

Episode VII: Chance Encounter

1

Imperial Listening post AT-412 sat on the uppermost ridge on one of the planet Atraken's highest mountains. The ridge, aptly named "The lone Spine" stretched for over eighteen kilometers and was surrounded on all sides by an arid wasteland. On good days the wind gusts and sandstorms would only last fourteen of the planets twenty daily hours.

There were rarely any good days.

Given such harsh conditions, the post was designed to withstand all manner of attacks- man-made or otherwise. The one condition it wasn't prepared to deal with, and one that it's Imperial designers never even considered, was the most damaging of all-boredom.

Felix Naas stared impassively at the bank of terminal screens that sat in front of him. All manner of data scrolled by, slow enough to read but fast enough so that he wasn't able to pull his eyes away. He was situated in the far corner of a small squat building that housed eight other signal techs and their superior officer. The building was split into a rec room, living area and surveillance suite. Once every month an Imperial shuttle would drop off supplies that got stored in an underground holding area...this was considered the high point of the month.

He hated this...hated it with every fiber in his scrawny six-foot three inch body. Somewhere behind him his "Superior" officer, Lt. Ballers chuckled at some asinine joke Private Lugas made. Lugas was a recent transfer and still green enough to have a sunny disposition. Felix wasn't. Today marked the 1,344th day that he sat at this terminal and watched pointless holonet transmissions scroll by.

"Felix! Lugas is fixing some coffe...you want a mug?" Ballers asked. He was a stout man, and, if you believed him, a short timer. He made a point to mention at least once a week that he had a cousin in high command working to get him a command position on Aderlon, a heaven compared to the hell of Atraken.

"Yeah...sure..." Felix replied. The green waterfall of data continued to run down the terminal screen.

It wasn't supposed to be like this. He spent 3 years in the Imperial academy busting his hump in hopes that he would someday make it into Intel. But

apparently the Empire had other plans, plans that didn't include sunny beaches or nubile young....

Something beeped.

On the control panel, a small red light started to flash to life. Instinct took over and Felix adjusted the frequency knob, slowing the rush of the waterfall to a minor trickle. Messages slowed and he was able to scan each one. The first few were standard transmissions; a corporation sending out an earnings report to its investors from Celanon, a private transmission detailing the delivery of a newborn Quarren...standard relay channel junk.

Then it was in front of him. A message with several words highlighted in bold, flashing red. The filtering program they used was accurate, searching for words that would throw up various flags should they be used in conjunction with each other...this was one such message.

Felix tapped away at the keyboard, isolating the text. He began to read:

Baal,

I hope this message finds you well. I miss the days studying on Garnib, but I have found something that I think you will find interesting. During my stay here on Mrlsst, I have uncovered several books concerning the JEDI of the Old Republic. They discuss the FORCE in great detail and offer some insight into topics you and I used to discuss.

I would like for you to come to Mrlsst, at your earliest convenience. Several of the JEDI tomes reference an ARTIFACT of great power. I thought this would give us a chance to work together again and potentially find something of historical significance!

Hope to hear form you soon!

Leeza

The words "Jedi, Force, and Artifact" flashed in bright red, scattered among the drab green of the other words. Felix blinked, making sure he was reading everything correctly. Ballers appeared next to him, cradling a cup of caffe and sitting another mug on the console.

"What the hell...."

Felix turned, pulling his eyes from the screen. "This looks hot Cap, you want me to raise Intel on the line...?"

Ballers stiffened slightly next to him. "No.. no..." he said coolly, turning towards Griffun, the tech working the console to Felix's right. "Griffun, raise Captain Nock'Nord on the Reliant immediately," he said. When he turned back he was wearing a grin that stretched from ear to ear.

Felix turned his full attention on Ballers. "Sir, Imperial protocol dictates that..." but Ballers closed within an inch of his face, his oily skin glistening in the light of Felix's console.

"We are under orders from a higher power son...now transfer that message to Griffun's terminal and go back to doing your job, or you will never get off of this forsaken rock," he snarled.

Felix recoiled slightly and held Baller's stare for only a moment. One thousand three hundred and forty-four days of boredom raced through his mind. He steadied himself and nodded.

"Yes Sir," he managed, slowly turning back to his console. He hit the relay key and transferred the message one console over. "I've got Captain Nock'nord online," Griffun said. Ballers hovered over him for another moment and moved over to Griffun's console. Felix managed to shut the rest out. Once again losing himself in the waterfall of green.

The wind bit into Chance Mulgrew's face like a Corellian Sidewinder. Beneath him, "Chance's Folly"- his green and black racing swoop, was topping out at 670 kilometers an hour, leaving a trail of swirling dust along the floor of Grubber's Canyon. He was in third now, and quickly approaching Varba, a Duro who was plodding along in second.

They were racing at speeds that most would consider suicidal along the surface of Etti IV, a temperate paradise sitting in the hub of the Corporate Sector. Varba's rear engine had begun sputtering for the last several miles; Chance racked it up to the canyon's high volume of "diggers dust", a fine particle that lined several of the planet's canyons. Without the right filters, the dust would short out an engine in a matter of days...or, at these speeds...minutes. Any racer worth his stripes new that; Varba was a former Corporate Sector swoop racing champ...which meant he was in on the con.

“Your loss, moron” he muttered to himself. That morning he decided he wasn’t going to play ball. Ploovo Two-For-One had dropped 50 large into his hands to throw the race, but a restless nights sleep can do weird things to a man. He wasn’t a quitter, in fact, he had several trophies to his name...and today he would take another.

Of course it would end his swoop racing career in the Corporate Sector; you can’t cross a crime lord like Ploovo and expect to live for very long. That suited him just fine. There were other systems and plenty of places he could pick up a new identity at. Fifty thousand corporate sector creds would start him out on a new life; he was ready for the change.

Roaring in protest as he increased power, his swoop pulled even with Varba. The Duro turned his black helmet towards him and screamed something in his native language. Chance couldn’t read the blue mouth, but had a pretty good idea that Varba realized what he was planning on doing. Smiling, Chance just winked in return.

Varba went for his blaster.

Chance had just enough time to duck. All of the racers kept sidearms. That was no secret. When you are racing across 400 kilometers of rough terrain, it pays to have some personal protection. But Varba wasn’t aiming for a rabid nerf...he was aiming for the tuft of curly red hair peeking out from Chance’s racing helmet.

The first blaster bolt singed the back of his jacket and the next missed entirely. Dropping back on the accelerator, Chance angled his swoop towards Varba’s, and dropped his engine directly in front of the Duro’s stabilizer. The sudden shift threw Varba for a loop and he quickly grabbed his swoop’s handlebars, attempting to avoid the collision that didn’t happen. The blaster bounced form Varba’s grasp and disappeared.

