

Episode VIII:

Prophecy of the Fates Revelation

Statistics. Numbers stacked on top of each other, occupying a tiny corner of a holoprojection. Meaningless digits that meant nothing, but told everything. Two hundred dead, over three hundred wounded. Research labs and specimens-all destroyed. The list went on, listing a TIE squadron and AT-AT is scrap; the computer core and the invaluable research housed inside, reduced to nothing more than a carbonized chunk of silicone and durasteel.

“All of it gone, useless molten slag,” Nomi whispered to herself. To her right the 2-1B medical droid stopped working. “Mistress?” he asked. He was in the process of reattaching her hand to her wrist and was nearing completion. Using her remaining hand, she batted away the holoprojection, shutting the program down.

“Nothing. It’s all nothing now,” she fumed, the painkillers causing her head to swim. Anger welled in her and she let her gaze drift across the command bridge and out the observation window of Darkmoon, her Loronar Strike Cruiser. The vessel was still docked above Dejer Prime, awaiting Nomi’s orders to leave. She could care less. It was all the fault of those pieces of rebel trash. In time, she would have her revenge. Hate consumed her; in her mind’s eye she cut them all down, headless torsos dropping to the ground like...

Sparks exploded beside her. The 2-1B crumpled as a crimson blade slashed through its center and continued through her wrist, dropping her hand to the deck. Pain exploded behind her eyes and she gripped the stub of wrist, hitting the deck hard and rolling onto her back. The lightsaber blade hummed just centimeters from her face as she tried to blink away tears and control the maddening pain coursing through her arm.

“I should kill you for this failure,” he said, towering above her. Beyond the blade she could make out the handsome visage of High Inquisitor Tremayne, features marred by a metallic plate and glowing red orb where his right eye should be. A black cloak billowed around him, allowing a peak at a like colored tunic beneath. The condescending smile that normally sat in the center of his face was gone; replaced by a snarl that rivaled that of a Rancor.

“If not for the favor you’ve gained with the Emperor, I would have already cut you into so many pieces. Such is my mistake,” Placing a dark leather boot against her face, he applied painful pressure, forcing it into the cold of the deck. Slowly he continued until the faces of her startled crew began to swim before her eyes, the numbness of the pain medication now gone.

“You will never be more than a worthless farm girl from Xanath IV,” he said, disdain and anger washing over her prone form, “Go find the two we seek-fail this time and even the Emperor won’t be able to save you from my wrath.”

The pressure on her temple disappeared and he stepped back, allowing her a chance to breathe.

“Rise,” he commanded.

Coughing a spatter of blood onto the deck, she shook the dizziness from her skull and painfully began to push herself up on her left hand. When she had her knees under her a black leather boot shot out, connecting with her torso. Nausea and pain erupted in her chest and she fell backwards, landing on her shoulder blades. The world grew dark. “I trust we won’t forget this lesson, you insipid child” were the last words she heard before she passing out.

Dr. Lauren Salias sat in the lounge of the Ghtroc freighter “Skullduggery” with the rest of its crew, all huddled around a tiny round table; some sat on a worn silver couch that made a half circle around the table, others on small wire frame stools. To her right was Vic, a man she came to know...and love? Maybe, she wasn’t sure...yet. Beside him a tall thin humanoid named A’sok tapped away at a datapad, paying little attention to her or anyone else. On her left sat a huge blue Trianni named Baal. She had just reattached his hand only weeks before, when she was interning on the University planet of Mrlsst. The felinoid had made a full recovery in little time, and now sat shoveling a plate of Mrlsst Drebbles into a huge maw.

Seated beside him on a stool a nondescript human with wavy brown hair and a goatee named Klux picked away at his meal of Mrlsst Range Tunda and vegetables. Rounding

out the circle was a red-haired man about her age with deep green eyes. He wore a scowl like a fashion accessory and most of his meal had yet to be touched.

Shifting in her chair, she edged closer to Vic, not so much for warmth, her black bodyglove and oversized sweatshirt were doing a good job of that; it was more for comfort, and, as she looked around the table, maybe a little protection. They had been sharing a bunk since he agreed to take her to the Corporate Sector and seemed to be the only one who she could really trust, the others seemed cold or...odd. A droid hovered in and placed a cup of caffe before her.

“Thank you,” she said to “Ten-Spot.” He wasn’t built like any droid she had every seen before; a domed head sat atop a tapering cylindrical chassis that hovered almost a meter above the Skull’s deck. Vic called him an “all purpose maintenance droid” but he was unlike like any she had ever seen working around her parents home on Coruscant.

“Think nothing of it,” he replied, a hint of sarcasm flavoring his monotone voice. “Does anyone else require anything or may I go back to my personal Hell?”

Vic looked up from a piece of flimplast he was browsing. “No, that’s all. Make sure you keep Hell picked up from now on. I almost broke my damn neck tripping over a hydrospanner last night.” The droid stared without responding and silently hovered backwards out of the lounge, never taking it’s eyes off of the group.

Pushing a lock of blonde hair away from her face, Lauren suppressed a giggle and sipped at the tasty warm brew. The robust flavor of ground beans and dash of Soccoran Rava sat in her mouth and slowly made it’s way into her stomach. As it’s warmth spread through her she cradled her hands around the mug and peered into the dark brown liquid with intelligent blue eyes; the ship never seemed to be warm enough to suit her.

“Crazy droid,” Vic muttered, returning to the flimplast. “Is this accurate Baal?”

“From the traffic I’m seeing on the Newsnets, yes.” The large feline took a pull from a bottle of water. “The CSA is rounding up Trianni villages and shipping them out as slave labor. I’m not sure why or what for, but I can’t sit back and allow this to happen,” he said, leaning forward in his chair. “My people have fought this war for too long, it must stop sometime.”

Vic stirred uncomfortably, tossing the flimplast into the center of the cluttered table.

“Look, Baal, I didn’t have a problem going to Mrsst, and I realize we have to take Lauren to the Corporate Sector...but we don’t have a lot of time to go sight seeing and avenging the wrongs of the galaxy.”

“Vic, I’ve not asked much from this team, “Baal began. “When you wanted to go after the Askala Contract, I raised no argument. When the Rebel...” he stopped abruptly, shooting a glance at Lauren and back. She felt her heart skip a beat. Was he about to say the Rebellion? “I meant to say...”

“Hey man, it’s been a while since we checked in at JIE. We’ve got a business to run ya know,” A’sok piped up, running a hand through a mass of black hair; he never took his

eyes from the datapad. Baal, feline features contorting in irritation, picked up a tiny spice container and hurled it at him. "Hey!" A'sok exclaimed as the small silver cylinder smacked against his shoulder and rebounded from the table and onto the deck.

"Look, look...ok," Vic said holding up his hands, "Baal's right. His people are in danger and we need to check on them...that's fine," he reached over and took a sip from Laurens steaming mug. "We'll hit Fibuli, then drop her off, if that's ok?" he asked turning towards her. Brown intelligent eyes sat under a violet tattoo that curved across the right of his forehead. She had meant to ask him what it symbolized but he seemed to change the subject whenever she approached it.

"Sure! Absolutely!" she replied smiling and nodding. She was just happy that he agreed to take her to the Coporate Sector, it saved her having to find less reliable passage. But was that all? Did her eagerness not have anything to do with the time they had been spending in each other's company? She pushed the thought away, she had a position as head surgeon waiting for her on Bonadan, a position that her rich parent's had nothing to do with her getting, making it even more important. However, she had to admit the thought of staying here with Vic had some appeal...

"What are you asking her permission for? Who's she? Don't you call the shots around here?" Chance asked from across the table. His face pasty white face was angry, coupled with a smirk it made him look even less attractive than normal. Leaning back, he crossed his arms and stared daggers towards Vic.

"No, no I don't," Vic replied, leveling a stern gaze at the younger man. She could detect his easy-going nature being replaced by something harder and darker; the red-haired swoop racer seemed to bring out the worst in the crew.

"Wow...Really? Seemed like you did back on Mrlsst. I figured you for ex-Imperial with the way you were ordering everyone around," he cracked. Leaning back on his stool he turned his attention to his fingernails, picking at one with a set of crooked teeth. In a blur, Vic snatched Laurens mug and hurled it across the table; smacking against the young mans forehead, it coated him in coffee and caused him to lose his balance. He hit the deck with a heavy "THUD" and clatter as the cup skittered away trailing the murky brown liquid.

"SUNNUVABITCH!" Chance screamed, racing boots peddling in mid-air. A moment later he stood, face flushed red with anger and clutching a humming vibroblade in his right hand. Lauren hadn't seen him go for the weapon and she gasped in alarm. Drawing back he froze; still clutched in his hand, the weapon hovered menacingly above the table. His eyes were locked on A'sok, suddenly, amid the deathly quiet gathering, all eyes turned to the hacker.

Without pulling his eyes from the datapad, the pale humanoid had drawn a small holdout blaster, burying it deep in the swoop racer's ribs.

"I would watch who you call an Imperial on this boat Nerfchucker-some tend to take it personally," Vic said, rising. "Sorry about your drink Babe," he whispered to Lauren,

placing a brief kiss behind her ear. Turning his attention back to Chance, who stood trembling with the vibroblade hovering in front of him he leaned forward and plucked it from the young mans grasp.

“When you get a moment of clarity I would also thank A’sok for saving your life,” he said shutting the weapon down and tossing it to Klux, who snatched it from mid-air. “People who draw knives on me tend to get them returned-pointy-end first.” Turning, he smiled in Lauren’s direction and made his way from behind the table, disappearing down the corridor. Chance righted his chair and dropped into it, fists clenched into tight balls of rage.

“Better learn to control that trigger,” A’sok said, the hold-out disappearing into one of many pockets on the mans coveralls. Baal and Klux shared a concerned glance and stood. “We need to talk to Chance in the cargo hold anyway,” Klux said, tossing a napkin on his plate and gesturing for the swoop racer to follow. “We’ll cover some dining etiquette protocols, among other things.”

Glancing between the two, Chance rose. “Great, guess I get to get lectured by you two geniuses too,” he spat and stormed from the lounge.

“Uh, yeah. I got to get some things ready, you know, personal things,” Lauren offered to A’sok, standing.

“Later!” he cheerfully called, face never leaving the datapad.

Backing away from the table, she followed the corridor away from the galley, sidestepping Ten-Spot who was hovering in the opposite direction.

“Oh I guess I get to clean up too?!?” she heard him shout from the lounge. Shaking her head she continued, wondering what she had gotten herself into.

“That Jerk is going to get sliced. I hope he doesn’t make a habit of sleeping,” Chance fumed, kicking an empty cargo crate. The durasteel box moved less than a centimeter. Baal sealed the bay door and followed Klux who fell in behind the young man. Baal had sensed Chance’s potential about the same time Klux had, and both agreed to approach him at once. After the episode in the lounge, he hoped they hadn’t misjudged the young man’s potential.

“Chance, we need to talk to you,” Klux started, casting back his brown robes. Baal did likewise, his regal purple robe revealing a deep blue tunic. The red haired man turned facing them, a smirk crossing his face. “What? You guys going to work me over? Is that how Vic handles things? You and the big blue...” He jabbed his finger in Baal’s face and was about to unload a threat when he stopped, eyes falling to the Trianni’s waist. “What’s that?”

With a flash, Baal’s lightsaber was in his hand, a red blade leaping from the hilt and illuminating the swoop racer in a red wash of light. “This is a lightsaber, a weapon of Mew-Tao warriors,” Baal said with a degree of pride.

From Baal's left Klux let loose a cough, slowly detaching his own lightsaber. "Actually," he said, igniting his own cobalt blue blade, "it's the weapon of a Jedi. I was going to go for the 'less dramatic' approach."

Irritation ruffled the fur on Baal's back; they had been discussing this issue for weeks without any resolution. The Jedi was adamant that any sort of Force related warrior was a Jedi. Baal, who had been born and bred into the Mew-Tao religion, knew otherwise. Both had very different ideas on which discipline to train the young man in. "Klux, we agreed to discuss this later."

"It is later," Klux said, turning from Chance.

"Whoa! A LIGHTSABER? Wicked! Where did you guys get those?" Chance asked, green eyes growing wide in wonder. Baal pulled away from Klux's challenging gaze and focused on the young man. "We are practitioners of "The Force" Chance. The reason we tell you this is, and are confiding in you, is that we have sensed Force potential in you. Only a rare few possess the ability to properly wield it."

Eyes narrowing, Chance seemed to focus on some far off memory. "Yeah...yeah there have been times...even in my last race...when I felt...something...different...like I could almost control things. You know, make things move." He stepped over to his green and black swoop and hopped on the seat, staring between the two. "So that's the Force huh?"

"Yes, telekinesis is but one of a Jedi's abilities," Klux said shutting down his saber and reattaching it to his thick leather belt. "Baal and I would like to train you...in time you could become a powerful Jedi." Baal coughed this time, cocking a large furry eyebrow. Rolling his eyes, Klux continued, "In time you could gain immense power and enlightenment. The light side of the Force is a wondrous ally."

Nodding, Baal shut down his own lightsaber, the humming energy blade disappearing into the hilt. "Yes. A wondrous and powerful ally is the Force."

"Sure! That would be great," but the young man stopped, confusion masking his features. "Hang on, I remember Griff, my old Master mentioning something about the Jedi being hunted to extinction."

"You had a Jedi Master?" Klux asked, stepping over to the swoop. Chance was already shaking his head. "No...No. Griff owned me and my sister," he said, voice catching in his throat. "We were slaves for a while on Ord Mantell."

"Oh, I'm sorry," Klux said patting the young man on the shoulder. Shrugging it off, Chance straightened, "Forget it, ancient history. So, will I get a lightsaber? I would give anything to cut down those scum who killed my sister." His jaw setting like a vice, Chance pounded a fist into his swoop. Far off in the back of the bay, his repair droid, L-Zee, swiveled an onyx head towards his master. The droid remained silent, simply sitting on a cargo crate and watching the proceedings with disinterest.

“Chance, the Force must not be used in vengeance...that is the path to the Dark Side,” Baal warned, shaking a large blue finger at him. Uneasiness crept along Baal’s spine. What if this was a mistake? He and Klux had no formal training as instructors, everything having been learned from various sources or from their own experimentation in the Force.

No, no the young man would have to be trained. Dark forces were at work in the universe and if they didn’t act, Chance would either fall to the Darkside or be killed. There were no other possibilities.

“Sure...Sure...I understand,” Chance said. Baal let fine Force tendrils weave their way from his mind and gently brush along the perimeter of Chance’s mind. Confusion, anger and vengeance were the most distinguishing thoughts. But, buried somewhere deep down, he felt a glimmer, a slight spark...of hope.

“Look, its been a long day and we still have a few weeks till we get to the Corporate Sector,” Klux said, casting back his cloak and dropping onto on of the bay’s many overturned cargo containers. “Why don’t we begin training tomorrow, after breakfast?”

“Sounds great!” Chance exclaimed, shaking his head from side to side. After throwing another look at the two, he nodded. “Wow, real Jedi. And I thought you guys were just a couple of Nerfheads. Hopping up from his swoop he made a beeline for the bay doors. “Catch you guys tomorrow!”

Watching the bay doors seal, Baal slowly shook his head. “I sense anger in him Klux, I hope we can mold him into a responsible warrior,” he unhooked his saber and, igniting the blade, began working through several defensive training exercises.

“Yeah. Baal look, about this whole ‘Mew Tao versus Jedi’ argument, I think it would be best if we just stuck to calling ourselves Jedi...if we try to teach him about your religion it might just confuse him,” Klux said watching him intently. Baal stopped in mid-motion, his humming red blade hovering just centimeters from the top of his head.

“Sorry Klux, but I disagree. The Mew Tao is a part of me, and it’s heritage and traditions will be a part of whomever I choose to train. You may call yourself Jedi, and choose to teach them your own code of honor and justice, and I will teach others as I have been taught and trained.”

“You can call yourself Mew Tao all you like, but it’s just another name for being a Jedi and practicing the Force. You can call it Blue Milk, but no matter what you call it it’s still the same thing,” Klux said, crossing his arms..

“Klux, your master, Da’Jonny may have convinced you there was no difference, but my Priestess and my Father taught me otherwise. I will teach Chance what I know, you teach him what you know.”

The younger man hopped up from the crate and approached him. “That’s no way to teach someone Baal. We both approach him from two angles and he’s going to have a scattered view of the Force and his responsibility...we can’t afford that.”

Baal spun on Klux, the red blade hovering between them, its glowing tip reflecting tiny rivulets of sweat along the Jedi's brow. Staring at the weapon, Klux set a calm gaze upon Baal. "What? You going to cut me down?"

The blade disappeared into the hilt and the Trianni replaced it in the folds of his tunic. "Don't be ridiculous. I'm your teammate Klux, not your enemy. You train Chance how you wish and I'll teach him what I know. He's an adult, I'm sure he won't have any trouble balancing the teachings and knowing right from wrong."

Shaking his head, Klux pivoted on one black leather boot and walked away towards the bay doors. "Whatever Baal, I guess if we are wrong we'll find out too late to do anything about it."

Homesickness washed over Baal as he gazed upon the brilliant green crescent of Fibuli, hanging before the black curtain of space. Behind him, A'sok had already engaged the sensor mask-not that they needed it; most Corporate Sector patrols seemed to be focused on the far side of the planet. Adjusting his approach vector, Baal angled the Skull' into the atmosphere and was soon buzzing above the planets darkened jungle canopy. The landscape was both familiar and foreign to him; after all, it had been years since he last bounded through the planets lush green jungles.

The terrain sped by, marked occasionally with light clusters from the planets more industrialized cities. Several large oceans wrapped around the planet, breaking the land into several large continents. As they approached the planets terminator Baal dropped low and decreased the ships speed. "Looks like we got life form readings ahead," Vic said from beside him.

"That's Shaffel Vag, the Mew-Tao village," Baal said tapping the coordinates on the Skull's heads up display. Breaking from the darkness, the Skull soared over a lush green landscape, marked with occasional patches of swampland. Anticipation gnawed in his stomach as the ship slowed, approaching a large clearing populated by hundreds of huts spiraling in a circular pattern. Towards the edge sat a large stone temple that towered above the smaller thatched domes. Trianni villagers spotted the landscape, all stopping to watch the large black saucer-shaped freighter approaching. Looping around the village, Baal put the ship down less than a half a kilometer away in a small grass clearing surrounded by overgrowth and jungle.

"An escort will be arriving shortly, I'll handle the introductions," Baal said, killing the ships engine. To his right the Outlaw turned in his seat. "Are you going to be ok? It's been a while since you've been back, hasn't it?"

"Yes. I need to find out if High Priestess Tha'Ressel is alive. If so, she may be here, if not, then someone here might be able to tell me if they've heard any word from her. In watching the Newsnets I've not seen mention of any of my people or the village. I'm still hopeful," Baal said locking his deep green eyes on the jungle wall.

“Fair enough, you call the shots pal,” Vic said rising from his copilot station. “I’ll tell the droids to stand by in case we need them to prep the ship.”

With a loud clatter the loading ramp of the Skull’ descended, dropping onto a cushion of lush green weeds. A’sok stood impatiently, sandwiched between Vic and Klux with Baal standing far in front. Once the ramp touched down the Trianni strolled out with the rest in tow.

