bounty hunters were a dime a dozen, he would find plenty of work.

"Well..." the assembler continued, composing himself, "Where did you lose her at?"

Minutes passed as Terminus sat staring at him. Eventually the Assembler broke and screeched "Well!?!?"

"That information isn't for sale, and this transaction is completed. Tell your partners Krish make lousy kidnapppers," he said and thumbed the holonet transceiver off.

Leaving the common room Terminus headed back to his cabin. Vic pulled the helmet off and tossed it onto his bunk one he was inside. "Thank blazes that's over," he mumbled to himself. He dropped onto the cot and stared at the dead visor of the helmet.

"Always play the part so well you even fool yourself," Vic murmured. It was advice he received from Proctor back in the day.

Moonlighting as Terminus was a temporary thing, simply a way to make some credits and conceal his real identity, but he could feel the task wearing on him.

"Someday soon...my friend...you and I are going to part ways...for good," he stretched out and kicked the helmet from the bunk.

Turning over he let sleep take him. The sound of the helmet rocking back and forth on the floor followed him into the darkness.