Banking his swoop again, Chance initiated his customized propulsion unit. Bright blue flame leapt from the swoop’s engine and incinerated Varba’s right leg in a blinding flash. The blue racer screamed, grabbing at his stump of leg with both hands.

Chance threw only a glance behind him as Varba’s swoop spun wildly out of control and slammed into the canyon wall, ending in a brilliant flash of red flame. So much for that piece of dianoga crap, he thought to himself and sped ahead. Parrick Lornda was only a few kilometers ahead and he was ready to put this race in the history disks.

For the third night in a row that Balthazar awoke from a nightmare. Details disappeared in the haze of waking, and for that, he was thankful. Lying in his

bunk on the Skullduggery he slowed his breathing, until it escaped as a shallow rasp. Somewhere in the bowels of the Ghtroc freighter the coolant system kicked in, sending toxic liquid racing throughout the ship. He focused on its noise and soon he was at peace...rolling along with the liquid, feeling it flow through the ship just as the force flowed through him.

Pulling his seven-foot frame from the bunk, he ran a three-fingered paw through the grayish-blue fur on his forehead. It came away drenched in perspiration and he suddenly realized how dry his mouth felt. He triggered his door and stepped into the quiet hallway, heading for the lounge.

The hall was quiet, the only noticeable sound being A'sok's stereo, filling the air with a soft hint of a classical Bothan melody. Piping and conduits lined the dimly lit hallway, pulsing liquid and energy throughout the ship and causing the air temperature to fluxuate slightly. Baal didn't notice; several inches of thick bluish fur covered his body, striped with ebony markings. He wore a pair of exercise trousers more out of respect for the team than out of any need for warmth or protection.

He stepped down into the recessed rec area and saw Vic pouring a cup of caffe at the small counter. The human turned to him and offered a lopsided smile.

"I would offer you some but I know how much of a naturalist you are." He was dressed in knee-high brown leather boots and matching trousers, with a black t-shirt hanging loose over the waist. He was well built; having the frame of a shockball player with the rugged features of a soldier.

"Thanks, I'll just grab some H2O," Baal said, pulling blue bottle from the small refrigeration unit set into the bulkhead. He dropped onto the grav couch across from Vic and took a long draw of the clear liquid.

"We should be hitting the Mennalli System in about another 2 weeks...I just hope we reach Mrlsst before the Imps do," Vic said, downing some of the muddy-brown caffe. His wavy auburn hair was slightly mussed and Baal could sense he had recently been napping.

"You've been asleep at the wheel again...have you not?" he asked, smirking. Vic nodded and dropped his head onto the table. "Yup. Watching lines of stars for hours on end...it's hypnotic," he said, raising his eyes to peer at Baal. "Course, those naps would last a lot longer if your nightmares didn't keep waking me up."

Baal drew back in surprise. "How did you know...?"

Vic snickered and finished off his caffe. "Buddy, you are a seven foot tall cat for cripes sake...when you dream, you dream LOUD."

Baal gave him a sheepish grin and shrugged. "My apologies. I didn't mean to..."

“Hey, save it...I just weep for whoever you chose to marry pal,” Vic said smiling.

Baal nodded, appreciating his partners sense of humor...especially now. They were on this trip because of a message he received from Leeza, a fellow student and friend he knew from his time on Garnib. She had spent the last several months studying on Mrlsst pursuing her PhD. When he realized she had not sent the message encrypted, he convinced his teammates to accompany him, fearing the Empire may have intercepted it.

“I hope no harm has come to Leeza,” he said finally, capping the top of the water bottle.

“Why don’t you use the force to see into the future...find out?”

Smiling, Baal shook his head. “I’m afraid it doesn’t work that way Vic...the force can only show me possible futures...and then, I only see brief glimpses...it’s not totally reliable.”

The Outlaw shrugged and smiled. “If you want reliability, you are on the wrong ship.”

The landscape of Etti IV was a blur. They broke from the canyons a moment earlier and were now speeding across a wide-open plain. The console on Chance’s Folly screamed warnings in 4 different languages, the diagnostics showing no less than 3 systems in the red.

“Shut...the hell...up!” Chance screamed and smacked the side of the console. Two of the three systems dropped back into the yellow and the swoop seemed to stabilize.

That’s what he got for buying retail pit droids without any modifications...they were more apt to screw up a perfectly good swoop as to fix it.

The Silver Thrust, Lornda’s swoop, was just under a kilometer away. Chance leaned forward in his swoop and maneuvered up behind the bright orange glow of the Gran’s engines. Chance wiped some grit away from his goggles and made his move.

Darting alongside the silver swoop, he flashed his toothy grin. The holoivid cameras, hovering several hundred meters in the air would love that. The alien glanced over and snarled, showing several square teeth and more than a few empty spaces. Two of his three orange eyestalks narrowed and he turned away, leaning into his bike and pulling away from Chance.

Increasing his speed, Chance again pulled up alongside momentarily and passed him. His proximity locator began to squeal, signifying less than 30km to the finish

line. Both raced neck and neck for what seemed like an eternity. Etti IV ceased to exist as a planet and instead became nothing more than a wavering aqua blur. Gravity pulled at Chance, causing his head to throb in the confines of his black helmet. Lornda was faring better, and pulled ahead slightly. When he was just ahead of Chance's Folly, a hydrosponder slipped from Lornda's hand and into Chance's path.

With his hands gripping the swoops handlebars and gravity pulling him down, Chance could do nothing but watch the spinning silver bar as it came towards his head. He winced, with no time to even shut his eyes against the impact. The spanner, instead of hitting him square in the face, flew to one side, smacking against the leather of his seat cushion and spinning away into the dust trail.

"What the hell..." Chance didn't try to understand what happened. Triggering his propulsion he leapt ahead, closing the last few meters between he and Lornda. The alien looked back again, cursing and shaking his fist. As the pavilion loomed ahead, Chance overtook and bypassed the snarling alien.

Chance's Folly broke the finish line, leading The Thrust by just under a second, but he had done it, he had won the race. Now he had to get the hell off the planet.

Fans were streaming from the stands now and Chance scanned as many faces as he could, not noticing any hostiles, but he wasn't taking any chances. Ploovo's men would be stationed at the racers locker room waiting for the opportunity to turn his face into mush.

Spinning The Folly around, Chance spied an open gate at the far end of the stands and headed for it. A few of the quicker fans dodged aside as he gunned the engine and roared off towards the pavilion's stone outer wall.

Two Barabels who were supposed to be guarding the exit were in the process of breaking up a scuffle and didn't even see Chance as he shot through the hexagonal opening. Once through he threw one last look over his shoulder at the Pavillion and headed for the starport.

The freighter captain was fittingly named Skank. He couldn't have weighed more than a womprat and had various patches of hair sprouting from a number of spots on his face. He was human, but you could barely tell it from all of the grease and soot that covered his mottled, pale skin.

"Hooyah! Here come my rider! Hooyah!" he exclaimed as Chance swung his swoop in the cargo hold of the "Fandry Jol", Skank's dilapidated Loronar Transport.