I could be doing so many other things, things other than playing diplomat, the young hacker mused as he advanced down the ramp. Beside him Klux strolled along impassively while Lauren and Chance brought up the rear.

Emerging from the underbrush, two Trianni warriors clad in deep forest colored robes and armed with broad swords approached the Ghtroc. One was covered in ebony fur, with no visible striping or markings to be seen while the other, a slightly smaller, stockier specimen, was covered in mottled gray and silver fur that peeked out from his robe’s low collar. The black Trianni stepped away from his counterpart and approached the group. Baal also advanced and bowed his head, fingers entwined in an elaborate Trianni symbol of greeting. When Baal straightened, A’sok noticed he was about the same height as the silver Trianni..

“Balthazar Cochroth greets Shava Fegarn,” he said in his deep rolling voice. The black Trianni, oblivious to the rest of the group, bowed his head and returned the greeting.

“Greetings Balthazar. It has been many cycles since you’ve graced your clan. High Priestess Grismarr awaits your arrival with great anticipation.”

“High Priestess?” Baal asked, muzzle curling into a smirk. A’sok noticed Shava tense, fine black fur rippling slightly across his massive frame.

“Yes?”

Rolling his eyes, Baal crossed his arms. “I hope this is some of the legendary humor Shava Fegarn is known for. MY High Priestess is Tha’ Ressel.”

Shava’s fur stood on end and he approached Baal, towering over his fellow Trianni. “You should watch showing such disrespect in the company of Protector Initiates Balthazar. We...”

“Enough.”

The silver Trianni’s voice cut through the tension like a vibroblade. Stepping forward, he placed himself between his two brethren.

“That is Enough. Balthazar, you have been away for a great while. I would suggest you and your companions accompany us to Shaffel Vag. High Priestess Grismarr can then answer your questions and perhaps you can answer some of hers,” he said, holding Baal’s gaze with brilliant blue eyes.

Reluctantly, Baal nodded, bowing to Shavan. “My apologies. It has been a long trip and Protector Initiate Vabane Dress speaks the truth. My group would be honored to have such fine Protector Initiates as escort.”

Muzzle pulling back into what A’sok could only guess was a smile, Vabane swept a muscular arm towards the clearings edge. “Then let us proceed, a storm approaches from the Eastern Mountains.”

Baal motioned for the team to follow. A’sok fell to one side of Baal while Vic took up a trot next to the blue Trianni.

“What was that all about?” A’sok asked, feeling an uneasiness settle on his shoulders. He had been banished from his own planet and would have expected such a greeting, if not worse. But Baal was a warrior in good standing. The animosity didn’t seem to make sense.

“Just some issues that need to be sorted out, that’s all,” Baal replied, never taking his eyes off of the retreating frames of both Protector Initiates. Shava and Vabane reached the underbrush and produced their weapons, then, with blinding precision, began cutting away a clear path through the vegetation.

Nodding, A’sok followed Baal onto the path. “Perfect. If things go badly we are ONLY trapped on a planet with three-meter tall cats with swords. That’s good to know.”

The group broke from the underbrush at the edge of a large field. They had no more than stepped onto the dirt path leading to the village when an acrid stench hit them, causing A’sok and Chance to pull up their shirts, covering their nose. Baal felt revulsion grow in his throat while Vic began to hack. “What the frell...” he asked from beside him. Before Baal could answer, Lauren’s voice emerged as a whisper from behind them, “It’s decay. These crops are rotting,” she said, her gaze lingering across the fields.

As far as they could see, rotting vegetables lay among slick darkened leaves. The odor overpowered them; a sickly sweet stench that smelled like nothing Baal had ever encountered before. Digging into her bag, Lauren produced thin disposable surgical masks and doused them with a disinfectant. “Here,” she passed them among the group, “put these on, they will help mask the smell.”

Trotting up beside him, Vic strapped on the white mask. “Whats going on here partner?” he asked, gesturing to the field.

“I don’t know, but they,” Baal nodded towards the retreating Protectors, “don’t seem to be affected. Which means this isn’t a recent development.”

Shaffel Vag wasn’t any better. Upon exiting the field several small Trianni children scurried from nearby huts, scampering among the feet of Shava and Vabane, laughing and pointing to the masked outsiders. A few curiosity seekers darted among the group, tugging at Baal’s tail and pulling at his long robes. Maintaining a healthy distance from the others, they regarded them with stares of uncertainty, and in some cases, distrust.

Smiling, he bore long white fangs in mock rage and playfully tapped a few on the backside, sending them gently tumbling along the lush grass.

His humor dropped away as they entered the outer ring of huts. Sick and dying were stretched on blankets in front of the thatched homes. A few lay retching onto the ground, while others cleaned them, tossing diseased rags into small fires that burned nearby. He counted over a dozen Trianni in various stages of illness. "Baal, I need to go and see if I can help these people," Lauren said from beside him, worry dancing in her blue eyes. He looked down and nodded, unable to speak.

Vabane appeared beside him a moment later as Baal watched her work on an older Trianni female with mottled black and silver markings; a small pile of fur lay on the ground, pulled out in clumps. "We need to keep moving Balthazar," he said, "The High Priestess is waiting."

"What is happening here?" Baal asked, pulling on the Force to block out the noxious odor that followed them from the field into the village. It was worse now, the stench of death and decay not restricted to just vegetables.

"Come, the High Prie..." Vabane began, turning away, but Baal clamped a hand on the Protector and spun him back around. "I asked YOU a question Vabane, not the High Priestess." Ahead, Shava turned his attention back to Baal and dropped a hand to his weapon; Vabane stopped him with a gesture and Shavaa let his hand drop harmlessly to his side. Turning a crooked smile back towards Baal he emitted a humorless chuckle. "Balthazar...the years away from Fibuli have changed you. No more are you a timid little Trianni with a wet nose and curious nature. No, you have grown into a powerful warrior of stature. But...I see the curiosity remains."

Letting his hand fall away from Vabane's shoulder, Baal lowered his voice. "I simply need to know Vabane. I know what Grismar will tell me, but I need to know what is really happening...from a friend."

Looking to the sky, Vabane drew a deep breath of the putrid air, letting it flow from his mouth. For the first time Baal noticed his gums were a sickening purple. "Isn't it obvious Baal? We're dying."

"How did this happen?" Baal asked, attempting to keep his fury in check. After directing the rest of the team to a reception hut, Shavaa and Vabane remained outside at the entrance to the temple, allowing him to have his council with High Priestess Yahwell Grismarr alone. She remained silent, seated on a modest chair of wood and steel, watching him with large golden eyes. She was perhaps fifteen or twenty years Baal's

elder, a blink of an eye in a Trianni's extended lifespan. Her fur, a deep rich gold, was marked with broad amber stripes curling up and around her muzzle. Wrapped around her shapely form was a gown of the finest Trianni silk, deep blue with various swatches of green flaring throughout the material. When she moved, light that fell from the ceiling of the large stone chamber would reflect and dance along its surface.

The temple was as he remembered it, having spent many years of his life under its roof in training. Hugging a wall far off to the left a stone staircase ascended to a second floor ringed by wooden balusters. The perimeter of the main hall was lined with eight circular columns that stretched high into the ceiling, supporting the structure. Her throne, almost too small by contrast, was situated in the center of a raised circular dais jutting over a meter out of the floor. Indirect light from above illuminated the center of the temple, casting the outer walls and doorways in shadow.

"How have you been Balthazar? How is the galactic situation?" she asked, descending the dais. "Would you like some refreshment?" she gestured towards a nearby table that had been supplied with an assortment of ripe red fruit and a clay pitcher.

"I could give two frells about the 'Galactic Situation'...I think we better discuss the Fibuli Situation," he said planting his fists on his hips. "I'm tired of not getting a straight answer when I ask a question around here," he snarled.

Not turning, she poured herself a mug of a creamy yellow liquid and turned, facing him. Her beautiful feline features were pulled back in a snarl. "You should watch how you address the High Priestess Balthazar, your rank in the Mew Tao does not grant you THAT much power."

"You are NOT my High Priestess!" he bellowed, advancing and jabbing a finger under her nose. "Until I find out what happened to Tha' Ressel, don't presume I hold you to be anything other than a glorified replacement!"

Anger flared through her eyes and her maw drew back, baring a row of razor sharp fangs. "YOU DARE!?!!" she began and just as suddenly, stopped-realization flashing through her eyes; the mug, now crushed metal, dripped liquid onto the temple's stone floor. "You...you've been gone a while. You don't know...couldn't possibly have an idea of what has happened here," she murmured, turning away from him.

"Gris..High Priestess, I just want to know what has happened...to Tha'Reseel...to my people," he pleaded. This had not gone the way he expected and he felt the anger drain from him. At one time Grismarr had been one of his closest friends, a proud Trianni whose eyes always seemed fixed on her future. And now? Now she was as much a mystery as what was happening outside the temple's very walls.

"She's dead Baal. She's dead and our people, this clan, is dying." Grismarr said, tossing the mug away and ascending to her throne. She dropped into it, shoulders sagging under the brilliant garment. He suddenly realized how tired she looked, how her fur, while beautiful, didn't shine; instead it carried a dull cast that reflected little light.

"How do you know this?" he asked, trying to keep his frustration at bay. She seemed to consider the question for a moment, eyes glazing over. "Reports, unconfirmed reports.

We waited as long as we could Baal. You must realize that. But in the end, someone had to take over the mantle...the clan...was-is, suffering.” She crossed her legs and slowly ran a hand over the fabric of her robe, brushing away invisible motes of dust.

“And the clan? What has happened? Why are they so sick?”

“Many reasons. The harvester is broken and we don’t have the credits or knowledge to get it fixed. The Mew Tao relied heavily on trade and commerce with other Trianni clans. In recent months the Corporate Sector Authority have been raiding encampments and villages, enslaving our fellow Trianni,” her voice trailed off. Absently, she pulled a claw along the battered wood arm of the throne. “Items were sold for what we could get. The throne was one of the first to go. It brought a princely sum of twenty bags of grain...of course that didn’t last long.”

“What about trade with Podeziniku?” he asked. Podeziniku was the only major city on this side of the planet, centering around an Imperial starport and built heavily on trade with the locals and freighter captains. Baal’s father would frequently take him on trips there, when the clan’s provisions ran low.

“Useless. Since the raids, the CSA has threatened any merchant who aids a Trianni clan with banishment or imprisonment. We used up all of our favors in the first few weeks. After that the only beings that would help us were black marketers-at a price. Without any crops to harvest...”

“Frell!!!” Baal roared, knocking the small table over. Drink and food scattered, soiling the tan stone floor; Grismarr jolted upright in the throne. “What of the Trianni Rangers?” he demanded. “What of the fierce warriors who handled the CSA on countless occasions?” Behind him the doors flung wide and padded footsteps rapidly approached; he paid them no mind, all of his attention on High Priestess Grismarr.

“They have been unable to assist us,” she said, shaking her head back and forth.

“Someone powerful is behind this genocide Balthazar, I fear even the renowned Rangers are of no help.”

Frustration coursed through his blood like hot oil. The inability to act, to do something NOW tore at his sanity. “Something must be done! Our people are dying!” He roared.

Shava and Vabane, weapons drawn, appeared beside him. Approaching cautiously, Vabane sheathing his sword and placed a hand on his shoulder, addressing he and the High priestess both at once. “Baal, what can we do? Even if the merchants would deal with us, we have no credits.”

Pulling himself up to his full height, Baal crossed both arms over his massive chest and set his jaw. “True. This clan may have no credits,” he smirked, “But I know someone who does.”

“We cannot thank you enough for your generosity Mr.Palisades,” Grismarr said. A’sok watched the transaction from the front seat of the busted harvester, pretending to only half pay attention. He and Vic had been working to get the old machine back online for the better part of an hour when Baal and his High Priestess arrived. Chance had gone back to the ship and Dr.Salias was busy making the rounds of the huts, leaving he and Vic to find something to occupy their time with.

“No thanks are necessary. I’ll get some of my droids to help with the harvester and A’sok and I can head into town and pick up supplies and medicine,” Vic said wiping grease off on his trousers. At the mention of “droids” the High Preiestess wrinkled her nose and glanced at Baal. “Ah yes...droids,” she said with some hesitation. Vic cocked an eyebrow. “Yeah. A maintenance droid and a few R2 units. Is there a problem?” he asked. Smoothing her robes she offered a gentle smile. “Mr.Palisades. Your generosity is appreciated, and we would welcome any assistance, but you must realize...the Mew-Tao own no droids. It is our belief that droids have as much right to free will as any sentient,” she spread her hands wide. “Therefore, while in the village, your droids have no “owner”...and are free to do as they wish, to help if they wish, but it must be their choice.”

“Uh...sure,” Vic said throwing a curious look back at A’sok. He was as baffled as the Outlaw was. “Hey! I thought you guys hated droids...Baal can’t stand em!” A’sok offered, leaning back in the harvesters ragged seat. The High Priestess’ eyes grew wide. “Is that so? Well, I assure you that must be a decision Baal has reached. The Mew-Tao have no animosity towards mechanics.”

Bowing, she clasped her hands together. “ I thank you again,” she said, turning and leading Baal back towards the temple. They were far out of earshot before A’sok spoke.

“Uh, Boss, was that a wise business decision?” he asked. Normally he didn’t question Vic’s decisions or motives, but letting the droids loose on their own and loaning money out of good faith seemed risky. The Outlaw fished his comm from a pocket and turned towards him. “These people need help A’sok. If we don’t step up they will continue to die,” he commed the ship,

“Plus, Baal is a member of this team...don’t worry, someday I’m going to have to call on him to return the favor.” Before A’sok could ask what he meant the comm barked to life.

“What?!?” Chance’s voice screamed from the cylinder.

Holding the comm away from his ear, Vic cursed. “It’s Vic. Get the droids and get your ass back to the village!”

“Yeah!” Chance screamed and the small cylinder went dead. Vic stared at the device and shook his head. “Idiot,” he murmured to himself.

“Yeah, there’s another freaking mystery Boss, why are we keeping that doofus around?” A’sok asked, leaning over and fiddling with the harvesters controlboard. A sustained silence caused him to rise and look at Vic.

The outlaw was standing watching Dr.Salias make her way across the common area towards the harvester. Even from a distance A’sok could tell she was tired; smears of

blood and bile coated her jacket and a look of confusion hung on her face. “Boss?” he tried again.

Shaken from his reverie, Vic turned back to him. “Huh? Oh the swoop racer...” he shrugged. “He’s good with transportation, we could always use someone like that. It’s just youth pal, don’t worry it will pass,” he said, pulling a rag from his belt and wiping his hands clean. “Let’s get ready, we need to hit Podeziniku before nightfall.” “I hope you’re right about the kid, cause’ he’s killing me with this attitude,” A’sok said, turning back to the harvester.

If she had entered the hut a decade earlier she would have turned up her nose at it’s sparse conditions. But now, Lauren welcomed the comfortable cot and glass of clear water someone had generously set on a nearby table with immeasurable gratitude. Pulling her stained jacket off, she tossed it into a corner. Her white tanktop survived the staining and she was glad she opted to wear her dull green Mrlsst scrubs. For over three hours she patched and nursed and, in some cases, wept alongside the Mew-Tao. It was what she was trained to do and the mantra rolled through her head like a child’s rhyme, “Heal when you can, comfort when you can’t, cry because you must.” Her head hit the soft pillow and the scent of dried flowers drifted from beneath her. The thatched walls and roof of the hut was just beginning to blur when he walked in. The horrors of the day vanished and primal energy surged through her body. Covered in grease, he offered her a lopsided grin and jerked a thumb towards the door.

“I may look bad, but you should see the harvester!” Vic said dropping onto the baked earth.

“Yeah, I was doing some work of my own,” she smiled, nodding tiredly to the lump of clothing in the corner. He was also wearing a tanktop, black with matching cargo trousers. Smears of grease across his face and chest resembled camo paint, making him look more like a soldier than a tramp freighter captain. Rising from the cot, she took two large steps and dropped lazily on top of him, both rolling across the hard ground. “Lauren, I’m dirt...” he managed before she kissed him, letting her hands slide behind his head and pulling him closer. After a moment he broke away, smiling. “I’m covered in grease, it’s going to get all over you,” he said, gasping for breath. Sliding her hand around his waist she pulled his body closer, enjoying the warmth. “I’ve been covered in blood for three hours...you could be covered in Trianni dung and I wouldn’t notice,” she kissed him again, this time letting closing her eyes and losing herself in his embrace.

“What did Baal mean when he said your crew worked for the Rebels?” she asked. They lay entwined on the hut’s floor, listening to the shouts of Trianni cubs echoing

somewhere off in the village. Vic slipped a powerful arm under her head and she turned to look at him. "I might as well be honest, we occasionally do jobs for the Rebellion," he said unapologetically. She figured as much, but was glad to hear him admit to it.

"I thought so," she rolled onto her back. She was wrapped in a thick blanket the Trianni had covered her cot with, her scrubs long since joining her soiled jacket in the corner.

"But, why? I mean, aren't the Rebels trying to overthrow the Empire? I even heard they blew up Alderran," but he was already shaking his head.

"Imperial propaganda. The Empire is a deadly machine that's grinding up the galaxy planet by planet," his eyes took on a fierce light and fixed on a point on the ceiling. "I've seen some of my best friends killed by the Empire. They are no better than the CSA, hell, even worse" he spat.

"Yeah, the CSA," she agreed. "The Trianni I attended today told me what was happening. I...I can't believe it," she admitted. When they first told her the stories she thought it was a mistake; but after hearing the same horrors from over a dozen of the Mew-Tao, she knew the brutal stories to be true. "I don't know what to do. I can't take a job in a sector like this," she whispered to herself.

"Well. I know the Trianni are glad you are here," Vic offered, his tone softening. "If not for you, there would be a lot more suffering around here." She smiled at him and shrugged, pulling the blanket up around her neck. "I can't stand by and do nothing, no matter what the CSA or Empire or anyone says." He leaned down and kissed her, jumping back suddenly and pulling his arm from under her head. It smacked against the ground with a "paf!" throwing up a small cloud of dust.

"Sithspit!" he snarled staring at his chronometer.

"OW!" she rubbed her head, throwing him an angry glance. "I bruise easy buddy, watch it!"

"Ah hell, I'm sorry Babe," he said, dipping down and lightly kissing her forehead. "I didn't realize what time it was....I have to head out and get the village some supplies. "Oh," he snapped his fingers as his bare form reached form under the cover and collected clothing from the floor. "If you need us to pick up some medical gear, I need a list." Rising on her elbow she offered a sweet smile and gestured at the far corner of the hut. "Sure. Item Number One would be my scrubs please."

The supply run to Podeziniku was uneventful. A'sok and Vic were able to pick up all of the supplies on the list Grismarr and Dr.Salias composed, and in some instances, since they weren't Trianni, wound up on the winning end of the deal. Klux and Baal had wandered the streets, occasionally checking in to see if they needed any help. Even Chance came in handy, securing a new repulsor drive for the harvester at a bargain basement price.