Dismounting, he untied a black duffel bag from the rear of his swoop and slung it over his shoulder. "Yeah, let's get out of here," Chance muttered, heading

forward towards the cabins. His pickup went smoother than expected and he was ready to get off planet.

“Hooyah! We out of here!” Skank exclaimed, closing the cargo ramp.

Dropping into his rented bunk, Chance put his head back, using the duffel as a pillow. In total, he made off with just over 155,000 credits. Included was his take from Ploovo, a bet he made on himself and the remainder of his meager life savings. It would be enough.

He would head to Mrlsst, where his sister Leeza was doing research, and give her the heads up on his situation. And then where? Maybe Aderlon or Ord Mantell...someplace where he could race part time for extra dough and spend his days at the casinos.

Oh and don't forget L-Zee...he couldn't forget L-Zee.

Sleep gradually took him and he fell into a welcoming darkness.

2

Skimming above a forest of greenstalks, the Skullduggery angled and slowed its descent, falling into a flight pattern that put them in line with the approaching spaceport. The Greenstalks were gargantuan trees that stretched high into the Mrlssi sky and made up much of the landscape; many had to be cleared away to allow the spaceport the necessary room required for craft to land and take off.

The Imperial class spaceport lay just kilometers away. Surrounding it, scattered among the towering Greenstalks, sprawled over a hundred kilometers of administrative and academic buildings; all a part of the Mrlsst University campus.

Dropping into a bay among several other light freighters and starships, Baal set the craft down and killed the repulsors.

The foot traffic was relatively light in the spaceport and Baal spent a few minutes going over some maps and asking questions in the tourist bureau while Vic, Klux and A'sok window-shopped in the port's upper mezzanine level. The starport was crafted from a dull blue duracrete and augmented with transparasteel windows and solariums. Occasionally a mural or painting by an aspiring artist broke up the 'port's monotony, but little could eliminate the prevailing sense of Imperial oppression.

A light wind blew through the walkways of the open-air port while low dense thunderheads marched across the sky, threatening rain. Aliens of all manner milled about, many propped on top of luggage, eyes glued to a datapad.

“Ah I do so love college planets,” A’sok said, eyeballing a particularly fit twi’lek female working the counter at a nearby kiosk.

“Hey, smooth operator, keep you eyes open for trouble,” Vic replied, barely dodging a fast moving group of Mrissi. The short humanoids sported long blue faces adorned with bright multi-colored plumage; Vic remembered hearing they were descended from avians. One member of the group turned and yammered an apology, large black bulbous eyes wide with emotion.

“Yeah, keep your eyes open for the natives Bossman,” A’sok smirked. “Still, I don’t know about this man, we don’t even know this Leeza...what if the Imps have already gotten to her?” he muttered, gathering a light jacket around his thin frame. Vic stopped, inspecting a stuffed snarling Wampa that stood decorating an outfitters display window.

“Baal seems to be convinced she’s in danger, but if she did uncover some sort of artifact...” he looked sideways at the younger man and shrugged, “might be a nice chunk of change in it for us.”

A’sok pulled his eyes from the towering white creature’s glistening fangs and smiled at his partner. “I like the way those synapses fire...this might be worth...”

“Worth your time? And what would you be doing otherwise?” Klux asked, strolling up behind them. He wore the traditional brown robes of a Jedi, with a gray under-tunic. His hair was pulled back in a severe ponytail and his auburn goatee was neatly trimmed.

A’sok rolled his eyes and prodded a finger into the Jedi’s chest. “Look Klux, you and Baal can run around trying to save the galaxy all you want...but me and Vic, we’re businessmen...always looking at how to make a profit...the Ghtroc doesn’t run on good intentions ya know.”

Vic, still admiring the Wampa looked over at the two. “We?”

A’sok glanced back. “Well, yeah I figure you and me...” he stalled and turned back to Klux. “Look, VIC is a business man and it’s in our best interests to...”

“Calm down friend...it’s ok...we are going to find the girl, get her to safety and everything will be fine...” Klux said in soothing tones. A’sok stopped talking and gave him a crooked smile. “Sure...easy as cake,” he agreed.

“Ok...got her address...” Baal said approaching the group. He was wrapped in clothing similar to Klux’s opting for deep royal purple robes instead of brown.

“Vic, if you and A’sok want, you may “hang back” as you say. I’m pretty sure Klux and I can handle this.”

Vic shrugged, this was Baal’s show after all. “Whatever you say Boss. Come on A’sok, lets go grab some grub.”

The dorm room was a disaster, with Leeza sprawled in the center of its floor, barely alive. They entered when they noticed the door ajar to find her face down in a pool of blood; books and holodisks lay scattered about the room, some stained red. Klux went for help as Baal held her, letting the Force flow from him into her limp body. He could only do so much and felt her slowly slipping away. "Don't move, relax," he whispered, wiping a bloody strand of blonde hair away from her eyes. Large dim eyes studied his face and she tried to speak, but only a moan escaped. He was at least succeeding in calming her panic. She tried to speak again, this time managing a few broken words.

"Baal...under the library...catacombs...books...you must go...now..." she sputtered and began to cough uncontrollably. Baal held her tightly, rocking her limp frame back and forth. Somewhere behind him medics entered the room, too late to do any good.

Vic finished reloading his light repeating blaster when his comm barked to life. Unclipping it from his belt, he toggled the silver cylinder to life.

"Yeah".

"Vic- Baal...we found Leeza, hurt. She was injured but we're not sure by who and her room is a mess. Klux and I are heading to the library...she told me before she...look, can you and A'sok head to the university hospital and make sure none of our "friends" go after her there?" He was already moving. "On it," Vic said and shut down the comm. "A'sok! We gotta roll!" He yelled down the corridor and began locking down the ship.

Chance arrived as the medics slammed shut the doors to the ambulance. Leaping from his swoop he passes a throng of nearby students and froze when he heard one of them mention "Leeza."

"Who?" he asked, approaching a small male Bith on the edge of the group. The stunned student stammered in getting the name out again. "Lee-Lee-Leeza Mulgrew," he answered.

Roaring to life, the ambulance bathed the throng in red flashing lights and was gone.

"What happened?!?!" Chance shouted into the students face.

“Someone said she got beat up...someone tried to kill...” but Chance never heard the rest.

Less than ten seconds later and he was in pursuit of the white and red repulsor vehicle, now a blurred speck on the horizon.

Darting among the side streets, Chance attempted to catch up with the ambulance. The red and white repulsorvan sped just ahead, and Chance fell in behind, practically riding its bumper.

Suddenly, it juked sideways down a narrow alley, sending Chance hurtling straight towards an ice cream cart. The Folly’ slammed into the small box going over 400 km per hour and sent the contents spraying skyward in a milky white fountain. The world spun out of control and he landed with a sick thud on the lawn of a community park.

Something sticky coated his face. Certain it was blood, Chance wiped it away and was surprised to see his hand come away coated in pink cream.

Beyond his hand was the haggard angry maw of a Klatoonian. The dog-faced alien was screaming something he couldn’t understand. Chance growled back and shoved the vendor aside, knocking the small red and blue paper hat from the alien’s square head.

“Get off...” he grunted. A small group of onlookers had collected and he bulled through them, searching for his swoop.

He had lucked out. It’s rear stuck out of a hedge 40 meters away like some piece of abstract art. After some tugging he broke it free of the tangle. The Klatoonian was still cursing and shaking his fist, but keeping a safe distance. With one last look back, he gunned the engine and headed the Folly off towards the hospital.

The University of Mrsst Library sat atop a large hill in the center of campus. Crafted from bleached stone, it was an intricate creation beset with crystal windows that surrounded the circular building on all sides. A holoboard hovered

a meter above the manicured lawn surrounding the building. Baal peered close and read off information that scrolled across it in over a dozen languages.

“...Of Mrsst Library. Founded...unknown. Original building ravaged by storms, this new building was built in its place only a century ago...”

Behind him, Klux gathered his cloak about his body. A light mist was beginning to fall from the darkened skies. “Sounds like a perfect place for some catacombs, I wonder...” but he stopped.

“I feel it too...a sense of dread of darkness...” Baal muttered. A low rumble echoed in the distance and the wind picked up, billowing their robes behind them.

Raising an eyebrow, Klux turned to the large cat. “If things go badly...if we find those who hurt your friend in there...I want you to...”

“I know...kill you before you can be turned. Death before darkness,” Baal said through clenched teeth.

“Uh...no. Actually I was going to say, ‘Comm Vic for backup’.”

“Oh...right...oh yeah...of course!” Baal said, shrugging the suggestion off. “I just meant...you know...”

“Yeah...yeah ok, let’s go,” Klux said as fat droplets of rain began to fall from the sky.

The dayglow-Orange hovervan screeched to a stop in the emergency lane of the University of Mrsst Hospital. Vic and A’sok unfolded themselves from the back and dropped to the ground. Two teenage Cerean males and four female Twi’lek cheerleaders shouted after them.

Vic stepped around to the front and leaned in. The two Cereans wore grins that stretched across their faces. One had a tuft of blue hair erupting from his huge domed head...the other had no hair at all.

“Oh! What a pleasure it was to meet you sir! We have your entire series on holodisk! You are like, a deity around here!” the blue topper exclaimed. Vic nodded and offered them both up a smile.

“Well, my buddy and I appreciate the lift...thanks.” he said, casting a wink back towards the swooning group of Twi’leks.

“Hey, could you, can I get an autograph?” the bald one asked holding out a datapad.

“Sure!” Vic exclaimed and scrawled a message across the small screen with the offered lightpen.

“Thanks, Mr. Palisades!” the duo screamed as the van leapt away from the curb. Behind Vic A’sok muttered to himself.

“So much for low profiles.”

Vic turned and walked through the sliding double doors of the emergency room. “Hey at least it saved us cab fare...look admissions!” he said and headed over to the desk.

A sullen faced man in his early twenties with hair as orange as their ride was leaning against the glass. Behind it a bored Mrissi with a domed head worked impassively, tapping away on a computer; a name tag reading “Feb” hung from her robe. As Vic approached, the young man, decked out in black racing leathers with green flames licking the sides of his pant legs, stepped away from the window to allow him access.

“Hi!” he said getting the Mrissi’s attention.

“Can I help you?” she asked in a dull monotone. Her facial plumage ruffled slightly as she cast a passive glance through the window.

“Yeah...just looking for a recent admittance...uh...Leeza Mulgrew...” Vic said, glancing down at the scrap of flimplast he pulled from his pocket. When he looked up the “Feb” was trembling and staring intently off to Vic’s left. The orange-haired racer had a DL-44 blaster leveled at Vic’s chest. His face was a contorted mask of rage and his hand shook. For the first time Vic noticed he had globs of pink and white goo smeared against his cheeks and neck, with a trail leading down his chest across a lime green shirt.

“What the hell are you, a Bothan’s fashion nightmare?” the Outlaw asked. Behind him he heard A’sok unsheathing his holdout blaster.

“Get out of here!” The young man snarled. His hand shook a little more, the large black barrel dipping in rhythm to his threat.

Vic let out a sigh. “A’sok, lets get the hell out of here,” he said, turning away from the racer and heading for the double doors. He stole a glance over his shoulder as they cleared the exit and saw the young man staring after them with a befuddled look replacing his rage.

“What the hell...” A’sok began, catching up to him. They stood under the hospital awning as it began to rain; above, voluminous black clouds marched across the sky like Imperial At-At walkers.

Vic turned. “I don’t know...and really don’t care. I’m not going to get in a gunfight in the middle of a hospital with some retard cause’ he doesn’t like the color of our boots, or what the hell ever...” Vic shook his head and pulled his comm from his jacket. Hitting a preprogrammed number, the comm buzzed to life.

A gruff voice answered after two beeps. “Yes?”

“Baal, it’s Vic. Some lunatic waved a blaster at us when we went looking for your girlfriend...so we left.”

There was silence for a moment. “Well, who was he?”

Vic shrugged. “I don’t know...jealous boyfriend, jilted lover, insane intern...take your pick. He was wearing racing leathers though. A red haired kid who handled his blaster like a crippled Trandoshan.”

“That would be Chance...her brother...” Baal came back. Vic could hear the hint of despair in the Trianni’s voice.

“Look...Vic...would you please go back and try to smooth things over...he’s probably just confu...” but Vic cut him off. “He’s an idiot. But sure, we’ll go back and make nice,” Vic said, killing the comm. He turned back to A’sok and put an artificial grin on his face. “Lets go make friends!”

Chance sat with his face buried in his hands. They would give him no information on his sister and two guards had already thwarted his attempts at entering the operating room. So he sat. His shoulders and shirt were still sticky from his spill with the ice cream truck and his back had swollen where he had landed on it, producing a nasty bump between his shoulder blades. The stamp of boots coming down the hall echoed in the small waiting room...not at a quick pace, but fast enough to let him know he had trouble. He shouldn’t have drawn his weapon in public like that...better to follow those two guys and get info out of...

“Hey kid...got a second?”

The duo had returned. Speaking was a large well-built man in a brown leather jacket and black shirt. Brown trousers were tucked into black riding boots and brown stubble peppered his face. Chance could tell that he wasn’t a run of the mill tough, it was something in his eyes. Something “dark” was hiding behind

those brown circles. The other was thin and somewhat pale...with small eyes and a narrow nose that ran through the center of his face. He looked completely bored and fidgeted in the pockets of his gray coveralls. He shrugged and stood.