The city itself was a dreary depressing maze of derelict buildings and pale duracrete facades. For a planet as lush and green as Fibuli, A'sok expected it's main city to be the same; but Podeziniku proved to be the exact opposite. Sitting on the coast of Fibuli's main body of water, skyscrapers of transparasteel stretched high into the sky, with smaller buildings creeping out of their shadows like thieves along the shoreline. Several factories billowed noxious clouds from dull gray smokestacks, carpeting the lower levels of the city in a dense smog; along with a sudden thunderstorm that rolled in from the ocean, it made the city damp and reeking of chemicals. Podeziniku's occupants were no better, scowling and miserable, they aimlessly wandered the narrow streets, wrapped in whatever they could find to fend off the downpour.

"Could this ride be any rougher?" Vic asked from beside him.

"Sorry Bossman, we should be there shortly," A'sok offered. They found the repulsor truck's balance compensators damaged, so every time A'sok leaned too heavy on the stick the vehicle would vibrate and jostle it's occupants like playthings. The loaded trailer they were towing helped stabilize the vehicle, but not much. Chance, who decided to ride along on his swoop, led the way back to Shaffel Vag, occasionally throwing a smirk over his shoulder. Just like an outsider, A'sok mused as he dropped the truck's repulsors on a lower setting and slowly cruised above the ground.

Without warning, Baal gripped the dashboard, large black claws sinking deep into the vehicles worn interior. Pain exploded across his face and his muzzle pulled back to reveal rows of glistening fangs. "Ah, BLAST!" he roared.

"What's wrong?" A'sok asked, trying to keep his eyes on the landscape and check on his partner at the same time.

Turning, Klux, grabbed at his head, shielding his eyes. "I feel it too...suffering...pain...and death. Something's happening at..."

"The village," Vic finished pointing to a spot in the distance. Turning, A'sok could just make out a thin black column stretching from the jungle canopy into the sky. "Smoke," he said, and kicked the truck into high gear. The lumbering beast shuddered, picking up speed. Ahead, Chance was already moving, his swoop disappearing into a tiny black speck in the trucks grimy windshield.

"We need to get to the Skull, get our gear," Vic said, anxiousness almost bringing him out of his seat. Baal, eyes jammed closed, was gripping his lightsaber in a huge fist. Rage pulled back his maw into a snarl revealing four-centimeter long fangs. "Whoever has attacked the Mew Tao will pay in blood for any Trianni lives lost," he growled. Klux and Vic shared a concerned glance as large fat drops of rain began to splatter against the thin film of dirt on the windshield.

Foliage and underbrush were reduced to a blur as Baal raced along the path towards Shaffel Vag. Rain soaked him to the bone; the thunderstorm that followed them from Podeziniku rapidly made its way inland and was dousing the Fibuli landscape with torrential buckets of water. The rest of Raptor Squad was still back at the Skullduggery suiting up. Chance returned from his recon informing the team that soldiers and hovertanks had moved on the village and were slaughtering Baal's clan. In the Corporate Sector that meant only one thing: Espo's.

Behind him Klux kept pace, both traversing the muddy terrain with ease. The Trianni could feel the Force flowing from his partner, augmenting the Jedi's speed and agility to superhuman levels. If the village were facing Espo's they would need every edge they could get. The Corporate Sector spared no expense when it came to training their elite army. Espo Soldiers' were every bit as good as Imperial Army and in some ways more dangerous. While Imperials still held on to a semblance of ideals, the Espo's were paid to get the job done. Greed and wealth were powerful motivators.

Breaking from the treeline and racing through the diseased crops, Baal spied the column of smoke through the downpour, rising from the center of the village; smaller columns, most with visible orange flames licking their bases, burned from various huts in the outer ring. Inhaling deeply, his keen sense picked through the rotting crops and tainted rain to detect the scent of roasting flesh. Trianni flesh. With a roar, he ignited his lightsaber and sprinted towards the village square.

Absolute carnage had been released upon his people. Espo's were moving freely through the village and any Trianni not shackled and prone were beaten or shot by the indigo-armored thugs of the CSA. Off to the right, emerging from between the temple and inner ring of huts, two large white Mekuun Hoverscouts lumbered into view like drunk dewbacks, pouring heavy blue blaster fire into the nearest buildings from a roof mounted cannon emplacement; both were standard issue for the CSA, at least six meters high and equipped with no less than two blaster cannon emplacements that swiveled atop the monstrosity and a concussion missile launcher sandwiched between the two.

The violent assault drove Trianni from the protection of their homes out into the deadly gauntlet of blaster fire and stun baton; submit or burn were the only choices made available to his people. Emerging from the rear of the scout, a column of Espo's charged, weapons at the ready, towards the village temple.

Klux flashed past him, twirling his own cobalt blue lightsaber blade. When he was within meters of the first hoverscout, he let go of the weapon. Baal watched as the lightsaber twirled, end over end, lancing through the vehicle's sloped viewport. The blue blade disappeared with a "hiss", lodging deep into the ceraglass windscreen. The port remained intact, but the pilot, barely visible inside, jerked violently for a moment, and just as quickly, stopped. The curved fender of the vehicle tilted forward slamming into the ground and skidding in a semi circle where it stopped. Popping loose from the scout, the lightsaber shot high into the air, coming to rest delicately back into Klux's outstretched hand.

"Klux! Protect the temple!" Baal yelled over a high-pitched whine piercing the air. Spinning, his jaw dropped as the village's repulsor truck soared over the outer ring of huts and slammed into a squad of Espo's patrolling the village square. Exploding in a

grand ball of red flame, the vehicle rained fiery pieces of Espo armor and debris throughout the village.

Bright blue blaster bolts lanced into the ground beside him; superheating his wet robes with a painful hiss of steam. Dropping to the ground and rolling across the wet grass, he regained his footing and pivoted. The second Hoverscout tank, oblivious to the plight of the first, had targeted him and was pouring deadly fire from its turret mounted heavy repeaters. Several more bolts reached out to him, exploding into the ground and sending turf soaring to the heavens.

A flash of movement off towards the edge of the village caught his eye as Chance's swoop appeared from the circle of huts speeding towards the scouts. The helmeted racer gunned the swoop's engines and angled directly for the second attacking hoverscout. An instant before impact, he leapt clear, sailing through the downpour as the black swoop with green and blue flame detailing careened into the broadside of the CSA vehicle. Amid a screech of metal and violent roar, gouts of fire and sparks erupted from the impact, setting the gunner aflame and forcing the scout sideways, away from the huts.

Slow in getting up, the younger man lay curled in a ball, his helmet dipping into a pool of mud. Sprinting towards him, Baal was within meters of the swoop racer when an Espo appeared from the smoking scout, his back to the Trianni.

"I'm gonna burn you, cat lover!" the armored thug screamed at Chance, raising his blaster pistol. Chance, still dazed from his spill, was oblivious to any threat. Before Baal realized what he was doing, his saber was ignited and in his hand, sizzling across the Espo's exposed back. Arcing, the man let out a guttural scream, a thin burning trail of fire tracing down his uniform between his shoulder blades. The deep blue armor split in half, pulling away from itself like a cleaved crustacean.

The lifeless body dropped to its knees, then face forward into the wet mud, steam rising from where the rain poured onto the still smoldering incision. In his hands the lightsaber continued to hum, clean and brilliant, with no visible sign of the soldier's death.

Death.

Baal had never killed a sentient before. Wounded, yes, but never killed. Deep from within an unfamiliar energy welled up, coursing throughout his body. Power. An unusual seductive kind of raw power that he had never felt before lightened his head. Turning in a circle, everything seemed to slow down. Bodies of Trianni lay massacred throughout the village. Cubs, females, males, -there was no distinction. Trianni he grew up alongside, trained with and played with lay like a carpet of death along the floor of Shaffel Vag. One of them a cub he had tussled with just that same day, now stretched across his fathers frame, a hole burned through the child's back.

Rage. Pure, blinding, powerful rage, poured through him. Letting loose a roar that would fold the heartiest being into a huddle, he charged the still moving hoverscout, now heading directly for the temple.

Twirling his lightsaber in a great arc, he leapt atop the vehicle's bumper and drew back, slinging the glowing blade like a javelin through the rain-spattered windsceren. The glowing red blade pierced the ceraglass with a sizzle, continuing through where the

driver's head should be. Extracting the weapon, he somersaulted onto the roof of the still lumbering vehicle, his black leather boots lodging directly under the cannon's turret and anchoring him to the slick vehicle

. Beneath him, chaos coursed through the bodies of a dozen Espo soldiers who realized they were in an unmanned vehicle. He drank deep from the well of emotion, savoring every drop of uncertainty and wave of fear that seeped from the pores of his murderous adversaries. This was the beginning of his revenge, and the end of the CSA.

Blending into the side of the hut, A'sok let the Fibuli nightfall transform him into just another bit of thatched imperfection. Rain and smoke blanketed Shaffel Vag and the scream of blasters and rumble of hoverscouts continued to fill the air. Visibility was reduced to no more than few meters, the thunderstorm rendering anything further as random shadows in the shroud of rainfall.

Ahead, Vic darted among the huts like a phantom, drifting from one patch of darkness to another. Tightening his grip on the humming vibroblade, he moved up beside the doorway, the weapon sending tiny vibrations along his gloved hand. It was his fourth hut of the evening; the screams that emerged from its doorway a moment earlier dissolved into barely audible whimpers.

Peering around the corner, he spotted a stout armored Espo violently raining blows onto the back of a huddled Trianni female. Under her body he could barely glance the frightened stare of her cub peering out from his mothers protection.

"Please...please...Stop..." she begged, her cries drowned out by the sickening wet thud of her own torture. The Espo stopped for a moment, the stun baton hovering in the air above his deep blue helmet.

"Don't waste your breath you Trianni whore, I'm not gonna stop till I wipe your brain matter offa my club!" he panted, drawing the weapon back for another strike.

Moving quickly, just like Vic told him, A'sok took two large steps that deposited him directly behind the man; clamping a hand over his mouth he jerked the soldier's head back. Triggering the vibroblade from "standby" to "live", he forced it up, the humming blade of death disappearing under the rear edge of the Espo's helmet. With as much force as he could muster, he jerked the black back and forth, cutting through whatever the man had been using for a brain.

Just as quickly he removed the blade, leaving the man still frozen, arm raised high in the air. For a moment all A'sok could do was watch his own grim reflection in the dead man's helmet. The stun baton fell to the ground and the soldier's body collapsed at A'sok's feet. The Trianni female looked up, brilliant blue felinoid eyes peering out from a pelt of ebony mottled with wet patches of blood. From beneath her a pair of small eyes took him in with a frightened stare. He motioned to keep quiet, and, throwing her a wink, slipped from the doorway and moved on to the next hut.

Espo's poured into the temple like blue insects, swarming across the floor and seeking shelter behind the columns. Several Trianni protector-initiates surrounded Lauren, brandishing massive swords and heavy round shields. Behind her the High Priestess shouted orders, instructing the Trianni to fight and defend the temple at all costs. Blue blaster fire crisscrossed the stone hall, the majority of the volley blasting through the ceiling or being absorbed by the Trianni's large shields. Upon closer inspection, Lauren realized the shields were chunks of an old starship hull, the grip side having been coated in some sort of tacky rubber compound. Slamming into the discs, the blaster bolts flared brilliantly, quickly dying away to nothing more than a smoldering patch. The few shots that made it through, drove into the Trianni ranks, setting their fur ablaze and dropping them roaring onto the flagstone.

Roaring, the warriors that didn't drop charged the Espo's, slashing violently with curved broadswords. Arterial spray and smoke began filling the temple, bolts randomly striking into the Trianni and Espo alike, dropping lifeless bodies onto the hard ground

. Before her, Vabane shouted commands to the group protecting the High Priestess. As he gestured to Shavaa a blue bolt arced out of the smoke and struck him in his throat, flinging him backwards where he collapsed in a heap at her feet. Horrified, Lauren stumbled back, staring at the black hole sizzling under his jaw and the lifeless eyes now locked skyward. "We've got to get to safety, we won't last out here!" she screamed at Grismarr. The High Priestess, now brandishing her own broadsword, never took her eyes from the carnage.

"You stay out of the way! We will deal with this disease!" Grismarr snarled, stepping in front of Lauren and cutting down an Espo that managed to infiltrate the Trianni flank. With the other warriors following Grismarr's lead, Lauren turned and sprinted off towards the staircase in the rear of the temple.

Bounding up the stairs, she reached the second floor landing, turning in time to see Klux storm through the double doors in a sprint, cutting down a several Espo's in a blinding tornado of brilliant blue light. She stopped her jaw from hanging open as he spun and dodged, parrying blaster bolts back into the Espo's with a blue laser sword.

"A lightsaber," she whispered. As a child on Coruscant she heard stories of the fabled Jedi, but they were always just that-stories. Occasionally her mother told her tales of the Jedi Knights, romanticizing their exploits as swashbuckling heroes. But her father, rolling his eyes would always be there to pull her back to reality. "Nothing more than glorified sector ranger daughter, now back to your studies," he would admonish.

And now here was an actual Jedi, with a lightsaber, cutting down Espo's just like in the stories her mother used to tell her.

Keeping her eyes riveted to the fight below, she slowly backed up towards the temples outer wall. The tide began to turn, as Klux fell back to the High priestess, deflecting numerous blaster bolts with his twirling cobalt blade. Shouting, the High Priestess rallied her warriors and the group, led by the Grismarr and Klux, began advancing towards the

temples entrance. The remaining Espo's unable to match the new threat, began falling back to the entrance, but not without a last ditch volley of blaster fire to mark their retreat.

Hope filled her chest and Lauren turned to race back down the staircase. Several Trianni were still on the ground in pain and if she could get to them in time... She stopped in time to see a lone Espo advancing up the stairs towards her. A scream caught in her throat and froze there as the soldier, malice and fear contorting his rigged face, raised his blaster carbine and aimed directly for her chest.

The Hoverscout rumbled beneath Baal as he steadied himself on the vehicles slick hull. Rain hammered against his cloak but he barely noticed; rage had driven all thoughts other than revenge from his mind. Clutching his lightsaber, he parried two blue blaster bolts that blazed from behind one of the huts, sending them sizzling away into the dark sky like shooting stars headed in the wrong direction.

With a great swing, he sliced cleanly through the turret; somersaulting above it he downwards sliced again, dissecting the weapon emplacement. Trailing globules of white hot metal, the halves slid forward and down the side of the vehicle.

Dropping into the newly made portal, he landed into a hive of madness. Espos scrambled across his body while screams competed for supremacy over the vehicles warning klaxons. Moving like a hurricane, Baal struck down Espo's before they had time to draw a bead with their carbines; amid his flashing weapon he glimpsed aces locked in horror as death snatched away their last moments of life.

The scouts holding area became a slaughterhouse, the screams of the dying falling on his deaf ears. The only thing his mind allowed him to see were the bodies of the dead Trianni that lay face down in the mud throughout the village. The only thing he heard were the moans of the dying in the huts surrounding the village...a black cloud of anger and hate prevented him from seeing anything else.

Ascending the steps into the cockpit, the stench of charred gore hit him. To his left the pilot he ran through still twitched in the throes of death. Through the windscreen he could see the scout still lumbering on a collision course with the far right side of the Mew Tao temple.

Warning lights and sirens filled the small space and Baal's eyes flicked across unfamiliar controls. With the temple wall rapidly approaching and no way to shut down the scout', he hacked through the control panel with his lightsaber, sending a fountain of sparks erupting into the ceiling while smoke poured into the small area.

Jerking violently to the right, the vehicle spilled Baal onto the corpse of the pilot.

Horrified, Baal pulled himself away from the lifeless sack of flesh and retreated back down the stairs, making it through the exit hatch as the scout slowed to a stop. Hovering above the ground for a moment, the scout' emitted a piercing whine, dropping onto the wet grass with a shudder.

Kneeling, Baal scanned the area around the temple. A group of Espo's appeared around the corner, and seeing the large Trianni wielding a glowing red blade, began firing a volley of blue bolts in his direction. Energy sizzled and cracked against his lightsaber as he parried the bolts, creating a wall of light between he and his attackers. Several bolts

ricocheted back from where they came, blasting through Espo armor and flinging the soldiers back to disappear in the sheets of rain and darkness.

Raw power filled him, and he knew, as bolts that would cut down lesser beings whirled harmlessly around him, that he was the most powerful warrior on the battlefield.

Drinking from it, he surrendered completely to the Force, letting it guide his every movement; without concentrating, his weapon danced and parried everything that neared him. Blue energy, batted away from his twirling body, sailed in every direction, cutting Espo's down throughout the village square. He didn't notice; the rain on his face invigorated him and he relished every movement he made with the glowing red blade. A shaft of bright white light struck him and he froze, heart pounding a fierce rhythm in his massive chest.

"Drop your weapon!" a metallic voice ordered from the Mekuun's exterior loudspeaker. A smile pulled at Baal's mouth and the energy, once unfamiliar, now filled him with a comfortable surge of power. "Guess you'll have to kill me!" he roared and charged the oncoming hoverscout.

Terminus' Light Repeating Blaster roared beside A'sok and he wondered if he would ever hear properly again. Three bolts of red energy emerged, fusing together as a comically large spear of light ripping through the darkness. The muddy terrain lit up like a Coruscant nightclub, illuminating countless corpses scattered along the muddy ground. Two unfortunate Espo's that happened to be crouched near each other were annihilated as the energy burned through their torsos and flung what remained back into the darkness like discarded trash.

Emerging from the ring of huts minutes before, the duo now lay hunkered under the still burning husk of the repulsor truck. Stacked before them in a makeshift redoubt were the Espo corpses resulting from the trucks crash. The smell of charred flesh was nothing new by now, and the armored bodies were doing a fine job of keeping the Espo blaster fire at bay. A few remaining CSA soldiers still darted among the huts, pouring fire into the position and preventing them from making a move.

A'sok raised his Thunderer Heavy Blaster pistol and squeezed off a shot. The weapon bucked in his hands and spat an orange burst of energy that sizzled through the downpour and struck an Espo in the thigh, dropping him face first into the ground.

"We need some backup!" Vic's voice growled from the Terminus helmet. He squeezed off another shot while A'sok picked up bits of conversation emerging from his partner's interior comm.

"We can't harm sentients Vic! It's our..."

"I don't care! You are harming sentients by sitting there and doing nothing, now get over here!"

"But we don't..."

“JUST MOVE!” Terminus screamed and stood, the LRB mowing down several Espo’s attempting to clear the distance to the burning truck. All hit the ground but one, simply grazed, rolled with the shot and regained his footing, still heading towards their position. A’sok squeezed off two shots from the Thunderer, the bolts striking and dropping the soldier just meters away.

“Vic, we need to get out of here, this is a bad...” he began when a body dropped from the darkness beside him. Spinning he brought the Thunderer up and squeezed the trigger, only to hear a sickening “click” as it tried to fire from a drained energy cell.

“HOLY! DON’T SHOOT!” Chance screamed, covering his face with both hands.

“WHAT THE...Moron!” A’sok screamed back, pulling his weapon up and away from the younger man’s startled face. “Next time radio before you do that!”

More shots from the LRB roared behind them. “Stow it! These Frellbaggers are coming out of the woodwork! We need to move now!” Terminus screamed, throwing a shoulder against A’sok’s back.

All sprinted from under the truck’s charred husk, Terminus laying down suppressing fire while A’sok and Chance sprinted left towards the temple. Dodging around the corpses of fallen Trianni and Espo, they rounded the far corner of the building and skidded to a stop.

Hovering less than ten meters away, a hoverscout sat, training a blinding spotlight on the trio. “I came to tell you that it’s no better back here,” Chance said, slowly raising his arms in the air.

Dodging a volley of heavy repeating blaster fire, Baal ducked and rolled alongside the remaining hoverscout towards its rear hatch. Espo’s, already pouring out of the back, dropped into the mud and brought their weapons to bear on the warrior. Growling, Baal somersaulted into the group and twirled, his deadly blade dismembering some, decapitating the rest.

Spinning, the gunner let loose with the Mekuun’s forward mounted heavy repeater; lethal bolts sizzled inches away from Baal’s body, singeing the fur along his neck. Dodging again, this time backwards into the hatch of the open vehicle, Baal faced several Espo’s hunkering for cover, behind some seating. Two, near the rear, drew back and slung something round towards him. He dissected the first small, black orb with his blade, but the second exploded, a thick black gelatinous substance covering his torso. Fearing it was acid, Baal quickly grabbed at his robe...and stopped.

Sinking knuckle deep in the ooze, his hand stuck to his chest and refused to pull free. Holding the remaining Espo’s at bay with his saber, Baal struggled to free his hand from the powerful substance.

Nervous laughter emerged from the Espo’s behind the seats. One, shouldering his carbine, smiled a toothless grin. “You Trianni are so stupid. Maybe if you got off of this mudball planet once in a while you would have heard of ‘Glop Grenades’.” The smile disappearing, he raised his weapon to fire.

Letting rage and hatred charge his muscles to the point of bursting, Baal roared and pulled his left hand free as the soldier fired. The first bolt caught him in the left shoulder, the second slammed into the glowing blade that flashed in a semi-circle, deflecting the killing shot. Ricocheting, the bolt returned to drop one of the soldiers, scattering the rest further into the vehicle interior.

“You Espo’s are so stupid...maybe if you weren’t you would know to never cross a Trianni with a lightsaber,” he snarled at the twitching corpses. The vehicle bounced savagely, tossing him from the rear hatch out onto the wet ground behind him.

This is getting old, he thought, pulling himself from the soupy ground. Breaking into a mad rush for the vehicle, he hit the ground before the gunner could orient the turret. Rocketing along the ground under the massive vehicle, he jammed his lightsaber into it’s rumbling air cushion, severing coils and powerlines in the process. Sparks rained down into the ground, marking his path with a ‘hiss’. The lumbering vehicle dropped like a stone, with Baal rolling out from underneath before the beast could crush him into the wet grass.

“Hey there! We uh, we were wondering when you guy’s were gonna show up!” A’sok lied, squinting against the brilliant light. The Thunderer was still in his grip, but without a charged energy cell, it did him little good.

“On the count of three, move to the right and I’ll try to take out the light,” Terminus whispered from behind him. Body tensing, A’sok prepared to move.

“One...two...”

A brilliant shaft of red light appeared atop the scout’ and swept down, eliminating the spotlight in a brilliant explosion of sparks. Darkness fell across the trio, the only remaining illumination coming from the red glow of Baal’s weapon.

“Baal?” Terminus asked, voice carrying across the quiet expanse.

“It’s over Vic. Finished.” The Trianni’s voice floated down. A’sok couldn’t see him but could feel the despair and pain in his voice. Throughout the village the evidence of the CSA’s genocide could be seen. Never in his life had A’sok witnessed such a slaughter. That wasn’t true. He had, once before, seen his own people slaughtered mercilessly, and by his own hand no less. He shook the memory from his mind.

“It’s not quite finished yet, you savage,” an amplified voice shouted from behind them. Turning slowly, A’soks stomach clenched into a knot. A squad of Espo’s stood at the ready, carbines trained point-blank on the group.

The commander, his grim face partially illuminated by a shoulder lantern, pointed his repeating blaster towards Baal. “Why don’t you come down before my men are forced to start blasting your friends into char?” he commanded.

Glancing behind him, he expected to see the cat scrambling down from the scout, and was astonished to see the large Trianni already silently waiting behind him. “Frell man! When did you...”

“Quiet!” the commander roared, pointing to A’sok. The man’s next order was suddenly but the remaining command was drowned out by the whine of approaching twin ion drives.

Sweeping around the side of the temple, the Skullduggery appeared, floodlights bathing the entire area in pale white light. The ship shimmied side to side erratically, its disc shape coasting slightly and actually bumping against the temple. Breaking free from the impact, several chunks of stone plummeted into the group of Espos, crushing several soldiers beneath its tumbling mass.

“Uh...Hello! Hello! You down there!” and amplified voice commanded from the ship’s exterior speaker. The ventral laser cannons spun in a maddening arc, not focusing on any one person, rather targeting various Espo’s at once. “Hello! I need everyone to please drop their weapons!” Stunned by the bizarre targeting sweeps of the massive weapon, the Espo’s pitched aside their blasters and began putting their hands on their heads. “Yes! Good! Now please, lay on the ground!!!” the voice commanded.

Staring in disbelief, A’sok looked over at Terminus, who was shaking uncontrollably. “What’s wrong?”

“HAHAHAHAHA!!!” Vic’s voice erupted from the helmet’s comm system. Snatching his LRB from the ground he clapped a hand on A’sok’s shoulder. “Remind me to give Ten Spot a permanent position as the Skull’s gunner!” he laughed, advancing towards the prone Espo’s.

From around the corner Shavaa appeared, leading a group of warriors who fanned out and surrounded the prone Espos. High Priestess Grismarr appeared from behind the group, Klux at her side with his lightsaber at the ready. Hauling the Commander up by his chest plate, Terminus spun him around to face the enraged Priestess. Pulling back, the Skull hovering towards the middle of the village, setting down on a clear patch near the damaged harvester.

A’sok swapped out the drained cell from the Thunderer for a fresh clip. “Man, that was some good flying!” Chance said from beside him.

Baal felt Klux’s eyes on him and matched his stare across the courtyard. The ground of the village was stained with Trianni blood; family and friends he would never see again. Would the Jedi understand? Did the Jedi even care? Had he ever suffered loss like Baal had this day? The anger and rage he felt earlier ebbed away, leaving a sick feeling gripping at his stomach muscles. Hooking his weapon onto his belt he marched towards the group of prisoners. The High Priestess was questioning the Commander when he stepped beside her.

We want to know why you did this. Why you...” she spoke in low tones, her voice purring with fury.

“Murderer!” Baal roared, the faces of dead children again flashing before his mind’s eye. Drawing back a claw, he desired nothing more than to cleave the man’s face like a ripe

fruit. Face growing pale, the commander whimpered in fear as Baal swiped down-but the razor-sharp claws never connected.

Beside him, Klux clutched his wrist in a steel grip that was surprising even for the Jedi. He could feel the Force flowing off of the human, enhancing his strength and barely...just barely...holding the man's death at bay.

"Baal, this isn't the way. This is the work of the Darkside, this man is unarmed," Klux pleaded, his deep brown eyes boring into Baal's soul. The Trianni had heard enough. Pulling away, he stepped back and faced the Jedi. Regarding him with a look of pity, Klux held both of his hands out to his side. Grismarr stepped between Baal and the Espo, folding her arms across her blood stained gown.

"Many have died this day Balthazar. No more blood need be shed," she spoke with authority, Baal guessed for the benefit of the remaining Trianni gather to watch the spectacle. Turning an icy glare on her, venom dripping from his tounge. "Do not tell me about death," Baal seethed, "You are partially responsible for this massacre!"

He'd hit a nerve. Pain pulled at her eyes and she recoiled as if physically struck. Good.

"You overstep your bounds Balthazar!" Shavaa screamed, muscling past several Trianni. Pushing the Protector Initiate back, Grismarr turned to face him. "You blame me?" she questioned. Before he could answer a piercing scream from within the temple eliminated further discussion.

"Lauren!" Terminus shouted, shouldering his LRB and sprinting off towards the temple entrance. Baal's stare lingered on Grismarr for a fraction of a second. "I'll deal with you later," he snarled and sped off behind his partner.

Using her as a shield, the Espo jammed a blaster higher into Lauren's temple. They were above the throne room on the second floor landing; only his arm and a bit of his shoulder peeked out from behind her. Eyes sealed shut, Laurens tears poured from in a steady stream, soaking into the Espo's dull gray coveralls.

"Please...please don't," she begged, her voice falling from the landing as a harsh whisper.

"Fan out," Terminus said, low enough so that only he and Baal could hear. The bounty hunter made his way to the left, picking his way among the corpses of both Trianni and Espo while Baal slowly crept to his right.

"It's ok Pal, we aren't going to do anything stupid here...are we?" Terminus shouted to the landing, approaching the staircase in the far left corner of the temple. Upon hearing Vic's voice amplified throughout the hall, Laurens pleading stopped, eerie silence filling the temple. Silently, Baal mounted a tiny concealed staircase off to the right, hidden several large columns. Moving fluidly up the stairs and bathed in shadow, Ball, covered in black glop was practically invisible. The Espo's attention, now fully focused on Vic, never even turned in his direction.

“I’ll do her man! I’ll put a bolt right through her pretty little skull!” the Espo shouted.

Boundless fear spilled from the soldier and washed over Baal; through the Force the felinoid could practically taste the man’s nervous desperation. But something else cut through the fear and gave Baal a momentary pause. Trust. Trust rolled off of Lauren in wave. Picking among her feelings as he topped the stairwell, Baal realized she had complete faith and trust in Vic.

“I know...and we aren’t going to do anything crazy...everything is fine,” Terminus continued. Baal, hazarding a peek around the corner, saw the Espo back still to him, with Terminus approaching from the opposite direction. The light repeating blaster was slung across the outlaw’s back now, hands open wide to expose his torso in a show of faith.

“Shut your mouth! I’ll decorate these walls with blonde hair and brain matter!”

It was too far to reach the Espo from where he was, but by remaining in this spot Baal ran the risk of the Espo turning and spotting him. Glancing around, he spied a support beam just meters above the landing. Glancing at Vic he silently gestured upwards. Terminus nodded, face invisible behind the dull durasteel dome of his helmet. “That’s right, you got the weapon, and tell you what, I’ll just put mine down okay?” Focusing on his partner, Baal let a Force tendril skate lightly across the outlaw’s mind. He knew exactly what Baal was planning.

“You do it slow! Keep those hands where I can see them!” the Espo screamed, still backing up. Terminus nodded, his red visor watching the Espo impassively. Slowly reaching back, the bounty hunter gripped his LRB; Baal moved, using his powerful legs and agility to spring high into the air. He passed the beam and on the way down broke his fall with the Force, telekinetically lowering his body silently onto the narrow shaft of wood. The Espo, oblivious to Baal’s presence, never took his eyes from Terminus. “Right, here, see? I’m putting it on the ground,” Terminus continued, still moving forward. Slowly, the Espo continued to back up now less than two meters from where Baal crouched. Just another meter...

Calming his breathing, Baal sprung from the beam and fired a violent kick out towards the Espo’s head. Simultaneously the soldier moved, causing Baal’s kick to connect with the tender flesh of Lauren’s jaw. Spinning from the soldier’s grasp, she dropped face first to the ground, curling into a ball. Landing behind the Espo, Baal froze as the Espo leveled a blaster at the cat.

“That certainly didn’t go as planned,” Baal mused aloud.

“WHAT THE HELL!!?” the Espo shouted but Terminus was on him, cradling his head in two powerful hands and twisting his neck with a audible “Snap!”

Slinging the man's body up and over the railing, it landed with a sickening "thud" somewhere on the ground below. Crouching beside Lauren, Baal let the Force flow over her as Terminus joined him.

"Nice work partner...remind me to next time just shoot the hostage and save us both the energy, okay?" Vic growled, jerking his helmet off. Both did what they could, Baal allowing the Force to flow from him and numb her pain while Vic inspected her jaw. "She's gonna be ok," he said a moment later.

"Sorry," Baal offered. Fatigue enveloped him and he realized he hadn't been home for more than a day. Standing, he looked over the railing and took in the ground floor and the bodies sprawled across it. Blood stained the flagstone, running along the grooved flooring and pooling into large puddles of deep red. A thick cloud of smoke hung above the carnage, constantly being added to by the smoldering bodies beneath.

"I didn't expect all of this when I came back," Ball muttered, not bothering to block out the stench of burning Trianni flesh.

"Yeah, homecomings never turn out the way we expect," Vic said. "Come on, let's get her downstairs so I can patch her up."

Dipping low into a broad ravine, the Ghtroc fell into the early morning shadow and was all but invisible in the dense fog that followed the rainstorm. Baal had the directions to the hidden Mew-Tao sanctuary etched into his brain; all Mew-Tao did, practically from birth. In times of trouble or strife, when the Mew-Tao could go nowhere else, there was always Nalliga-Bend, the "Hidden City".

But that was more of a stretch on the part of the Mew-Tao. In actuality, Naliiga-Bend was a series of tunnels and catacombs that acted as a storehouse of emergency provisions and shelter in times of strife. In recent history the Mew-Tao had only used the sanctuary a handful of times. Besides a small troop of caretakers that was rotated out on a regular basis, Nalliga-Bend remained deserted.

Breaking from the ravine, the Skull' emerged into a deep valley ringed in sheer vertical walls of dull tan stone. A river ran along its floor, cutting a path through lush green forests still blanketed in white early morning mist. Casting long shadows across the forest canopy, the valley's walls were harsh crag covered inclines that made the valley almost impossible to reach on land.

Despite being encased in a climate controlled ship, Baal still felt a shiver run up the center of his back.

"Man, this place looks homey," Vic cracked from beside him. Most of the night was spent rounding up the remaining Espos and burying the dead. Those Trianni that could be saved were, and once Lauren was revived she helped in stabilizing some of the worst injuries. All survivors were loaded into the Skulls' cargo bay, along with any material goods of importance.

Raptor Squad had worked tirelessly through the night. Vic, somehow, had found out that the Espo team was an independent cell, working along from village to village, enslaving

some and killing those that offered resistance. Several hundred cells were scattered about Fibuli, all working towards the same goal- annihilation of the Trianni clans.

“This is a sacred sanctuary. Centuries ago this safe haven was established for the Mew-Tao. From birth we were taught how to locate it, under any conditions.” Someone opened the cockpit door and stepped in behind Baal. Turning, he wasn’t surprised to see High Priestess Grismarr, disheveled, hovering in the doorway and peering beyond the cockpit with tired eyes.

“Nalliga-Bend, I wish it hadn’t come to this,” she said. Her robes, once spun of the finest Trianni silk, were now torn and stained with the blood of the countless horrors the previous night forced on her.

Silence hung in the cockpit. Baal had much to say to her...but now was not the time. He held his tongue, focusing on piloting the Ghtroc through the valley. Several kilometers away a waterfall plunged over the edge of a steep cliff, pumping crystal blue water into the valley’s river.

The entrance to Nalliga-Bend was situated directly behind the wall of water, almost halfway up the side of the cliff face. Keeping his eyes on various landmarks, he almost overlooked a nearby plateau jutting up from the caverns forested floor. Ordinarily he would have paid it little attention, but upon closer inspection he realized a being stood in its center, executing slow deliberate movements.

“Who is that?!?” he asked, jabbing a finger towards the figure. The being was easily three meters tall and in the dim light Baal’s keen eyes picked out deep silver fur on the being’s powerful body. Peering closer he realized it wasn’t a Trianni.

“Ah, I thought he would still be here,” Grismarr said leaning on Baal’s seat. A tone of relief snuck it’s way into her voice. “That’s Araf.”

“What are you doing here?!?” A’sok exclaimed. He had to shout to be heard above the roar of the nearby waterfall. Here, in the mouth of the cavern, sounds was amplified, filling the large makeshift hanger with a constant roar. Stalactites hung from the high ceiling, wired with hundreds of makeshift lamps that twinkled like tiny stars. Small generators rimmed the massive cavern interior, illuminating everything in a dull yellow light.

“It is good to see you A’sok, Klux,” Araf said, addressing the Jedi who strolled down the ramp. The Coynite looked down on them both, hands firmly attached to his hips. A’sok noticed he didn’t need to yell, his natural booming voice carried over them in a forceful wave. Covered in silverfish fur, much like the Trianni, Araf’s face was a rugged canine affair, complete with a spiny ridge that ran from atop his wide forehead and curled down around beneath his cheekbones.

Towering over them, he wore no body covering above his waist. Instead, situated far under his massive chest was a deep black sash that encircled his torso and hung over a similar pair of trousers. Black leather boots rooted his massive frame to the moist floor of the cavern.

The first time A'sok encountered the Coynite was when he and Klux spent time on Xanath IV, alongside Klux's master Da'Jony. "Araf," Klux nodded, running a hand through his mussed brown hair. "How is Da'Jony?" he asked, all signs of fatigue vanishing.

"He is why I am here. He sent me to receive you...he had a vision," the Coynite's gray eyes took on a distant cast and he threw a glance back over his shoulder towards the waterfall. "Something is happening in the Galaxy my friends...something of great importance."

"Yeah, I'm hungry as all get out!" A'sok winced, grabbing at his stomach. The last time he was able to eat was the day before, and his policy about fighting on an empty stomach was proving once again to be founded. Appearing from the Skull's interior, Vic stormed out, voice in a pitched argument with Baal.

"I don't care! These people are going to need real medical attention and we simply haven't the room for..." Vic stopped when he saw the three meter tall Coynite. Grinning, A'sok gestured towards Araf. "Hey Vic, Baal, this is Araf...remember I told you about meeting him on Xanath Four?"

The two approached with interest. "Yeah, yeah I remember. Vic, Vic Palisades," Vic said, holding his hand out.

The Coynite stared at the hand for a moment and then back at the outlaw. "I am Zal Araf Th'Trar, of Coyn. You will forgive my manners if I choose not to shake. Coynites are very particular about who they come in contact with."

"Okayyy. Well, still, good to meet ya," Vic offered, dropping the hand to his side and casting a curious glance at A'sok. Baal bowed deeply and introduced himself.

"We were about to get some grub!" A'sok said, to the newcomers. Before he could continue, Araf produced a small silver disc from his sash. "Actually," he said, "I think you need to see this."

The group exchanged curious glances. "Great, as long as I get to eat it when we're done," A'sok said, storming back up the ramp into the Skull.

The holoinage was grainy, with occasional breaks running horizontally along the image every few seconds. The group sat in the tiny lounge of the Skull, huddled around the table and watching the vid with rapt interest for the third time.

It began with a news report; a female Itchi-Tib appeared on a docking pad, along with several stormtroopers standing guard behind her.

“...here just a little while ago. It is reported that they were planning some sort of terrorist attack, but of course we have no detail as yet.”

A'sok leaned forward in his seat. This is where it got interesting. Approaching from the left of the image and exiting to the right, a man with a white ponytail and blue tattoo over his right eye was being led by four stormtroopers towards a waiting lambda class shuttle.

“Again, a rebel cell headed up by this man,” she gestured behind her, “Jax Sheba’, has been exposed and captured by the Empire. As a GNN exclusive, we have the man responsible for the capture.” The camera panned to the left and for the third time A'soks skin went cold. Staring out from a deep blue mask criss-crossed with red lightning bolts were a pair of the craziest eyes he'd ever seen. Memories filled the hacker's head and he shook them away, trying not to focus on the insane stare.

“Mr. Lotek Skidna. Mr. Skidna, you claim to be respon...” he cut her off. ‘I AM the one responsible,’ he said, his voice causing her to step backwards.