“Yeah, but it not for long... those guards are going to arrest me for having a blaster,” Chance said to the larger of the two. The man cracked a smile and, without taking his eyes from Chance spoke over his shoulder... “A’sok...”

The thin man peeled away and intercepted the guards exiting the hallway. The larger man grabbed Chance by the shoulder and directed him out into the downpour. Thunder rolled and made it difficult for Chance to hear, but the man said something about being friends of Leeza and wanting to find out what happened to her.

“I thought you might be the ones who hurt my sister,” he shrugged, letting the rain soak into his hair and wash the remainder of the ice cream from his body. The mans called “A’sok” appeared then, grinning widely, “Took care of it Vic.”

“Good.,” he turned back to Chance. “I’m Vic, this is A’sok...we’ve never even really met your sister...formally. She was a friend of a friend ...so to speak.” He glanced around, slicking back his mane of brown hair.” I wouldn’t mind checking out your sisters dorm room...maybe we can find out who did this to her.”

“Whatever...I’ll show you where it is,” Chance said. If these two tried a double cross, he would just kill them and dump their bodies in an alley somewhere. No one even knew he was on planet anyway...except L-Zee who was back collecting dust in a storage facility. Vic and A’sok nodded and they all headed off towards a hovercab parked near the corner of the building.

The basement of the Mrlsst University Library carried the earthy odor of ancient boxes and storage containers that hadn’t been opened for millennia. Klux and Baal descended the steep stairs slowly, turning on the lights as they reached the bottom.

“I can’t believe how easy it was to get in here,” Klux said over his shoulder. Behind him the large cat moved without making a sound.

“Easier than an Imperial Garrison,” Baal added.

“Yeah, hey, you think Vic would spring for us like, a lightsaber training room or something at JIE when we get done here?” Klux asked, moving around crates and filing cabinets towards the back.

Ball snorted. "I think we need to find those books and get off this planet. I sense something very bad is going to happen."

Klux shrugged and stopped. They had neared the back of the room and off to the left a cabinet had been pushed aside...beyond a piece of board leaned against the wall.

"And what do we have here...?" Klux gently pulled the board away, revealing a rectangular hole carved into the dull grey duracrete. The smell of soil and sulfur drifted from the darkness and began to fill the room.

"It smells like a grave," Baal said, wrinkling his nose.

"So much for staying positive," Klux said, checking his comm.

"Indeed," Baal snarled and brushed past him, disappearing in the darkness.

Opening his mouth to protest, Klux just shook his head. "Right...I'll cover our rear then," he murmured and stepped into the dark.

The door had been sealed off by the campus security with a bright orange sticker that read "Crime Scene- Do Not Enter" but that didn't stop Chance from throwing a shoulder block into it. It shuddered, but didn't break, and the young swoop racer wound up bouncing off its cream paneling as if it were made of rubber. He collapsed at A'sok's feet cursing.

"Hey, Angry Young man, you wanna back off and let a professional handle this?" Vic asked, and threw a nod to A'sok. The hacker stepped around Chance and leaned towards the doors electronic lock. After letting his fingers dance around the keyboard for a moment the door opened with a "swoosh", disappearing into the like-colored doorframe.

It was mid-day and classes were going on, so the hall way relatively empty. The only light pouring in came from the end of the hall, thirty meters away. With the thunderstorm in full swing the hall was bathed in a dull grey light with intermittent patches of shadow.

Smiling, A'sok turned and showed a toothy grin. "After you, Gentlemen..."

Chance stared at the door. "How did..."

"Easy...after a crime most of these Security departments seal the doors off with their own codes...and those are usually changed daily...to make it simple they often use a combination of the local date and location to..."

“Right...lets take this seminar out of the hall professor,” Vic said stepping past A’sok and into the room.

It was a complete mess. Nothing appeared to have been touched since Chance’s sister had been moved and blood stained books still littered the floor. Dropping to one knee, Vic searched amongst the piles of flimplast and holodiscs, trying to disturb as little as possible.

“Bastards!” Growled Chance from behind and stormed into the room. Anger rolled off of him in waves and he turned, scanning the room, clenching his fists at his side.

Vic continued to pick amongst the pile of data. A’sok stepped around him, approaching Chance. “Look man, you need to calm down...”

“Get away from me!” Chance spat and advanced. A’sok stood his ground and Chance butted his forehead against A’sok’s. “For all I know you could still be in on it...you...”

“You both want to shut that noise down?” Vic asked standing.

The young racer turned towards him, “Why don’t you...” he began but Vic shoved his index finger against his chest.

“Shut up. I’m heading to the lab next door, you can come along, or sit in here and knock the poodoo out of each other. I don’t much care which.”

“Lab? What for Boss?” A’sok asked, backing away from them both.

Turning, Vic held up a fine tuft of golden fur. “Evidence analysis,” he said and walked out the door.

Baal and Klux moved silently along the rough stone floor of the catacombs. The air was filled with a thin veil of smoke and smelled as if someone had been burning old clothes.

They were somewhere under the campus now, having left the library far behind. After encountering numerous turns and intersections they were now relying on instinct to lead them. Baal’s glowrod played about the tunnel, revealing mortar walls constructed long ago by primitive hands.

Klux followed closely behind, letting his right hand trace the contour of the tunnel wall. Cold stone passed under his fingertips, occasionally marred by cracks or some sort of ancient writing they had given up on trying to decipher.

Baal stopped suddenly and Klux almost walked into him.

“What is it?”

The large cat had stiffened and Klux realized he was casting a light into an opening in the wall to their left. "A room," Baal muttered and cautiously stepped through the door.

Klux followed and found himself in a narrow room with a low ceiling. A pile of what was perhaps once a table and chair lay in the middle of the room. Baal fanned out towards the left and Klux stepped right, examining the pile of rubble. "I think we're wasting our..." he began but Baal was crouching at the back of the room. Approaching, he saw that a part of the rear wall had been carved away into a rough alcove. Several skulls and a few bones were scattered in the small space, sitting atop a mound of dirt, decaying with age.

"What is that, some sort of burial mound?" he asked from behind the large cat.

"It would appear so. A disturbing way to be buried."

"This isn't a burial Baal," Klux said leaning over; he spied a thin piece of cloth stretching out from beneath the bones. "Hmmm...". Grabbing a hold of it, he jerked the cloth towards him and a bag emerged from under the bones, kicking up a plume of dust.

"Jackpot," he said, peering inside.

"Look buddy, I don't want to waste time going back to the post and filling out paperwork...so can ya just run the sample here?" Vic asked. He was addressing a young Gran whose three orange eyestalks were still busy peering at the false sector ranger ID Vic had handed him.

"I don't know...I've got a term paper and there is a shockball game on tonight..." he muttered through large square teeth.

Entering the squat drab green building only minutes before, Vic walked into the first lab he found. The Gran had been hunkered down at a desk, face buried in a datapad; he didn't even look up when Vic rounded one of the dozens of empty lab tables that marched through the room.