“...Yes, well, nice work!” she regrouped, shoving the thin silver microphone into his face, “and how did you come about exposing this cell,” she asked. He stared at her impassively and she cast an unsure glance back to the camera. “Well! There you have it!” she said stepping forward, “a...few...VERY few words from ...”

“I speak with my actions,” he snapped from behind her. Without turning she cast a condescending glance backwards. “Yes I'm sure you do. So, with GNN...” she never finished. Skidna, hands moving as a blur, cleared his blasters and fired two red bolts that cleared either side of the reporter's head, striking the camera and ending the transmission. Vic had to run the last bit in slow motion just to track the man's movements.

“Ket...friggin' Ket Adkins,” Vic said from beside him. He was slouched down in the grav-couch, brow furrowed over two dark angry eyes. A thick cigarro was jammed far into his mouth, filling the lounge with a smoky haze.

A'sok was still trying to shake the cold chills running along his spine. “I thought you said he was in good spirits when he left, I thought you...” he began, waving away the tendrils of smoke creeping towards him. Snorting a white plume through his nose, Vic cast a cynical glance at the hacker.

“He's nuts. Those damn implants he insisted on getting must have his head buzzing like a mynock's nest. He was getting bad towards the end- paranoid, delusions of conspiracy...the whole bit.”

“If Ket turned in Jax, then what's to stop him from turning us over to the Imps?” Klux asked.

“Not a frelling thing! He’s gonna make us!” A’sok exclaimed, visions of Imperial prison planets and endless days of interrogation rolled through his mind like a horror holovid. He wouldn’t last in a place like that...so much torture and death... Silence fell across the group and Araf, hovering in the doorway, stepped forward. “There is more. Watch,” he said, tapping a code into the holoprojector. Another image flickered to life, the quality even worse than the first.

At first it was nothing more than fuzzy dark shapes moving across a slightly lighter background. Momentarily it cleared, showing black and white footage captured from a security camera. The date and time stamp in the upper left corner announced the video as being less than a month old.

The image clearing, the group was witness to a prison yard, bordered by a high barbed restraining wall. A’sok’s stomach began to flutter. Clustered around a pole that jutted into the sky at least three or four meters, a group of “Hardtops”-slang for Imperial Stormtroopers, stood in a loose group. Eventually some peeled away and the camera slowly focused on the pole.

Lashed to its base, hands bound behind him, kneeled Jax. Even through the grainy noise of the footage, A’sok could tell he was injured. Blood poured from various facial cuts and abrasions and his naked chest was stained with a crimson wash. His once white ponytail, now dark, fell about his shoulders in ragged strands. Two Hardtops, brandishing stun batons, towered above him, apparently taking a break from the “disciplinary action”. After what appeared to be a momentary discussion, one of the troopers turned and began raining violent blows atop the Rebels’ back.

“Kill it,” Vic said in disgust around his cigarro. Baal leaned forward and shut off the projector and brought up the lights. No one spoke. Klux, visibly shaken, bundled his robes around his lithe frame and stared at some innocuous point on the floor.

“Who was that?” Chance asked from the floor of the lounge. Bruises lined the young man’s jaw where he took a header into the ground the night before. A fact he had boasted about-repeatedly to the entire team.

“That is-was our Rebel contact,” Baal answered. Lifting himself from the deck, Chance jammed his hands deep into his pockets. “Looks like he was getting messed up pretty bad. Hey, anyone hungry?”

“We have to go get him. We need to get in touch with the Rebellion and find out...” Vic began, pulling the plug of tabbac from his mouth. Baal, shaking his head, held up both hands. “Hang on, Vic, I agree we need to find Jax and help with his rescue, but I have some things that need attending to here.”

Vic looked up with an incredulous stare. “Are you nuts? Were your eyes open? Look, Baal, I realize things here have gone to hell, but Jax is our contact...our friend...he...”

“That’s where you are wrong,” the tall cat stood, leaning over the table. A’sok cast a nervous glance at Klux, who sat watching the back and forth with bored interest. “Jax is not MY friend. If you remember, every time we take one of his “jobs” we wind up

getting the short end of the saber. I'm sorry but I will not leave my people in this condition to run off on a rescue operation for a man that only seems to have his best interests at heart."

"Yeah, I mean, no offense, but I don't even know this Jax character," Chance said, standing beside the large cat. "I mean, I'm no fan of the Imps, but why stick our neck out for some guy who, you know, like Baal said, he gets us into trouble and ...stuff."

Gazing up from the grav couch, Vic's mouth curled into a sarcastic snarl. "Oh, right Chance. I forgot all of the times Jax put YOUR life in peril. Forgive me," he stood, leaning forward and matching Baal's intense stare.

"Jax saved my ass when I was imprisoned and made sure I didn't spend the rest of my life fighting off the nightmares that live in the side tunnels of the Kessel Spice Mines. We can go ahead and finish what we started here, but mark my words: When we finish up getting your people back on their feet, we are going to do two things. Save Jax and put Ket Adkins in a shallow grave."

The waterfall continued to roar. Below him, it plunged into a great white mist, emerging as a serene blue river that twisted and disappeared into the lush forest. Cackle birds, brightly plumed avian with an enormous wingspan and four sets of claws soared high above the trees, diving and twirling in a whirlwind of color.

For the better part of four hours Baal sat on the outcropping of rock, taking in the serene beauty of Nagilla-Bend. With a deep inhalation of clean air, he allowed the anger and distress from the previous night drain from his body and off into the ground. To his left, a half a kilometer away and several hundred meters down, Vic and Araf practiced various martial arts kata atop the plateau. Once the Outlaw had heard that Araf was an accomplished martial artist he and the Coynite struck up a quick friendship. It may have been the only positive thing to come out of the last few days.

"Relax, focus, concentrate," he whispered to himself. The afternoon sunlight warmed his back and assisted in loosening his muscles while he ran through his Mew-Tao meditation exercises. The remaining Trianni would endure. The survivors were loaded into the makeshift infirmary deep in the caverns of Naliiga-Bend upon their arrival. Many died during the assault, falling under the jackboot of the CSA like fragile weeds. But even weeds can tangle and kill, and the new day saw many CSA soldiers dead on the ground of Shaffel Vag.

Behind closed eyes something tugged at his mind. In the darkness he could see a form emerge from a cluster of boulders behind him. The human moved like an apparition through the force, not hiding his presence but neither attracting any attention to it.

"What do you want Klux?" he asked without opening his eyes.

"Thought I would find you here. Nice spot," the Jedi said, dropping cross-legged to the ground beside him. He body touched down without a sound.

"I didn't ask you to sit," Baal said. Peace...calm...he continued to level his breathing.

The Jedi sat beside him in silence for a moment. “Yeah. Didn’t figure you would.” The response lacked sarcasm or malice, emerging as a simple statement that hung in the air between them like a rickety rope bridge, challenging Baal to cross. Sighing, he opened his eyes and turned. The Jedi was staring out towards the valley, eyes focused on something distant, some point in space not even in the same star system.

“Yes?” Baal asked. He had neither the time nor energy to argue with his teammate.

“Last night, in the middle of the battle with the CSA, I sensed something. At first, I wasn’t sure what it was...I mean, a lot was happening. But it was a familiar sensation, almost like when you burn yourself; later if you get close to a flame, that old sensation of the burn will come back, warning you of what happened last time.”

He turned to look at Baal. Shrugging his massive shoulder, the Trianni stared back. “And what was it?”

Concern crossed Klux’s face briefly. “It was you Baal. But...it wasn’t you. I felt you through the force, but, it was as if you were wrapped in something, something dark.”

Klux looked back out at the valley. “The last time I felt anything like it was a month ago...down in the catacombs.”

The sensation of power that surged through Baal the previous evening flashed through his mind, sending a tingle throughout his body. Power and grace flowed through him, allowing him to kill quickly and move deftly; swelling his body with energy he had never encountered before. He shrugged away the sensation racing along his skin. “I don’t know what you mean...I was simply protecting my people. And if the soldiers of the CSA had to die then so be it. I was saving lives.”

“That’s just it Baal. In reading those books we found in the catacombs under Mrlsst...this is exactly what the dark side does. It fills your head with justification of actions...soon you don’t know what right and wrong, as long as you can justify it. Soon you...”

Baal sprung, powerful legs propelling him up into the air. Landing, he spun, deep violet robes billowing around him. “YOU are the one who does not know right from wrong! Is slaughtering Trianni cubs right? Is that what YOUR Jedi teachings tell you?” he challenged, jamming a finger into the man’s startled face. Anger powered through him, along with a tingle of excitement. Sitting immobilized, Klux spoke quietly, never removing his eyes from the towering Trianni.

“What’s happened to you Balthazar? Ever since we set down on Fibuli you’ve been...different. I mean, the condescending way you treat your own High Priestess...”

“Don’t...” Baal, warned, advancing a step towards the Jedi, “call her MY High Priestess. I tolerate her position for the good of the Mew-Tao, and that’s where it ends. She is nothing more than a poser, thrust into a role that far exceeds her limited abilities,” he snarled. “In fact, if I didn’t need her to be ordained a Protector, I would have nothing to do with her.”

The Jedi moved faster than Baal anticipated, and was standing, nose-to-chest in a blink of an eye. “So, that’s what this is all about...some title?” Klux asked, sneering.

“Not just “some” title Klux. You wear your title of Jedi with pride and dignity, holding on to the belief that you are carrying on a long lost warrior tradition. Being a Mew-Tao Protector is no different. The history of my religion is rich and it’s culture is vast...a protector is what I aspire to be...and WILL be.”

Silence hung between them as the remaining rays of afternoon sunlight fell onto their bodies. The cries of the Cackle Birds echoed off of the walls of the valley, filling the air with sweet music that carried on a gentle breeze that cooled them.

“We can’t seem to agree on many things. How to train Chance, how you treat your...THE High Priestess. The difference between the Jedi and Mew Tao religion,” Klux cast his glance back out across the valley. Baal did likewise, noticing Vic shadowing Araf’s fluidly moving frame. “But I think we both agree that the Darkside is something we need to be wary of...and avoid.”

“I suppose we can agree on that much,” Baal said, turning away and heading back towards the waterfall.

“Is that okay?” Vic asked, smoothing out the edges of the bandage. He had a minor amount of training, and insisted on resetting her dressings when needed. “Yeah, yeah it’s a good job,” Lauren said smiling. “You know, I DO have a little training Mr.Palisades, it’s not necessary for you to wait on me,” she said trailing a thing finger along the bandage adhering to her jaw.

Leaning back in his bunk, she let her head rest against the interior bulkhead of the Skull’. Out in the hallway C-Beez, a white and red R2 unit stopped at the open door. His small silver domed head rotated, issuing a series of beeps and chirps.

“Sorry pal, I can’t read your display from here,” Vic said leaning back beside her. The droid twittered again, this time in deliberate tones. Vic tilted his head and nodded. “Ah, okay. No, Lauren and I are fine, we’ll grab some grub later. But thanks.” Turning the small droid rolled back down the hallway.

Passing the door and heading in the same direction, Ten spot hovered after the R2 unit, cruising past the open door. ‘I told you they weren’t hungry. They only seem hungry after they...oh well, you know.’

Laughter filled the cabin. Tears pulled at the corners of Lauren’s eyes and she wiped them away with the back o her hand. It had been weeks since she laughed as hard.

After the attack, she spent the next several hours in a daze, patching up Trianni and trying to do the best with what she had. Without proper facilities and a bacta tank, many Mew-Tao perished. Upon reaching Nagilla-Bend the Trianni allowed her to set up a makeshift infirmary in one of the cavern’s chambers. Temporary beds were constructed and the medical supplies the group purchased in Podeziniku were put to use.

The following day was spent much like the first; tending to the sick and wounded and grabbing bits of sleep when she could. Fatigue worked at her but she pushed it aside. Years of medical training conditioned a person for long hours of stress and little rest.

“Thanks for the instruction by the way,” Vic said, leaning forward and arranging the items in a small travel first aid kit. “With this group I have a feeling I’m going to need it.”

“It’s not a problem, if you guys are working for the Rebellion you are going to need every advantage you can get.” The cabin was sparse, with most of Vic’s belongings packed into spacer chests or travel duffels. In the corner his Terminus armor hung from a wall mounted frame, staring at her impassively.

“Vic, I hate to pry, but...what were you before? I mean, you must have had some sort of life before joining up with this...team.”

Snorting, he rose from the bunk and stashed the medkit in a footlocker. “Team,” he mused, turning and dropping on top of the black container. “Not sure if we are organized enough to be called that.” He smiled, staring down at the deck for a moment. “The truth of it is, I used to be a soldier, on Vol Kol,” he said, crossing his arms over a “Garnib Crystal Corp” t-shirt. “It is—was a great place to live. Clean air, good people, beautiful cities...a nice life. But that all changed when the King’s son decided climbing into bed with the Empire was more important than his fathers life.”

Nodding, Lauren could see the struggle he was going through just to tell her this much. He offered a crooked smile and shrugged. “So, he killed him. Killed him and hung the blame on the only guy who had proof of the true murderer,” he jabbed a thumb into his chest. “After that I bounced around the galaxy for a few years, you know, hired muscle and all that. Then one day I fell in with this group and, well...” he let the words drop.

“Some story,” she said, mouth hanging agape. With every passing minute her interest and love in him grew. Turmoil raged inside of her, soon she would have to make a decision, a hard, unwelcome decision.

“You mentioned you wee from Coruscant, I bet that was wild,” he said, moving from the locker to the bunk. She raised her legs and he dropped onto the cushion, taking her feet in his hands and working out the days stress. “Yeah,” she said closing her eyes. “Mother and Father wanted a doctor in the family, so here I am,” she smiled. His powerful hands kneaded the balls of her feet, sending a warm relaxation through her entire body.

“I bet they are going to choke when they get word I decided to pass on the Bonadan position,” she said. The massage stopped. Cracking an eye, she found him staring at her, confusion on his face.

“You are what?”

“What?” she asked, opening the other eye.

“You are going to pass on Bonadan? Why?”

Rising on her elbows, she jabbed a toe into his ribs. “Why? Vic, after what I saw last night, I can’t work in the Corporate Sector. Those Espo’s were killing Trianni, and for no

good reason!” she shrugged. “If I am going to help people I’m going to do it somewhere else, somewhere it matters.”

“But,” he shook his head, “It’s not like you will be working for the CSA. There are people on Bonadan who could use your skills.”

Lauren lay back, her head dropping back onto the pillow. “My minds made up Vic. The Corporate Sector will just have to get someone else to patch up their killers for them.”

“Whatever you say lady.”

“That’s right. I guess I’ve picked up some of your bad habits,” she smiled, shutting her eyes. “Now get back to the massage before I get cranky.”

The caverns of Nalliga-Bend wove deep into the side of the cliff face; branching off, they doubled back on themselves in an insane maze of crawlways and dead ends. Baal had only been this far down once before, when he was practically a cub. His father, fearing an Imperial raid, brought him to Nalliga-Bend to wait out the raid. The rumor that Lord Vader was aboard the visiting Star Destroyer was enough to cause the entire clan alarm, and his father wasted no time in spiriting his son away into the sanctuary; his father’s hope being that Baal’s Force potential would be hidden by the deep catacombs. Fortunately, the raid was just a rumor, and the Dark Lord of the Sith never came within three systems of his home planet.

He’d retreated into the catacombs for peace, but a strong curiosity tugged at him a curiosity to know how far the tunnels went, and what lay at their end, drove him now just as it had decades before.

Moving deeper, Baal felt his way along the rough wall of the cavern, a glow rod casting a pathetic circle of light before him. He would probably be better off shutting it down and using his own keen senses he thought to himself. The path wound around in an insane maze. Twice he had come across the same collection of scavenged bones decorating the wet floor. Just like Mrlsst he thought, smiling to himself. However, if there is an evil cat creature in this tunnel...

“It would probably be me,” he mused. After his conversation with Klux he realized why he spent countless hours meditating the day away- to cleanse the dark taint that stained him from the night before. The intoxicating power that surged through his body left him feeling soiled and tired, as if someone had shoved his soul into a Nar Shadda gutter. The Darkside almost claimed him, but in the end, justice and concern for his clan pulled him back from the edge, but only just barely.

Stepping into a large cavern, the ground ended just a meter from where the tunnel stopped, falling away into nothingness. The meager light of the glowrod disappeared into thin air and Baal could feel a draft rising up from somewhere far below. He stood on a shelf that ended a meter away to his left and stretched on, winding down and away to his right. Moving with confidence and grace, he picked along the narrow path, teetering on

the precarious edge that ran snug with a rugged stone wall. Feeling his way along, he felt the ground beneath his now bare feet grow from rough wet stone to a dry smooth surface. Moments later his hand, trailing alongside the wall on his right, dipped into a recessed alcove.

Casting light into the opening, Baal was startled to see a small generator sitting on the ground a meter away. Kneeling, he fiddled with the controls until the machine let go with a ragged sputter and crack of electricity. Dozens of illumination rods sparked to life, one by one, slowly revealing an immense hall beyond the alcove, carved from the caverns dull yellow rock.

Above, the ragged stalactites of the cave giving way to a smooth domed ceiling that arched high over his head. Thick support pillars, not unlike those in the Shaffel Vag temple, marched in straight lines down either side, ending at a raised platform some thirty meters away; atop the platform sat a low stone table, carved from the same stone as the chamber itself. Various wooden chests and cargo containers sat nestled behind the pillars, covered with dust and tattered netting.

Awestruck, the Trianni stared in wonder, taking in every stone block and towering column. Stepping closer to the pillars, he noticed etchings and symbols carved into the smooth stone. Some appeared to be broken basic, some he couldn't decipher at all. Glancing around, he realized the writing seemed to cover every wall and pillar in the cavernous temple. Wandering as if in a dream, Baal allowed his eyes to take in every mark, every symbol. Bits of familiar text and symbols jumped out from the mishmash of scripture. "History...the entire history of the Mew Tao.." he whispered to himself, recognizing lines he memorized from texts as a child.

. Ascending the raised platform, a dark shape atop the table caught his eye. Resting in a hollowed out indentation, a shiny black orb reflected Baal's curious visage back at him. To its right, in a similar recess at the opposite end of the long table, lay a slightly larger pyramid crafted from the same black glassy marble streaked with faint veins of jade. Gently, Baal pulled one, then the other from their resting spots, turning them over and examining them.

The orb was very plain, with no visible markings or imperfections marring its reflective surface. Turning over the pyramid revealed a round recession, roughly the same width and half the depth as the orb.

"What the frell?" Baal muttered to himself. Shrugging, he stuck the orb into the pyramids indentation.

Light-side energy exploded from the object, bathing Baal in a warm, comforting sensation. The lights in the hall flickered briefly while the power pulsed, sending shivers along his arms and raising the fur over his entire body. After a moment, the tingling subsided, but the energy remained, pulsing from the black object like a heartbeat. Bathing in the objects glow and warmth, Baal almost didn't sense the being approaching from the caverns ledge. Gripping his lightsaber, he spun to face the temples entrance, eyes peering into the darkness beyond.

"You won't need that," a voice called from the darkness.

“I’ve not had much luck with secret underground rooms lately,” Baal snarled. “So you’ll forgive me if I don’t believe you. Show yourself.”