A'sok and Chance were parked outside in a cab...the last thing Vic needed was Chance trying to strong-arm some meek college kid. No, this needed a more subtle touch.

"I understand that pal...look," Vic said, digging into his flight jacket. "Here, this should make up for your lost time," he said, holding out a cred chip with the lock of blonde fur on top.

The Gran's eyes grew wide. "Sure, that will cover my lum expense for tonight!"

Vic shook his head. "Yeah, whatever. Just run the sample...alright?"

Plucking the cred chip-and fur from Vic's fingers, he offered up a toothy grin. "Sure!"

Twenty minutes later the Gran handed Vic a short piece of flimplast. The outlaw took it and scanned over the blue text.

"Srros'tok? What the hell is that?" he asked looking up. Shrugging, he dropped onto a bench opposite of where Vic sat. "The comp says it's a felinoid species but that's about it."

Vic stared at the flimplast for another beat and got up. "This will come in very handy, thanks for your cooperation," he added and headed towards the door.

"No prob, thanks for the Lum money!"

Vic shut the passenger side door and turned to A'sok and Chance, who were in the cab's back seat. "Looks like some sort of..."

"Hey Vic, who won the Galaxy Wide Shockball finals 4 years back?" A'sok asked.

"What?"

The young hacker threw a nod towards Chance who sat shaking his head. "This guy thinks it was the Corellian Gamblers...but I say it was the Coruscant Towers...now, if that's true..."

"Look, shut up ok? I don't give four nerf craps about who won what...and it was the Towers for the record...we got to..."

"HA!" A'sok spat and leaned back. Chance threw a glare at Vic and turned to look out the window at the falling rain.

"Damn...just take us to the starport," Vic told the driver, a small, rust colored droid with a head the shape of a wedge.

"Sure thing boss. And for the record, the Gamblers got robbed that year..." he responded in metallic chatter.

"Shut up," Vic said and, leaning his head back, closed his eyes.

“I’ve got a bad feeling.”

Baal stopped inspecting the pile of ash and turned towards Klux. He was standing near the room’s small door and casting his light down the dark tunnel. “We were having negative feelings before we entered this place, what is different now?” Baal asked.

“I don’t know. It’s just...it’s different, more immediate.” Klux pulled his comm from his belt and began hitting buttons. A moment later it beeped to life and A’sok’s voice emerged from the tiny silver cylinder.

“A’sok’s Used Datapads.”

“A’sok. Klux. Look...I think we might need backup...something isn’t right here...”

Baal turned away and went back to the pile of ash. It was the fourth pile they had come across in the last several rooms but the first one that was still smoldering. They realized that someone else was in the caverns when they first smelled the smoke; these piles were just more proof of another presence.

Baal closed his mind to Klux and his surroundings and focused on the pile. It was nothing more than a heap of black ash, with small tendrils of black smoke drifting upwards. He calmed his mind and focused on the smoke. It wafted and spiraled and slowly an image hovered in front of him. He peered close and saw the pile and figures around it...but instead of ash it was a large volume of paper...a “book”. The figures moved around it and suddenly it exploded into flame a golden flame that looked unlike any fire he had ever seen.

“Baal!”

The voice pulled him out of the vision and he looked up to see Klux standing over him.

“Come on pal, Vic and the others are headed this way...I think we need to wrap it up here.” Baal stood and shook of the remainder of the images. Something in the back of his mind still tingled...a sense of fear and dread remaining with him.

“I think you may be right.”

The cabbie visibly shook when Vic tossed the large black duffel in next to him. Dropping into the seat, armor bulged underneath the outlaw's black leather trenchcoat. A'sok, wearing a light suit of armor and Chance, still wearing his racing leathers hopped in the back.

"Uh...I don't.." The droid began, looking between A'sok and Vic, his metallic head swiveling like a top.

Jabbing a one hundred cred chip into the droids neck joint, Vic pointed towards a distant cluster of building. "Just drive and keep your yap shut, rustbucket."

The droid nodded and the cab raced off.

Klux strolled forward cautiously with Baal just a step behind. They were slowly making their way through the caverns back towards the library when they heard voices.

They began as a low murmur and both strained to make out what they were saying. Klux, against his better judgment, began to follow them, pulling his lightsaber from his side and gripping it in his sweaty fist.

"I sense nothing," Baal said from behind him, drawing his own weapon. Klux nodded silently. He too could sense no life in the caverns, but it was much more than that...it was as if there was NOTHING in the caverns...as if they existed in a Force-free vacuum.

The voices seemed to be getting louder and Klux could just see a light ahead. Approaching, he could see that it was firelight falling from a recessed doorway. Behind him he could sense Baal, primed and ready. Cautiously, they approached the doorway.

"I need a weapon."

Vic turned and regarded Chance with a stare. They were in the library's storeroom and just meters away from the basement door. Several students were hunkered down in a cubicle four meters to their left, oblivious to the outside world; otherwise the place was deathly quiet.

He was in full Terminus mode now, Vic Palisades having been left in a wet alley behind the library.

“What?”

A'sok rolled his eyes and checked the charge on his carbine. “I thought you had a blaster.”

Chance shrugged and held up the DL-44. “It's not a rifle...I could use one of yours...or,” he said pointing to Terminus' armor, “you could let me use on of those grenades.”

“The only time a grenade comes off of this armor is when it's minus a pin,” the bounty hunter responded. He pointed at the DL-44, “that will be good enough, I don't trust you with explosives.”

Chance balked and looked to A'sok.

“Don't look at me Red, I don't trust you at all.”

“Fine, that's fine,” the swoop racer spat through gritted teeth, “lets just get this thing over with!”

Terminus turned towards him and jammed his finger under Chance's nose. “For the last time. Shut up. The library will be closing its doors in ten minutes...then we move.”

Smoke filled the small room and hung above the ground like a shroud. Holding his breath, Klux entered and spotted its source - a stack of books towards the rear were engulfed in flame and spouting plumes of black smoke.

Baal was past him in a flash, casting his cloak onto the fire. Klux raced to help and they were able to douse the flames but it was no use, the book was destroyed.

“Who's down here? Show yourself!” Klux exclaimed. They had been playing catch up with someone for the better part of two hours and knew even less than when they entered the caverns.

“It has to be the Imperials, only they would have a fear of knowledge such as this,” Baal said shaking his head and poking through the ash. Klux stood; he was turning towards the doorway when he saw the smoke stir and twist.

He registered the movement as a golden lightsaber seemingly flared to life on it's own in the small room, slashing at him in one blinding motion.

His body moved before his mind could catch up. Jedi training took over and his lightsaber sparked to life in front of him, the blue shaft of energy parrying the deadly gold arc of light.

Blaster fire erupted from somewhere near the back of the storeroom, forcing Terminus to dive to the ground and roll to cover. Behind him A'sok and Chance did the same, both skittering behind a large steel horizontal filing block. Red spears of light slammed into the identical cover Terminus had and he could feel the force of the shots driving the block backwards against his armor.

The room was pitch black, the only illumination coming from the random shots lancing back and forth, casting everything in a crimson glow. "A'sok cover me," he said into his comm. and crawled out from behind the block.

More fire erupted but stayed a good meter above his head. Green fire returned from A'sok's position and the opposition ceased firing for a moment. Terminus pulled a grenade from his chest harness and lobbed it towards the back of the room. He covered his head as the explosion blew the block apart, scattering fire and data disks across the expanse of the room. He was just raising his head when a second and third explosion rocked him, bathing everything a red glow of flame and death. Heat seared through his armor and he could feel it baking away the paint on it's exterior.

Something rustled and moved. A stumbling black clad figure emerged, leveling a blaster at him. It was a point blank shot and the bounty hunter simply clamped his jaw shut hoping his armor would absorb the energy.

A green blaster bolt lanced from the darkness and picking the figure up and tossing him back into the flaming wreckage. Terminus was up in a second and moving towards the carnage in the back of the room. A'sok trotted up a moment later, surveying the damage.

Four bodies lay crumpled on the floor, adorned in flat black armor. Scattered among the wreckage were the remnants of at least three other bodies. Kneeling next to one, Terminus removed the black helmet, inspecting it's interior. Chance stepped up behind them, still gripping his weapon with an unsteady hand.

"Who are they?" he asked pointing with the DL-44. Terminus gently pushed the barrel down and away from the body and nodded towards the corpse.

"Imperials," he replied, tossing the helmet to the ground. "Looks like they also had explosives on them...must have gone up when the grenade blew."

A'sok rose from the corpse he was inspecting. "Yeah...too precise and conservative with their shots, clean shaven and no visible markings on the armor," the hacker shook his head. "I don't get it Boss, everything screams Imps but these guys aren't wearing any kind of armor I've ever seen a Imp wear."

Surveying the rest of the room, he let his visor toggle through its various modes. It settled on infrared and began illuminating the darker corners of the room. Off to the left a large plank of wood was haphazardly jammed against the wall. Behind it he could just make out a patch of darkness.

"I think we've found the caverns." He stood and readied his Light Repeating Blaster.

"Alright," A'sok said from behind him.

"Hang on," Chance said walking up to them. He held his pistol at the ready and Terminus noticed his jacket was askew. "Try to keep up," he told the younger man and continued to move.

Red, blue and gold energy clashed in the small room. Baal had joined the fight and had taken up a position opposite of Klux. Under normal circumstances the tactic would have worked and they would have made short work of the opponent.

But what opponent?

Klux had been slashing and parrying for the better part of a minute and still had yet to lay eyes on anything other than a flashing golden blade. Their opponent must be using the force to hide himself, Klux thought as he batted away another attack. The smoke was causing his eyes to water; in addition to that, the room was smaller than they first thought, so Klux constantly had to adjust his position to avoid slashing into a wall or parrying the golden blade into his partner. Baal, on the other hand, was loving it. His face gleamed with excitement and he twirled and maneuvered around the dancing golden blade, striking it aside with his own red glowing shaft of energy.

"Baal we need to get out of here, we need..." Klux began but the golden blade spun and came back towards the young Jedi, forcing him to duck and roll, coming up in a crouch that just barely parried the blade. This can't go on for much longer, Klux thought.

They had traveled down the tunnel no more than a hundred meters when they met resistance. More black armored adversaries were laying down fire and forcing Terminus, A'sok and Chance to seek cover in a small alcove no more than ten meters away.

Up ahead the tunnel branched into a "Y" and the opposition had established a firing lane from one of the branches.

“This is no good! We can’t get out from here without getting cut in two!” A’sok yelled over the firing. He was knelt down in front of Terminus returning a volley of fire.

“We have no other choice...don’t worry, they will make a mistake,” Terminus replied and stepped out from the cover and let a hail of blaster fire erupt from his LRB. The crimson bolts streaked down the dark hall, casting everything in a red glow and blasting apart mortar and earth a millisecond later.

“Yeah, well, I hope they screw up before we run out of ammo!” A’sok screamed, popping a new energy clip into his carbine. Smoke began to fill the tunnel and Terminus toggled back to infrared. The world changed to a dull red color and he was able to make out dark shapes changing position at the end of the tunnel. Reaching his LRB, his vision was suddenly blocked by Chance’s head. “Chew on this you Imp pigs!” he screamed and hurled something down the hall.

The last thing Terminus saw was the concussion grenade hit the junction and bounce back towards their position. Then a flash enveloped him and threw him back into the hard tunnel wall. Then darkness took him.

An explosion somewhere nearby shook the floor. Klux stumbled, losing his footing, and dropped to the ground. The golden blade stopped dancing for a second and slammed into Baal’s red blade with such force that the cat was knocked off balance as well.

Righting himself, Klux was just able to parry the next attack from the invisible opponent. Then, for the first time since the battle began, a figure emerged behind the golden saber, almost phasing out of the smoke and into substance.

The cat creature must have been at least as tall as Baal. His hair was a deep gold color and his face wore a more severe mask of hatred and anger than his partners. Golden glowing eyes danced above a deadly muzzle that was pulled back in an evil grin.

“Jeeeedi!” It screamed and slashed down towards Klux. Raising his weapons in defense, it clashed with Baal’s red blade and all three blades intersected. For a moment no one moved. Suddenly, the cat creature shot out a long powerful leg that connected with Baal’s ribs, knocking him out of guard and doubling him over. Klux struggled to his feet lunged towards the creature. Slashing out, he hammered his glowing blue blade against the golden cat’s saber in a volley of rage.

Strike after strike caught the darksider off guard and he spun, disappearing again, along with the lightsaber’s blade this time.

Dropping back, he and took up a defensive stance. Baal was regrouping and both searched the room for some sign of the Sith warrior.

Reappearing, the Sith's golden blade leapt to life and struck out towards Baal. The large Trianni went to parry but miscalculated the blade's distance; the shimmering golden shaft of energy passed behind the Jedi's blade, severing his hand at the wrist.

No words escaped from Baal's mouth, instead he simply dropped to the ground, grasping at his still twitching appendage.

"Baal!" Klux screamed and spun, bringing his blue saber around and blocking a second blow aimed for the back of Baal's head. Blue and gold clashed together, raining sparks down on the young Trianni.

Terminus stared into darkness. His head throbbed and a persistent ringing echoed through his helmet. He tried to shake it off but it held on tight, nausea overwhelming him.

Slowly, he rose up on one arm and brought his face up from the ground.

Darkness. Pure darkness that exists when there is an absolute absence of light. Bringing an uncertain hand up to his helmet he tapped its side. Nothing. Frustrated, he slapped it with an open palm-and was surprised to see an image jump to life.