Stepping into the hall, High Priestess Grismarr, cast her robes back so the light of the room sparkled along her fur. “I see you have found the Hidden Temple of the Mew Tao...and something else,” her eyes narrowed on the object cradled in his hand.

Baal clipped his lightsaber back onto his belt. “Why was I never shown this?” he asked, gesturing to the room with his free hand.

A smirk appeared under her muzzle, “Why should YOU have been shown anything?” she crossed the hall with a purposeful stride, “This is the Temple of the Mew Tao...only High Priestesses have knowledge of it.”

Rolling his eyes, he turned away from her and back to the table. “Of course. We male Trianni are nothing more than your soldiers and errand boys. Who would ever consider letting us in here?” He let his eyes focus on the symbols carved into the wall behind the table “For that matter, maybe we males simply aren’t smart enough...correct?”

“I thought your time out among others in the galaxy would widen your perspective. But I see that it’s made you nothing but a sad, angry little cub again Baal,” she hissed from a meter behind him. He turned to see her trembling beneath her fur. “I didn’t create our culture! I wasn’t the one who made females dominant! Yet you blame me! Why?” She roared, her brilliant golden eyes flickering with pain and malice. Without warning she swung at him, her palm missing his chest by centimeters. She tried again and he caught her arm this time, applying just enough pressure to stop her. She gazed up at him, eyes pleading for answers he didn’t have.

“When we were younger...you weren’t like this. You were compassionate and kind,” she pulled free of his grip. “We were friends Baal, and I thought, maybe, when you came back...” She stopped, crossing both arms over her chest and turned away, but not before Baal saw the embarrassment that exploded on her face like a starburst.

“What?” he asked, confusion muscling anger out of his mind for the time being. “You thought what?” He watched her with interest, really taking her in for the first time since he’d returned. Their friendship used to be strong, when he was younger. But that was another time and place.

“We lost Vabaa last night Baal. He died during the raid. Without him many others would have died,” she looked back up at him. “You want to be a Protector...and with the way you have shown your courage...I suppose there is no denying you that title,” she was back in control now, gathering her robes up, she moved past him and to the wall behind the table.

Memories of Fibuli summers raced through his brain; long exhausting training sessions when he, Grismaar, Shava would wrestle and tumble among the fella weeds played out like an ancient holo vid. Pushing them away, he hefted the black object in his hand. He didn’t have time to reminisce.

“And what of this object?” he asked.

She turned and stared at the item. “Ah yes, the Key. For millennia it sat untouched upon this table, until now.” She leaned against the stone, her robes brushing absently against the dust. “Even if I wanted to deny you the Protector title, I couldn’t.” Something etched into the wall had her attention, and she silently mouthed words as she read.

“What? Why?” he asked.

Leaning forward, she traced her finger along a line of script that appeared to be made up of many dots and swooping thin lines. “...And in the final days of the Mew Tao, a Protector will emerge, and, taking the key, will unlock the secrets of the Mew Tao and lead it’s people from the darkness into everlasting peace.”

Pulsing in his hand, the object seemed to get warmer. Grismaar looked back to him and then down at the black mystery he clutched in his large paw. “Whether or not I agree with it, you are the Protector the prophecy speaks of Baal. You are the one who found this sacred temple, and you are the one who will lead the Mew Tao into everlasting peace.”

Behind Baal, A’sok and Klux sat opposite each other, a lantern placed between them on the stone table. Datapads and Books lay spread out before them, covering a large portion of the surface. The black object lay near Klux, the rounded underside sitting nestled in its original groove, leaving the pyramid element exposed.

“That thing gives me the creeps,” A’sok said, bundling a light blue parka around his thin frame. “And what is the deal? Can’t we get a heater down here?”

“Are you done transcribing that text yet?” Klux asked looking up from a stack of flimplast. For the past several hours the duo had worked at trying to find a translation code that would convert the wall’s symbols to basic. Pouring over translation programs and the Jedi tomes found within the catacombs on Mrlsst, they had so far had no luck. “No, I’m not. It’s hard to work a keypad with frostbitten fingers!” A’sok said, jamming his digits in the air in front of him. Baal rolled his eyes. He’d argued long with Grismaar to allow his partners into the temple, with reason eventually winning out over tradition. She admitted that many of the writings and the script were mysteries even to her...it’s knowledge being lost over the passage of several millennia.

Turning his attention back to the wall, Baal inspected the symbols further, attempting to match them against a program that scrolled along his datapad. Nothing. They were having little success, but he was determined, even if it meant...He stopped. Leaving the team behind? Would it really come to that? And would he really be able to make the sacrifice?

“You guys going to be in here forever?” Vic asked from the entrance. Bundled in a pair of thick coveralls, he crossed the expanse, lugging a large black duffel over one shoulder.

“My Bossman!” A’sok called, pulling himself from the small collapsible chair and stretching. Vic nodded and tossed the duffel where it landed amid the books, covering up one side of the Force artifact. “Vic! Be careful! this is delicate and important stuff!” Klux cried, shoving the duffel into a cleared corner of the table.

“Yeah, right,” Vic said through his smirk. “Sok’ I brought you guys some field rations to snack on and a thermal blanky,” he said mussing the younger mans hair, “to keep you warm. I would have shoved Deuce in there but she doesn’t like tight spaces.”

“Frell you Porno!” A’sok said throwing a playful jab at Vic’s midsection. He took it and doubled over feigning injury. “Ugh! Damn, have you been training with Chance?” Picking through the duffel, Baal pulled free a meal container. “Where is the swoop racer?” he asked, popping the top free to reveal an unappetizing mixture of Corellian Goulash.

“Ah, he’s out talking swoops with Araf,” Vic said leaning against one of the pillars. “I told ZA it’s perfectly fine to kill him if he fails to entertain.” A’sok snorted and pulled a blanket from the duffel. “Ah. Warmth.”

“Yeah, Lauren said if you die of hypothermia she can’t do much for ya,” Vic said lighting up a thick cigarro. Baal wrinkled his nose and stared at the Outlaw. “Oh, sorry,” Vic grinned, smashing it out against his boot.

Grabbing one of the books, Klux stood and stretched. “Here,” he said, moving aside and over to the wall, “have a seat.”

Dropping into the rickety chair, Baal shoveled the mush into his mouth, trying to ignore the flavor. “She doing ok?” he asked around a chunk of Corellian Golden Crab.

Vic nodded, sticking the unlit cigarro back in his mouth. “Yeah, she’s good. Other than her little “fall” the other day, she should be a hundred percent in no time.” Baal offered a weak grin. Vic made a deliberate point to not mention Baal’s ‘slip’ when rescuing Lauren, so the others knew no better.

“Yeah...and what is up with you guys anyway?” A’sok asked, buried deep in the blanket; only his nose and eyes emerging from it’s warmth.

“What?” Vic asked.

Rolling his eyes, A’sok looked at Baal and back to Vic. “Uh helloooo? You going to get married or what?”

Eyes flying wide, Vics mouth flew open. “What???” the cigarro dropped to the ground. “Are you nuts? Look, Sok’, that might be in he bag for you and Deucy...but...me and Lauren are...we just enjoy each others company.”

“Could you enjoy each others company a little quieter? The Skull isn’t that big of a ship,” Baal cracked around a mouthful of goulash. A’sok exploded into laughter, the large

blanket-man-thing shaking uncontrollably. Picking the cigarro up, Vic threw them both a “frell-you” look.

“Hey! Topic shift! How is the translation going?” Vic asked, gesturing to the walls. Baal shrugged, the oily taste of Corellian seafood coating his tongue. “Not good. It’s weird, some of this script...the stuff that appears to be oldest...I’ve never seen before...and none of the translation programs seem to recognize it either.”

“There’s a reason for that,” Klux said, turning away from the wall, face drained of all color. Turning the thick Jedi tome over in his trembling hand, several of the symbols adorning the wall could clearly be seen scrawled on the tattered pages. “Baal...the writing on these walls...the early history of your people...it’s in Sith writing.”

Prophecy of the Fates: Odyssey

It just didn’t make sense.

For the hundredth time in the last several weeks Balthazar Cochroth sat motionless, matching the readout on his datapad against the carved script embedded into the Trianni Temple wall. What bothered him, what kept him parked in front of the rows and rows of ancient text was that he could find now flaws, no discrepancies that would lead him to believe that the story unfolding on the rough surface was some sort of galactic joke. After two weeks of arduous translation, the script now scrolled across the screen of his datapad, reading like some sort of rueful holodrama. The history told of a group of Trianni, thousands of years before, who lived in captivity under the boot of some long forgotten government. It went on to describe a man who arrived and released the Trianni from their shackles of oppression, training them in the ways of the current religion, the Mew Tao.

Combat, art, culture- the savior taught them everything he knew, building them up from a group of ignorant knuckle dragging slaves into a powerful society of artisans and philosophers.

Oh, and he just happened to be Sith.

Baal shook his head again and took a deep breath of stale dry air. Everything he knew or imagined about the Sith went against what was carved into the stone that sat in front of him. Near the bottom, where the history began, everything was written in “sith-script”, a word A’sok coined to describe the various marks and slashes that they found in the old Jedi tomes that now sat behind him atop the temples only table.

And then there was the mystery of the object that sat off to his right on the temples rough stone floor, emitting a constant pulse of force energy. When he found it, the components were a simple flawless black ball and triangle. By joining the two, both combined to create an artifact that emitted a powerful burst of light side energy.

And now it sat, it’s mysteries hidden somewhere among the thousands of lines of history scrawled upon the mighty walls of the temple. It would take along time to find the answer, time he didn’t have. In the recesses of his mind he felt the galactic clock moving. Once he joined the two pieces together something was set in motion. They hadn’t much time now.

“You’ve been down here a long time,” High Priestess Grismarr said from behind him. He sensed her approach moments ago, brushing away the interruption long before she stepped into the temple.

“Yes, well, it takes a while to digest that your religion is based off of the teachings of a Sith madman,” he replied, still staring at the datapad. Placing a covered plate beside him, she shoved a book aside and sat atop the table.

“Baal, this ancient text is not what the Mew-Tao is now. Whatever misdirection the religion took in it’s early days, we’ve changed...”

Her words sounded hollow in his ears.

“Really?” He jabbed a finger at a particular line of text, nestled in the corner of the wall.

“It says here that ‘Scraveren, the High Priestess, had no less than two Protectors with her at all time, sounds familiar doesn’t it?’

The question was met with silence as Grismarr shifted uneasily among the flimplast. On the wall, Baal watched her shadow smooth it’s dress.

“The council had a meeting last night, it was determined that these writings changed nothing; that our religion has grown beyond the history this scripture laid out,” her shadow gesture encompassed the temple. “Our people cannot live in the past.”

“So the truth gets buried under the foliage, and we go on pretending it never happened,” Baal said shaking his head. Everything he knew, everything he believed in, was falling

away in pieces. “No armor. No other beings may be a Mew-Tao. No...” his voice trailed off. Turning, he looked up at Grismarr who pulled her stare from the walls to meet his.

“Just conventions and customs that mean nothing. Codes put in place by a creature of darkness to indenture our people to HIM. Codes that, had we had known their source a week ago, could have been discarded to save Mew-Tao lives,” he let his gaze linger on her.

She nodded slowly in agreement. “This is true. Don’t think the council hasn’t considered those points,” she said, golden fur glistening under a shimmering white opaque robe. They watched each other for a moment and he looked away, back to the datapad.

“And the council won’t change these customs,” he said, fighting back a surge of revulsion.

Without responding she rose from the table, turning away from him. “I’ve got a meeting with some Mew-Tao that have been off planet Balthazar, we can discuss this further, later tonight,” descending the stone steps, she strolled purposefully towards the temple’s entrance.

Standing, Baal pitched the datapad on to the table. “How many more lives are going to be lost before we cast off these archaic customs Yahwell?” he called after her. She stopped in mid stride and turned back to him, crossing her arms over her chest. Her tail curled up and around her waist, smoothing the seam of her robes.

“The Mew Tao will persevere Baal. Through CSA attacks and starvation and,” her eyes narrowed, “those that think we should discard the old ways. We will persevere and overcome these obstacles because it’s what we must do,” she stared a challenge at him to speak, and when he remained silent she turned and passed through the grand hall and into the darkness.

Behind him the datapad beeped, tiny and weak in the cavernous room. Forcing back his anger, he stalked back to the table and jerked the small silver pad from amid the tomes of Jedi text. Still running a decryption program, A’sok’s program had deciphered another block of Sith-Script. Dropping onto the table Baal called up the latest translation. As the information scrolled down the screen, Baal read aloud, his voice echoing in the quiet sanctuary.

“...In the final days, the savior, the one known as Shaud’Narl, bestowed upon the followers, those of divine right, the Mew Tao Prophecy. Visions that were visited upon him through the glorious Force laid before him the future of its People. The Mew Tao.” Baal stopped, slowly picking across the next block of text. “In the last days of the Mew Tao, among the blood and ash of his kindred, a protector will rise, strong in the Force, and, along with a Human Warrior, will take the sacred relic and restore balance and light to the conflicted galaxy.”

The words, plain and clear glowed on the face of the screen challenging him to question their truth. Mind reeling, Baal dropped the pad to the table and buried his head in large powerful hands, weariness closing him in a cocoon.

Sitting in complete darkness, Chance felt at peace. For the first time in days, heck, weeks, he could let his body relax and his fear and anger drain away. Even the loss of his swoop seemed insignificant. Pushing away the vision of his prized possession exploding into a ball of flame, he searched for tranquility. Somewhere in the cargo hold, Klux was meditating as well, but in the pitch-black surroundings he had no idea where. He fought the urge to open his eyes to aid him, and instead put his faith in the Force.

At first nothing changed. Eyes open or closed, all he saw was the dark. Then, emerging as a vaporous apparition, a form took shape. It was large, legs planted wide and towering over other, smaller forms. Letting his mind drift to it, he tried to focus on the large humanoid shape. Small details began to materialize into the form of Araf, the large Coynite warrior he met just weeks before. Canine features with deep dark eyes, framed by dark silver hair, focused and sharpened. He was somewhere outside of the ship, surrounded by a group and gesturing. The large warrior's movements froze in place and he cast a curious glance towards the ship. White vaporous eyes seemed to focus directly on Chance. Alarmed, he let his attention falter and the images evaporated into the darkness; from behind his lids, light flooded the cargo hold.

“You let your concentration drop,” Klux said from a far corner. Keeping his eyes closed, the Jedi remained seated, both legs crossed beneath him and back ramrod straight. A thick mane of chestnut colored hair fell from his head and cascaded around his shoulders, framing a thin face set off by a bushy goatee. He was wearing his traditional blue Jedi tunic and knee high black leather boots, both accenting a frame that appeared both powerful and lithe at the same time.

“Yeah...I realize that. How did you turn on the lights without moving?”

A smile crossed Klux's face and he nodded to the control panel set into the bay's far wall. The lights shut off and returned just as quickly. “The Force can assist in many things,” he said.

Chance climbed to his feet, stretching. Swapping his racing leathers for brown trousers and a light green shirt, he always made a point to dress comfortably when training with Klux; with Baal he made a point to sacrifice comfort for protection.

“Right. Hey, I couldn't see you. I saw Araf...but ...you were closer..” he said, using an overturned cargo crate as a makeshift seat.

The Jedi, eyes still closed, nodded. "Correct. I could tell you were really stretching out with your powers, so I tried to conceal mine to see what you would come up with. Good job, by the way," he cracked an eye to take in the red haired swoop racer, "Araf is on the opposite side of the ship-outside."

"Hmph," Chance crossed his arms and nodded. "Cool. This Force stuff is cake man. Baal, just this morning, taught me how to twirl this," he pulled a short silver cylinder from his trousers. Thumbing its switch, a meter long blue blade snapped to life, energy pulsing along a white core; it's recognizable humming filled the hold.

A frown pulled down the corners of the Jedi's mouth as both eyes opened. "How long have you had that?" he asked, his trim body snapping up into a standing position. Shutting the weapon down, Chance jammed it deep into his pocket. "Just a few days. Baal said I was ready for my own training saber." Shaking his head, Klux muttered something inaudible under his breath. "I need to talk to him...this isn't what we agreed on. And take it out of your pocket, you can lose a leg that way."

"Hey, I've been meaning to ask," Chance said, pulling the weapon from his trousers. "What is going on with Baal? You guys were talking about his religion being Sith-based and all that...what gives?"

Klux's eyes narrowed and a mask of neutrality seemed to drop across his features. "That's something you need to ask Baal I think," he said turning towards the cargo hold's door. "But not until I get done with him."

The path to the summit was rigorous; over 2 miles through heavily wooded forest, populated by ravenous predators and deadly insects. Clutching the datapad in a large fist, Baal made the trip in less than five minutes, letting the Force enhance his ability traverse the forests hazards. After crawling up the plateau's steep vertical wall, he reached the top feeling as rested as when he began the trip. Standing to the side, he watched Klux with interest. The Auburn haired human lay on his back, several large rocks twirling in unison above his prone body. One after the other, they lined up vertically, falling in a line to the ground where they circled the Jedi, coming to a rest at his feet.

"If you're done playing games I've got something to show you," Baal said, activating the datapad.

"Sure." Without another word, the Force gently pulled the pad from his grasp, carrying it on invisible fingers where it hovered above the Jedi. For the first time he opened his eyes, scanning the screen floating above his face

"Interesting," he said a moment later, returning the datapad to Baal's hand.

“I’d say this is far more than interesting!” Baal snapped, crossing his massive arms. A cool breeze carried through the valley, ruffling his blue fur.

“Prophecies are a dime a dozen, this may not even pertain to us,” Klux said, levitating upright. With a wave of his hand a towel, bunched up near the edge of the plateau, hovered into his hand. “This prophecy may have already come and gone...your people have been around for quite a while.”

“I don’t think this is coincidence Klux, and I’m certain it refers to you and I. It even mentions the ‘sacred relic’...that item I found down in the temple? How can you just carelessly toss aside this revelation? Does the fate of the galaxy mean nothing to you?” Baal slipped the datapad back into the folds of his robe, advancing within a meter of the Jedi.

Towelng off the back of his neck, Klux turned his attention to the Trianni. “Oh, so I’m being careless now? How about you explain to me why you decided to give Chance a lightsaber. You would have been better off strapping a live thermal well to a rabid womprat and letting him loose in a playground. ”

Taken aback, Baal fixed the human with a narrow stare. “You underestimate him. He’s ready. He just needed a weapon to spar with, so I gave him my old saber.”

Klux paced to the edge of the plateau. “It’s dangerous is what it is. And I disagree. He’s NOT ready. I still sense much immaturity and anger in him. Today...he was better...we meditated and he seemed more in control,” Klux stopped and turned. “You and I had an agreement.”

Baal answered with a period of silence before he replied. “We decided you would train him how you saw fit and I would train him how I saw fit. That was the agreement,” he hefted one of the rocks, tossing it in the air. “I never said I wouldn’t arm him. You,” he pointed at the Jedi, “need to stick to the plan. Chance will be a powerful ally, he needs us to stay true to our teaching of the light side of the Force.”

“But you gave him a lightsaber! A Jedi’s weapon...but he isn’t a Jedi yet!”

“A TRAINING saber, Klux. After swapping out the crystal he couldn’t cut through Chibi butter with it. Besides, I’ve already constructed my new dual sabers to complete my Protector training,” he drew two long silver cylinders from his belt. “I didn’t need it anymore. You need to relax; he’s practicing with a professional swordsman in a controlled environment. He’ll be fine.” Facing the forest he ignited his new weapons, twin red shafts of pulsing energy leaping to life in his hands. Twirling the blades, he ran through a quick routine, shutting the weapons down and easily slipping them back into the rings dangling from his belt.

“Jedi are supposed to craft their own sabers. It’s tradition...a right of passage. You just GAVE him a hand me down.” Klux threw his hands in the air. “Fine, look, do what you want...train him how you want,” he made his way to the plateau’s edge and stared down. “I just hope we can avoid the dark...” his voice trailed off.

“The Darkside Klux?” Baal asked from behind him. He expected this to come out sooner or later. For weeks the team avoided him, casting unsure glances and questioning stares when they thought he wasn’t looking.

Now, especially among the Mew-Tao, turmoil and arguments were the order of the evening, with some outright refusing to believe the script and others claiming it was nothing more than an Imperial trick. Baal remained silent on the subject, speaking little and listening to all points of view.

“The Darkside can be a powerful ally,” he said, staring past Klux and towards the retreating sun. The valley below the plateau was growing dark, signaling less than an hour of daylight left. Baal pulled his attention back to the Jedi, who stood easily with his hand resting on the hilt of his lightsaber. “Powerful...but destructive. I know what you and the others think Klux. You are worried that the Mew Tao is in some way...tainted...by darkness because of our past,” he focused his green eyes on the human.

Shrugging, Klux matched his stare. “I don’t know what to think Baal. I mean, this hidden sanctuary you found, the artifact you assembled down in the temple, now you’re married to this prophecy deal...I don’t know what it all means, but none of it seems to add up to any good. Too much secrecy, too much darkness”

The Trianni nodded, dropping the stone to the ground where it kicked up a cloud of dust upon impact. “At least you are being honest. A’sok throws me doubtful stares now and Chance dances around the subject in some pathetic attempt to pry information. And Vic...” the Trianni emitted a low chuckle, “Vic doesn’t seem to give a damn about any of it.”

“Yeah, he’s got his mind on other things I think,” Klux nodded.

“Klux, I won’t stand here and make excuses or assurances. I’m the same being you’ve known since we met on Garnib. Nothing is different about me,” he said. Despite being true, the words emerged as if he were trying to convince himself rather than the Jedi. It was getting late, they could always continue the conversation later. “You ready to head back?” he asked.

“Yeah.”

“I’ll meet you at the bottom,” he grinned and hovered several centimeters into the air and backwards, dropping quietly into the carpet of treetops far below.

“Yeah, ok, so I was an adult holovid star.”

Lauren felt her stomach do a flip-flop. Sitting on a rock opposite her, Vic threw up his hands, exasperation evident on his face.

They were less than a hundred meters from the base of the waterfall, parked atop several large stone slabs dotting the rivers bank. A'sok coerced them to the spot for an evening picnic, leaving the dull walls of the Trianni sanctuary behind. High above, stars dotted the evening sky, chasing away the last remaining hours of daylight.

“Yeah, we have his entire holovid collection on the Skull’...although I don’t remember seeing it around lately,” A'sok prompted from the river. He was clad in a pair of brightly colored swim trunks, resplendent in varying shades of blue, white and green.

Vic was dressed in a pair of dark loose trousers while she opted to wrap a bright yellow sarong around her waist along with a matching bikini top.

Staring at the clear water, Lauren spoke so only Vic could hear. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

Still staring daggers at A'sok the outlaw turned his attention back to her. “What Nerfchucker failed to tell you, is that I was under deep cover for the Ivory Brigade.” He dropped from his perch and waded through the waist deep water to her rock. “My sister, Lacacia, was kidnapped and sold into an adult holovid ring, I had to infiltrate the business to find her and bring her back.”

Relief washed across her, but a nagging sensation still remained. “I understand. Really, I do,” she said, smiling and taking his hand. “You did what you had to do, your sister was in trouble...you have nothing to be ashamed about.”

“Thanks, I would have mentioned it sooner but it’s not something I really like to, you know, parade around.”

“Sure,” she perked up. “I mean, who cares about, what? A couple of holovids?”

“Thirty-Seven to be exact,” A'sok said popping up from beneath the water. They hadn’t seen him approach-one of the benefits of his being able to breath for extended periods underwater.

“Thirty-Seven?!?” She tried to hide the surprise on her face.

Mouth curling into a sheepish grin, Vic nodded. “But hey, to be honest a few of those were trilogies...so they should only count as one.”

Rolling her eyes Lauren dropped back onto the rock. “Great so I fell in love with an adult vid’ star,” she confessed to the sky. “Sounds like a horror holovid.” After a moment of waiting for a response she rose.

Vic, staring into the water, avoided her stare. A'sok was advancing towards the riverbank. “Uh, I’ll leave you kids alone,” he said.

“What’s wrong with him?” she asked.

“Ah, dysentery,” Vic answered, climbing back onto his own rock. “Lauren, I’ve been meaning to talk to you about... us.”

The flip flop from before was nothing compared to the cramp that now settled in her stomach. She had feared this conversation, but, like a bit of cancerous tissue, chose to deal with it before it could cause any more damage. “I’ve been meaning to talk to you too. Vic, I’ve decided to stay on Fibuli.”

The Outlaw, obviously prepared to deliver his speech, sat dumbfounded. “What? Why?”

Laughing, she dipped a foot into the river and kicked a stream of water towards him.

“You always ask that!” she laughed.

Emotion gripped at her but she fought it back. She had been thinking about her situation for the last few weeks and realized that, while she loved him, the Trianni needed a doctor more than she needed a live-in boyfriend. “Vic, I love you, and I want us to be more than what we are. But the Trianni need me. Many of the females are pregnant and the only nursemaids the clan had died last month in the raid.” The memory of the Espo attack on the Mew Tao village still sent a shiver of anger through her body.

“Uh...right. Lauren, look you are amazing, and I just ...I didn’t want you to think that I took our situation lightly.”

Sitting on the rock, tripping over his own words, she realized just how gentle he really was. As a partner he was attentive and kind, but by living the life he lived he’d developed a hard shell that seemed to keep out a lot of pain.

“It’s okay Vic. Really. I realize you need to get back to JIE and check on your business. And I need to stay here and help these people. Don’t worry,” she slipped from her rock into the cool water and crossed to him. “We will meet back up eventually and pick up right where we left off.”

He dropped into the water beside her and wrapped large tanned arms around her waist. “I couldn’t ask for more than that,” he smiled. They kissed and let the water of the river wash over them, carrying the day off into night.

Da’Jony Vbrisk faced him in battle. The older Jedi stood stoic, clad in a faded white Jedi tunic that fell open, exposing a broad powerful chest matted with a thick patch of gray hair. A brilliant green blade leapt before him, materializing from a plain gold hilt.

They were surrounded in darkness, the only light visible being the elder warrior’s weapon. His body language suggested confidence and power, while his face, framed by long white mane of hair and matching beard, appeared serene.

“You are a powerful warrior, but the Darkside corrupts from within. Striking me down will do nothing but lead to your own destruction,” the old man said, a glimmer of mischief and confidence in his eyes. Answering the green saber, a red shaft of energy

appeared, both casting the immediate area in a sickly color. Slashing out it targeted the older man, who twirled, batting it away with ease. Smiling, he nodded.

“You realize your weakness, and use the Darkside to compensate.” The attacking blade struck again, it’s hue shifting to a deep gold. The strikes were more determined this time, driving Da’Jony back into the recesses of the darkness. The only visible terrain was a cold flagstone floor whose shape shifted according to the lightsabers movement.

“Better,” the Jedi gasped, sweat beginning to glisten along his brow. “The years have slowed this older man, but he still has a few tricks left!” Twirling the green blade, a wall of light appearing between to two.

In a flash he was moving forward, slamming his blade repeatedly against the golden blade. Sparks flew from the impact and the Jedi appeared briefly to have the upper hand, a grin stretching under his bushy white moustache.

“Not so powerful now, are we?” he taunted.

Batting the green blade down, the golden blade shifted hues again, this time to a brilliant pale cobalt blue. Swinging high, it knocked Da’Jony out of guard and plunged deep into the Jedi’s chest, leaving behind a smoking pit as it exited the folds of white cloth. Teetering, the old Jedi looked down, his own weapon dropping into the darkness and disappearing with a clatter. Wrinkled tanned hands gently probed the hole, emerging with the slightest smear of red.

“There’s no...pain,” the Jedi choked out before collapsing into a heap.

“NO!!!” Klux shouted, tossing away his own blade and dropping beside his fallen master. The wizened older Jedi offered the younger man a gentle smile. “Pleestab...you must come to...Pleestab,” he muttered, blood pooling in the corner of his mouth.

“Hold on master, I’ll get help...” Klux whispered, cradling Da’Jony’s head in his lap. Fine tendrils of smoke drifted from the lightsaber wound, twisting up and around Klux’s face. Revulsion charged into his throat but he choked it back, turning his head away from the scent of charred flesh.

“The prophecy, you fate lies in the prophecy...” One last gasp of air and he was gone.

“Help!” Klux screamed, gripping the corpse tightly to his chest, “SOMEONE HELP!”

“WAKE UP!” Vic shouted into his face. Eyes wide, Klux sat bolt upright in his bunk, almost knocking heads with him. “Da’Jony!” Klux screamed, taking in the strange but familiar surroundings of his cabin aboard the Skullduggery.

Chance and Baal, both hovering in the doorway, watched with a mixture of curiosity and concern.

“It’s ok... Klux. It’s alright,” Vic said, backing off of the cot.

Grasping at the last tendrils of his dream, Klux repeated what Da’jony last told him. “We have to go to Pleestsab,” he repeated.

“Pleestab doesn’t show up on any of the current navigation charts,” Vic said gesturing to the mass of stars that hung above the Skull’s navprojector. “Are you sure you heard the name correctly?”

Jammed in the Skull’s tiny cockpit, Klux watched his fellow teammates turn uncertain stares on him. Baal and Vic parked themselves in the pilot and co-pilot seats while Chance and Asok sat directly behind them; the holoprojection hovered centimeters above the Ghtroc’s console off to the left. Leaning against the doorjamb, Klux shook his head and stared through the viewport into the dark cavern beyond.

“Positive. That’s what he said,” frustration pulled his face into a scowl.

“Well, it’s not on the map and if it ain’t on a map,” Vic shrugged, “we can’t get there.”

Baal spoke up. “That’s not necessarily true,” he said, leaning back in his seat. Vic threw a glance sideways, “Oh really?”

“Vic... and please keep an open mind,” Klux said, taking a knee. He sensed where his Trianni counterpart was about to go. “Baal and I have been practicing a Force related ability called “Instinctive Astrogation”... basically it...”

“Whoa!” the Outlaw exclaimed, tossing an incredulous stare between the duo. “If the next words out of your mouth are ‘we just “know” how to get from system to system ’ I don’t want to hear it! The words ‘Astrogation’ and ‘instinct’ don’t even belong in the same sentence, hell not even in the same DICTIONARY as far as I’m concerned,” he said shaking his head.

“So much for an open mind,” Chance grouched from the floor. “Why don’t you at least hear them out? You don’t know everything.”

“Boy, you ever “guessed” at nav coordinates? It’s like flying a swoop while blindfolded in a hurricane... the chance of hitting something or a tiny rock barreling through you is pretty damn good.” Vic said, talking down to the younger man.

Standing, the swoop racer jammed a finger into Vic’s face. “You need to back off Vic. Just because we Jedi decide to try something different doesn’t mean-”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa,” A’sok said, turning the red haired man towards him. “You said ‘We’...what do you mean ‘We Jedi’?” he looked at Baal and then at Klux. Rolling his eyes, A’sok leaned back in his seat. “Oh man...I ...I can’t frelling believe this.”

“I want you both to tell me you aren’t training Chance to be a Jedi,” Vic said watching the trio. “Come on. Tell me this is some sort of sick joke designed to give A’sok an ulcer. I’ll laugh and we can get on with the business of dismissing your idea.”

“We are,” Klux admitted. “We’ve been keeping it quiet because we expected this was the response we would get.”

“And for frelling good reason!” A’sok shouted. “This goofball can’t handle a friggin concussion grenade! What is going to happen when you decide to give him a lightsaber?”

“Hey! I’ve had a lightsaber for weeks now!” Chance screamed

Klux expected A’sok’s eyes to pop from their sockets.

“You DIDN’T,” the hacker demanded. The cockpit grew silent as Vic and A’sok shared concerned glances while Chance shoved his hands deep into his pockets.

“I think the young Padwan has some refreshers to clean,” Baal said from the pilots seat, staring at a shard of ice the swoop racer.

“Fine!” Chance snapped, storming from the cockpit.

“Vic,” Klux said, allowing the force to flow through him. Internally, his stomach unclenched and serenity settled around his body. “All of this aside. Da’jony is in trouble and I have to go to him. I can’t help but think this is in some way related to the ‘Something big’ Araf mentioned when we arrived here. Between it and this Prophecy Baal uncovered,” Klux shook his head. “It all points to an event that will likely shift power in the galaxy.”

Shrugging, Vic searched his pocket for a cigarro. “Look, you want to ‘guess’ at where this planet is, then fine. All you gotta do,” he pulled a thin brown smoke from his pocket,” is take C-Beez on a couple of test runs. You all come back in one piece and he verifies this ‘power’ of yours,” he jammed the ciagirro in his mouth and lit it, letting the smoke drift towards the ceiling panel, “then I’ll be happy to go on your little trek.”

“Fair enough,” Klux conceded. He and Ball had been practicing the skill for some time, but never with the others knowledge. Some things Vic and A’sok simply wouldn’t understand, but with the verification of Vic’s R2 unit, he had no doubt they would convince the outlaw to come along. “Then we leave day after tomorrow at the latest. I suggest we wrap up any business here on Fibuli we need to.”

Circling the plateau, torches billowed clouds of black smoke into the Fibuli night sky. A canopy of brilliant stars covered the planet, casting the rest of Nagilla-Bend in darkness. Atop the valleys massive rock plateau, Baal, wrapped in violet ceremonial robes kneeled, surrounded by the Mew-Tao, Araf and the rest of Raptor Squad.

Before him, High Priestess Yahwell Grismarr stood, regally attired in shimmering silver robes; a matching silver circlet resting gently atop her head on a bed of golden fur.

“Balthazar Cochroth, for displaying courage and valor in battle, I award you with this Mew Tao Blade of Pride,” she spoke, her smooth voice carrying across the congregation. Taking the long ornate weapon from Shavaa, stationed to her right, she turned back. “May its power and history serve you as an instrument of protection and strike down any oppression and injustices you may encounter.”

Taking the sword, Baal turned the blade in a graceful twirl and planted it beside him, right handle resting on the hilt. “And with this weapon, I swear to uphold the teachings and principals of the Mew-Tao.”

Nodding, Grismarr spread her hands wide, addressing the congregation. “Let those Mew Tao who stand here now, pay witness,” she took in the surviving Trianni with a solemn stare. It had been a disastrous month for the religion; after the vicious raid by the Corporate Sector Authority, less than a hundred Mew Tao remained to keep the religion alive.

Felinoid faces of all shapes, ages and colors peered at Baal in the flickering firelight. They were a proud, strong group, and in the preceding weeks after the attack had persevered, working diligently to rebuild their way of life.

To her left, Naspall, Grismarr’s female second, produced a large weathered piece of parchment from her dark green ceremonial robe. Grismaar took it gently, as if the item would crumble in her hands if mishandled.

“And now, Balthazar Cochroth,” she began, reading from the ancient piece of animal skin, “I High Priestess Grismarr, bestow upon you the mantle of Protector. From this day forward, all Trianni clans will recognize you as a Mew Tao Protector. Upon your shoulders will fall the responsibility to protect and preserve our religion and our people, under any circumstance, and at any cost.”

Handing the item back, Grismarr took a thin strip of red cloth from Shavaa and leaned forward, draping it around Baal’s thick neck. “Rise and turn,” she commanded.

He stood, towering above her, eyes fixed at some point far out into the dark valley. This was the moment he waited for his entire life. To be ordained a Trianni Preotector was the hope of every Mew Tao cub.

“Followers of the Mew Tao. I present to you, Balthazar Cochroth, Protector!” she exclaimed. The Mew Tao and Araf collectively dropped to one knee, planting their

knuckles into the hard dirt of the plateau. The Raptors, slow on the ways of the mew Tao, quickly did likewise.

“Rise,” Baal commanded. Pride and power filled his massive chest as he watched his family and friends stand upright at his command. This would be the start of a new life for him, a journey he waited his entire life to begin.

Despite the recent losses and hardships the Mew Tao suffered, they still threw their best efforts into the celebration following Baal’s consignment. A large bonfire raged in a patch of cleared forest near the base of the waterfall; multicolored lights, strung among the branches of massive trees, cast haunting shadows that danced along with the movements of the acrobatic felinoids.

Sipping from a small ceramic bowl, Lauren let the golden Trianni spirit “Cressha” roll down her throat and land smoldering in her stomach. Across the clearing she watched Vic exchanging stories with the Coynite Araf. The large brutish warrior laughed heartily, his voice almost overpowering the soft music that piped from A’soks portable sound system. She thought she recognized a Bothan melody among the eclectic selection the hacker decided upon. Adapting quickly, the Trianni moved rhythmically, their graceful bodies entwining and moving in synch with their partners. A slight numbness fell over her and she looked down into the empty bowl cradled in her lap.

“Need a refill?” A young female asked. She wore a light green bodysuit that clung to a pelt of lustrous silver fur. By Trianni standards she was breathtaking; Lauren was surprised she hadn’t noticed her before.

“Uh, sure,” she replied, holding the cup up to the offered pitcher.

“I’m Lana, I’ve been meaning to introduce myself,” the Trianni said, steadying the glass with her hand before the golden liquid could splash out. “My brother Arturo and I just arrived a few days ago.”

“Ah, yeah, I, I didn’t remember seeing you,” Lauren stammered. The Cressha was powerful, but it didn’t stop her from taking another large swallow. Dropping silently to the ground beside her, the Trianni watched her fellow Mew Tao celebrate their latest Protector. In the center Baal danced, four Trianni cubs hanging playfully from his limbs.

“Yes. We were off planet for a while. We had the misfortune of crewing on a ship, the “Brazen Gambit,” she shook her head. “The Captain was left for dead by the crew...my brother and I decided to jump ship before things could get worse.” Her soft voice soothed Lauren and she felt sleep creeping about the perimeter of her skull.

“Yeah...I fell in with the guys,” she nodded at Vic and A’sok in the clearing, “next thing I know, I’m here watching the CSA...” her voiced trailed off.

Lana took Laurens hand in a gentle paw. “You helped. I know you’ve been thanked, but I want you to know how much my people appreciate your work. You’ve eased our suffering with your generosity.”

Warmth of a different kind spread throughout Lauren and she felt tears pooling at the corners of her eyes. “Thank you,” she whispered.

No longer a raging fire, the collection of logs in the center of the clearing now emitted a faint glow; those close enough were able to enjoy a modicum of warmth from the tiny crackling flames. Few Trianni remained, and Lauren and Vic sat watching the orange and red light show dancing at the center of the stacked char.