Something clicked in the helmet but at least he could see. The image blurred to life and lit the catacombs in blood red.

Pulling himself up, he reached down and retrieved his LRB. Beside him, face down, lay Chance, bleeding onto the ground. A'sok was a little better, leaning up against the back of the nook, with a crooked smile on his face.

"Bartender...I'll have another one of those, this time with less shrapnel."

"Come on, we need to move," Terminus said, helping him up. A'sok sported a gash across his shoulder but seemed only slightly stunned. "Bossman, I need you to hold on to my blaster...cause if you don't I'm gonna shoot that retard in the back of the head," he gestured down at the prone swoop racer.

"Just hang on..." Terminus began when he heard Klux scream. It came from somewhere off to their right and both moved towards the fork in the hall, stumbling over commando bodies as they went.

Klux parried the golden blade away and countered, bringing his own cobalt colored blade down and across, singeing the cat's black tunic. Retreating a step, it bared an impressive set of fangs and snarled something in a language Klux didn't understand. Pressing the attack, he went for a double-handed strike,

hoping to cleave the cat in two. Spinning, the cat caught Klux's blade and forced him out of guard.

In one swift motion, the gold blade sliced upwards and Klux braced himself, feeling pain erupt across his chest. Stumbling backwards, he held onto two things for dear life: his lightsaber and consciousness.

Off to his right, Baal was prone, sprawled against the cavern wall, barely able to hold his weapon up for defense. Something warm was staining his tunic but he blocked it...letting the force flow across him and shutting him out to the pain swelling from within. Steeling himself, he held his ground and waited for the final attack.

The cat pulled its maw back in what Klux assumed was a smile and brought its blade up.

"Eat hot death Nerfchucker!"

The scream came from just outside the door and filled the small room. All eyes turned towards the doorway as it lit up with the red glow of blaster fire and the all too familiar roar of a Netfali Arms Triple Barrel Light Repeating Blaster.

Bodies, clad in black armor that were quietly hovering in the doorway, exploded in fire and gore, red arterial spray covering the room and its occupants. The large golden cat matched the roar of the weapon with one of rage and spun, disappearing from sight. A section of the room's wall crumbled away as the creature made its escape.

Two forms emerged from the smoked filled doorway as Klux's weapon and body both dropped to the ground, darkness wrapping around him and pulling him into unconsciousness.

"Your friends are going to be alright... a few more days in bacta and the major wounds should be healed."

Vic raised a weary eyebrow at the approaching woman. She was probably about six or seven years younger than him, in her mid-twenties, and lightly tanned. A bundle of blonde hair was pulled up under a surgeons cap and she dropped a trim body next to his on the grav couch. Bloodstains and a smell of disinfectant

coming from her medical scrubs marred her otherwise perfect beauty. She gave him a small smile and leaned back into the deep blue plush.

They were in a waiting room on the second floor of the medical building. The floor had been closed off due to renovations, but the equipment and systems were still operational. Bacta tanks in the next room cast a bluish glow through the observation window, providing the rooms only illumination.

“Sounds great Dr. Salias,” Vic said offering her a matching smile. “I trust our arrangement will keep them off of the local securities’ radar...”

Nodding, she leaned forward. “Absolutely. I normally wouldn’t have taken the creds, but,” her face blushed, “I’m heading to the Corporate Sector soon and any help I can get to get me started on my residency, well, you know.”

“Hey, the galaxy doesn’t run on IOU’s” Vic said, smiling. He put a hand on her thigh and gave her a charismatic grin. “I appreciate it. You have no idea how much you have helped us out.”

“Call me Lauren,” she replied, not flinching from under his touch. “Would you mind if I asked what happened? I’ve never seen wounds like that, except once, in an arc welder accident...”

“I wish I knew. We found them down in the caverns like that...I’m guessing some sort of blaster mishap maybe,” Vic replied. Beneath him in a large duffel bag sat the Jedi’s light sabers and the books they retrieved from the cavern...they would want them back at some point.

The Doctor gave him a wry smile and rolled her eyes. “Yeah, I guess that makes sense. Well, I know you are planning on spending the next few days watching over them, so I’ll get out of here and let you...”

“Hey, would you, uh, like to get something to drink? It’s just been a long day and..” Vic began but stopped when the room’s double doors swung wide.

“Hey, hey!” A’sok said, entering the room. The hacker was wearing a shoulder sling and carrying a data pad in his good hand. “Got the latest PNL reports from JIE...looks like,” he stopped noticing Vic’s barbed stare.

“What?”

“We were about to go get a drink,” Vic said, gesturing to Dr.Salias.

“Great! Where are we going?” A’sok asked, dropping onto the grav couch between them.

“You aren’t,” Vic stood, keeping the young man on the couch with a forceful push. “Stay here and keep an eye on the boys, alright?”

Salias stood as well and moved towards the door. Vic smiled and moved off in her direction, leaving the hacker by himself on the bobbing grav couch.

“Ok then, I’ll, uh...stay here.”

“Will he be ok?” The Doctor asked as Vic drew even, sliding an arm around her waist and leading her through the doors.

“No...but don’t worry...he hasn’t been ‘ok’ since I’ve known him,” he said and let the doors swing shut behind him.

“M-M-Master Mulgrew, so g-good to see you,” L-Zee stammered through his vocabulator. Chance shut the door to the storage closet and dropped onto a container marked “clothing”. Muscles still sore from the catacomb blast ached in protest but he shut out the pain. It had been hard to box Leeza’s things up, and even harder having to sit through the University Security’s question and answer session. Once he was cleared to leave he set about collecting his sisters belongings and depositing what was left of her life in drab plastic containers.

“Yeah, good to see you too,” he mumbled. “Go through your diagnostics, it’s time to go.” Beside him on another container a holopic rotated through a scene of he and his sister. It was taken when both were younger, right before one of Chance’s first big competitions. His sister, so full of life, grabbed him around the collar and smiled at the camera, waving furiously. He would never see her again, their life together, so messed up from the beginning, was over. When he was young he did everything to protect her and put her through school, and the one time she really needed him he was halfway across the galaxy. She needed him and he wasn’t there for her... now she was dead.

“Is Master Mulgrew going to take L-Zee along when he leaves?” the droid asked. It’s domed repair droid head swiveled curiously on top of a 3-PO protocol droid body. He had been tinkering on the droid for years, trying to work out a bug that caused the droid to change personalities at random.

“Yeah...there is nothing here for us anymore L-Zee..Leeza...” his voice caught in his throat, “Leeza is dead.”

The droid said nothing, merely taking in the info and returning a passive stare at its master. Tears begin to well in his eyes and Chance pulled his DL-44 from his shoulder holster. “But don’t worry pal...we are going to track down the person responsible, and I’m going to make him bleed before I make him pay.”