“Tonight was fun,” he said from behind her. She was nestled beside him, her back pressed against his warm broad chest. Wrapped around her, his arms felt like a barrier against the galaxies worst evils.

“Yeah. Too bad it had to end,” she said. Her head still swam from the drink and her body was limp, relaxation chasing any remaining tension from her bones.

Across the pit, A’sok slept using a small Trianni cub as a pillow; neither seemed to notice the other. “You know, if he wakes up tomorrow and comes to me for rash cream, I’m going to ask him how he got it,” she said. Behind her the Outlaw shook with laughter.

“That’ll teach him,” he said. They sat in silence for a long while listening to the fire crackle and snap. Above, pinpoints of shifting light filled the sky, each putting on it’s own individual show.

“This time tomorrow you will be gone,” she said quietly. The thought of him leaving made her chest ache. In her twenty-four years the last two months had been the most exciting, saddening and exhilarating of her life.

Resigned to a life charted out and encouraged by parents on the distant planet of Coruscant, it had all been turned on end by this man: Vic Palisades.

“Let’s not talk about that.”

“I know, sorry,” she said, gently kissing the large forearm that stretched across her chest. She decided not to bring it up anymore. She was staying here and he was leaving and there was no getting around it; the best she could do was hope that someday, somewhere they would be able to pick up where they left off.

Bundling closer to him she resigned herself to waste the night away, huddled against the warmth of his body.

“I wanted to see you off,” Grismarr said from the doorway. He was in the process of preparing his gear and hadn’t noticed her board the Skull’.

“Yes, Klux anticipates a long trip, so I wanted to be sure our gear was secure,” Baal said turning around.

She wore no extravagant robes; instead, her athletic frame was wrapped in a plain green cloth tunic that ended above a pair of shapely golden legs. “May I sit?” she asked.

Pulling the large duffel from his cot he gestured, “Of course.”

She dropped onto his bedding, back resting against the Skull’s dull bulkhead.

Dropping his duffel into a corner, he plopped down on a reclining seat opposite of her, trying not to be obvious as he watched her recline.

From his robes he produced the artifact, turning it over gently in his hands. “Long day,” he offered awkwardly.

A smile creased her muzzle and she nodded, closing her eyes. “Long couple of months.”

Silence fell between them and Baal wondered if she had fallen asleep.

“You handle the sacred item with ease...just proves the prophecy was correct.” Her eyes remained closed.

“Yes, well, if it is my destiny to have it I may as well get used to it,” he said grinning. He realized that he didn’t feel angry or tense as he had in their past dealings, and that she was approaching him as his old friend Yahwell; the mantle of High priestess folded away with a robe somewhere in her bedchamber.

“Comfy cabin,” she said, opening her eyes and glancing around. Picking absently at the green blanket stretched over his bunk, she seemed to take in the small room for the first time.

He appreciated the subject change; he had his fill with talk of prophecies and the Force.

“Had I known you were coming I would have picked up,” he said gesturing to the sparse conditions and organized surroundings.

Suppressing laughter she nodded. “Well thanks Baal, I appreciate that.” The smile made it’s way to her eyes, something he’d not seen since before he left Fibuli, years ago.

“I wanted to thank you for everything you and your friends did to help the clan,” she continued. Two golden pupils fixed on him, reflecting the gentle light of a desk lamp situated in the corner of the cabin.

“Without you, the Mew-Tao would surely have perished.”

He shrugged. She was right of course. If not for Raptor Squad the CSA would have enslaved or killed all of the Mew Tao...something he couldn’t let happen.

“If I had known things were as bad as they were, I would have come sooner,” he shrugged.

Smiling, she smoothed the hem of her tunic. "I know Baal. We tried to get word out but..." her voice trailed off. "Nonetheless, I just wanted to tell you I hope you return safely someday."

Standing, she looked around as if forgetting something. "I'll...leave you to pack."

She was almost out the door when he grabbed her wrist. Standing, he pulled her back and turned her towards him. "You've always been a good friend Yahwell, despite what we agree or disagree on, that will never change."

Her golden eyes seemed to lose focus for a moment. Slipping her arms around his broad neck, she pulled against him in a firm but gentle embrace. "Watch yourself out there in the black Baal. No matter what happens in the rest of the galaxy, you will always have a home here."

He held her for a moment until she pulled away. Her eyes glistening, she planted a small kiss along his cheek and turned, making her way down the Skull's dimly lit corridor.

At dusk the next day Lauren stood on the plateau as the Skulduggery hovered into the cool evening sky. Beside her, Yahwell and Shavaa watched the freighters blue ion engine roar to life, propelling the black disc until it shrank into a glowing blue speck, eventually disappearing among the field of stars.

"I hope they stay safe," she said. All of the tears and anguish that went along with Vic's departure was exhausted.

Now all she felt was a hollow numbness that sat in the pit of her stomach. In the years she'd trained as a doctor and watched countless patients die, she never felt anything like the grief she felt when the Ghtroc blended into the dark Fibuli night.

"They have Araf with them, he is a strong warrior...they all are," Shavaa said from beside her.

Collecting thick robes about her body, Yahwell turned, offering a tender smile. "Their destiny is set Dr. Salias. Good or bad, Raptor Squad has been set upon a path that fate has chosen. I have no doubts they will stay true to their nature and overcome whatever obstacles they shall face."

"I know," she said still staring into the sky.

Patting her on the shoulder, the High Priestess turned away. "We'll see you back in the sanctuary."

As the two Trianni began their descent from the plateau, Lauren lay down on the cold hard rock. Far above, the same stars she and Vic watched the night before continued to twinkle and change color.

Thunderstorms hammered the Skullduggery; for the third time in as many minutes Chance was slung like a ragdoll against the gunwell that ran through the center of the ship. Something in his shoulder popped, an explosive pain erupting from the impact.

“Blast! Can’t you control this thing?!?” he screamed, collapsing to the floor and clutching the wound. Pulling free his belt he lashed it to a nearby cargo hook embedded into the bulkhead. Down the corridor Baal and Vic wrestled with the ships controls, trying to bring the vessel under control.

Upon entering Pleestab’s atmosphere, the Skull’ was overwhelmed by electrical storms that battered and shook the ship like an abusive child. Seconds into the descent an enormous bolt of lightning struck nearby, the impact sending the ship into an insane dive; now, wind seemed to be the most dangerous culprit, turning the trip into a deadly flight of uncertainty.

“This is it, this is how we die...by getting blown into scrap by an angry God of Thunder!” Ten Spot exclaimed, hovering past him and towards the cargo bays.

Two-E, Klux’s small black and white R2 unit followed, beeping what sounded like a slur directed at the armorer droids back.

“Just you be quiet! The loss of a bossy R2 unit is minimal at best!” Ten Spot replied before disappearing down another corridor.

“Master Mulgrew! Master...” he heard L-Zee screeching from somewhere in the bowls of the ship. His repair droid was invaluable, but not particularly smart, opting to get involved in situations when his input was neither needed nor wanted.

“Stay where you are El-Zee!” he screamed above the roar of thunder. The ship dipped sharply, the nose of the cockpit pointing directly towards the black violent ocean hundreds of kilometers below.

With a clatter, Chance watched as L-Zee’s metallic blue 3-Po chassis rolled down the corridor, bouncing from the gunwell and skittering the rest of the way through the cockpit’s open doorway. His black domed L-Z repair droid head swiveled erratically, it’s lone red optical sensor trying to focus on a million things at once.

“Someone get this thing out of here!” A’sok screamed from the shields station, planting a boot against the repair droids skull and forcing the torso back into the corridor.

“Hey! Get your foot off his head!” Chance screamed from his lashings. Anger, surging through his body in a wave, screamed for release.

In the cockpit, L-Zee’s head, previously resting on the floor, shifted, rose, and dropped violently-smashing the hackers boot into the deck.

“ARGH!” A’sok screamed, jerking the black leather from under the confused droids head.

“Oh, Mister Thurgood!” L-Zee exclaimed in surprise. “I’m sorry, I must have...”

Chance snickered to himself, relishing the mask of pain pulled over the hacker’s face.

“I trust that’s the last we’ll see of that kind of activity,” Klux said, frowning down at the swoop racer.

The ship’s violent motion and movements seemed to have no effect on the Jedi, who stood rooted to the flooring like some ancient Greenstalk.

“Hey! I didn’t see you there!” Chance screamed, startled by the man’s appearance.

Nodding, Klux let his disapproving gaze linger for another moment before serenely strolling off to the cockpit.

A’sok, holding his boot gingerly above the deck, was turned back to the ship’s controls, blinking away the pain and working furiously at the shields station.

Stepping over the prone droid, Klux settled a hand on the hacker’s shoulder, a look of serenity replaced the pain on the young man’s face.

“Thanks Klux,” A’sok said, glancing back at the Jedi.

Silently cursing to himself, Chance turned away from the cockpit, disgusted.

Pulling out of the deep dive, the Skull’ broke from the storm and evened out over Pleestab’s raging emerald ocean. In the distance, lightning briefly illuminated a forested coastline jutting up from the turbulent chop. At the speed they were traveling, they would be crossing over the main continent in under five minutes.

Below, gargantuan fish leapt from the dark waters, their silver glowing bodies spinning clockwise before crashing back into the choppy water.

“Da’Jony’s on the main continent, stay the course,” Klux said over Baal’s shoulder.

Unlashing himself, Chance gingerly rose and walked to the cockpit, rubbing his swollen shoulder. L-Zee, still lying prone on the ground, turned his optical sensor on the swoop racer.

“Master Mulgrew, I...I tried to get...” the red light twitched momentarily and the droids’ normally passive voice took on a harder edge with a hint of back alley Corellian slang.

“Get me offa this frelling floor!” L-Zee now demanded, his arms flailing madly.

In unison, the group turned, the violent storm and dangerous terrain momentarily forgotten.

“What the hell...” Vic said, turning from the viewport to look at the two.

Struggling with L-Zee’s chassis, Chance dodged blue metallic arms that missed his head by centimeters. “It’s ok, he’s just uh...L-Zee has a slight hiccup in his personality matrix,” he said, hoisting the droid up.

“I do? Well at least mine can be fixed! the problems with this team would take a chop shop working around the clock a month to fix!” the mouthy droid snapped, swiveling his head towards Chance.

Propped up, the droid finally stood upright under his own power. “Thanks partner. I’ll be in the back converting one of those extra swoops in the cargo hold into something worth flying for ya.”

With an uncharacteristic swagger, L-Zee sauntered off, absently smacking the silver dome of Vic’s R2 unit C-Beez as he wheeled past. The short white and blue droid let go with a series of beeps and tweets before continuing on towards the engineering section.

“Ok, let me get this right,” Asok asked, turning away from his station, “Your droid is schizophrenic?”

Chance noticed the hacker didn’t seem surprised. He shrugged while the Baal and Vic returned to piloting.

“Yeah. He’s special.”

“Sure he is. You two make a great pair,” A’sok smiled, returning to the ships shields.

Forcing back the urge to bash his skull in, Chance set his jaw and stared through the viewport at the approaching coastline.

Urgency tore at Kluxs’ and he found himself losing focus. Da’Jony was in trouble, and while he knew no specifics, the Force did allow feelings to roll from his master in waves. Somewhere ahead, buried under the dark wet canopy of forest, he could sense his master fighting for his life.

“We’ve got multiple life form readings in this jungle, some really big one’s too,” A’sok said, tapping madly at his console. “Cripes...we’ve actually got to sit down on this piece of rock?”

“He’s...he’s less than 30 kilometers away,” Klux said, peering into the darkness. Rain spattered against the Skull’s cockpit and Vic leaned over, banging a large fist against the ships control panel.

Something whirred and a red transparent tint flickered to life across the viewport, displaying a yellow topographical map of the planet speeding by below. The outlaw jammed his finger hard against the ships comm. “Araf! We got visuals, make sure everything is lashed down in the back, we sit this boat down in less than five.”

“Got it Vic,” the Coynites’ voice came back, transmitted from somewhere deep in the guts of the Ghtroc.

The display flickered momentarily, it's imaging dancing a small jig before settling back to it's original position. "Piece of junk," the Outlaw groused, jabbing a unlit cigarro into his mouth. "Can you handle this Baal?" he asked, unbuckling his harness.

The felinoid, not taking his eyes from the viewport nodded. "Yes, as long as we don't get struck by lightning again."

"Good," Vic barreled past Klux and Chance. "Sok', let Klux handle the shields, we need to get suited up!" he said heading towards the rear of the ship.

Klux kept his eyes focused on the digital horizon. From somewhere beyond the rain and mist, sensations began to bombard him; familiar, evil sensations he'd felt only one other time.

"There is a Darksider here," Baal said, echoing what Klux already knew. Leaning hard on the controls, the Trianni increased speed.

"Watch out Kluxxy," A'sok said, stepping around him. The ships cockpit was small, with barely enough room for the entire team at once. He was about to pass through the door when Chance blocked his exit.

"Touch my droid again and I'll kill you," the swoop racer warned, leveling a cold stare at the hacker.

"Get out of my face you Solo wannabe," A'sok said, drawing back a balled fist.

Looping his arm through A'soks, Klux pulled him away. "Stop this! We need to get ready, you want to fight, do it when you get off the ship!" he said, shoving the taller man through the doorway and past Chance. Throwing one last irritated glance at both of them, A'sok turned and charged down the corridor.

Snarling the swoop racer thumbed a gesture at A'soks back. "That punk better..."

"Chance, shut your mouth. We have more important things to worry about than your pride," Klux admonished, shoving a finger under the young mans nose.

"I've got a lock on a structure," Baal said from behind him.

Turning, Klux dropped into the co-pilots seat. "Magnify!" he said, heart racing. On the viewport, a small green dot hovered near the bottom of the red display. As Baal fiddled with the controls, the dot grew, enlarging to a transparent green castle the size of Klux's fist.

Feeling an immeasurable pull towards the digitally reproduced structure, Klux jammed his finger at the image. "He's there."

Turning he let his fingers dance across the Skull's sensor panel, focusing on the structure racing towards them. Data began to stream across the small display screen, almost too fast for Klux to keep up with.

'Looks like it's stone and durasteel, surrounded by forested area...approximately forty seven meters high...' Klux said, peering through the screen. "And it looks like it's surrounded by soldiers."

"That's unfortunate for them," Baal said smiling. "Kill the overlay."

Toggling the control, the viewport went back to normal, rain racing from the clear transparasteel in streams.

Klux leaned in; they were only minutes from the castle, and the anticipation was almost more than he could bear. "I've got a real bad feeling about this."

The Skull slowed when it was within a kilometer of the castle. The structure loomed at them, a dark phantom against a green overcast sky. Atop the castle a light show caught Klux's attention as brilliant gold and green shafts twirled and clashed, white sparks erupting from each impact.

Staring intently at the confrontation, Klux felt his stomach knot. "Sithspit! He's in trouble." The golden blade moved much quicker than the green, threatening to penetrate Da'Jony defense at any moment.

"That's the cat creature we faced in the catacombs on Mrlsst," Baal observed, unconsciously clenching his reattached fist. "The one who took my hand."

The Skull slowed its approach as the two figures came fully into view, illuminated by the bright energy of their weapons and the near constant flashes of lightning. Da'Jony, wet and haggard, fended off the relentless attack by the massive golden felinoid. Flipping on the Skull's exterior spotlight, Klux bathed the castle's roof in a brilliant white wash. Stalking through the rain the golden cat hammered at the older man's blade; Da'Jony, retreating, turned and stumbled through an open doorway set into a corner tower.

"Chance, get your swoop. See if you can..." Klux turned, only to find the swoop racer gone. "Where the hell did Chance go?"

Klaxons sounded through the Skull as the loading ramp detached from the underbelly with a piercing screech of metal. Strapping his racing helmet on, Chance mounted the unfamiliar swoop he liberated from the cargo bay.

“What are you doing!?!” someone screamed from behind. Turning, he spied A’sok, donning a suit of dark blue camo armor, advancing towards the ramp.

“Gotta go!” Chance screamed, and gunned the vehicles engine, shooting across the ramp and into the darkness.

Rain pelted his lower face like needles as the swoop bucked fiercely against the torrential winds. Through his helmets visor, he was just able to make out the dark castle wall looming ahead. Above the buttresses, light echoed against a lone tower, marking the battle between the two warriors. Pleestabs thick air coated his nostrils and throat with a repugnant metallic film, forcing him to take in great gasps of air. In the recesses of his mind, he remembered A’sok saying something about the planets mildly toxic atmosphere. Too late to worry about it now, he thought, fighting against the elements and the swoops sluggish controls; dipping low above the jungle canopy, he left it behind, emerging above a courtyard of dark grass and few trees. Large basins of water broke up the landscape, turning the clearing into overgrown swampland.

He was less than a quarter kilometer from the towering fortress when a barrage of hellish red blaster bolts reached up from the ground, causing him to jerk hard on the controls, sending the swoop in a suicide spin.

While the world twirled about him, the red bolts, hissing through the rain, continued to scorch the night sky. Leveling out, he angled the swoop in towards the castle and away from the blossoming needles of energy.

Groaning, the vehicle raced up to the castle and turned, it’s repulsors bouncing along the buildings rough stone face. Shoulder screaming from the earlier trauma, Chance nearly blacked out as he held onto the swoop for dear life. Focusing on a break in a rampart, he evened the vehicle out again, aiming for the break.

He was almost on top of it when an orange blaster bolt, twice as big as any he had seen before, discharged from a nearby tower, cleaving through the swoops forward stabilizers and wiping them from existence.

“Frell!” he screamed, the swoop violently shuddering and spinning uncontrollably towards the ground.

Pulling with every ounce of energy, he managed to force the vehicle into a semi straight angle-directly towards a small grove of trees in the rear of the building. Closing his eyes, he jammed a boot against the machines engine and leapt free, body sailing through the rain and into the darkness.

Skidding across the ground on his shoulder, A’sok came to rest behind the trunk of a massive tree, less than fifty meters from the walls of the castle. Rolling onto his stomach,

he struggled to keep his blaster out of the putrid water that covered the ground and soaked through his clothes.

Ahead, out of the castle's shadow, two blaster bolts sizzled through the rain, slamming into his cover; smoke and fire erupted from the tree trunk as it shuddered with the impact of the shots.

"Looks like those guys are toting some LRB's" he screamed to Vic, who was huddling behind his own tree a few meters away.

"Yeah, we'll so do we," the outlaw screamed, his lower body invisible in waist deep mire. Leaning around the trunk, he let loose with a round from his LRB, the crimson bolt sizzled though the rain, erupting in a brilliant flash as it found its mark. For an instant A'sok was able to glimpse the dark form of a humanoid as the bolt pounded through his armor.

"Nice one!" A'sok began when the same warrior let loose with a barrage of blaster fire. Hunkering down, the bolts slammed hard into the ground beside his position, super-heating the wet ground and sending gouts of rank smelling steam into the air.

"What the hell? He didn't go down!" Holstering his blaster, he unfastened the Netfali Arms Groundpounder from his back; the weapon, renowned for its durability and ease of use, whined with life as he tripped the fire selector to "full auto". Clutching it with a death grip, he dipped around the still smoldering trunk and fired off several shots. Vic, pulling himself up onto the trees roots, did likewise, hitting the same soldier again, this time in his thigh.

They swapped fire back and forth what seemed like an eternity. Several of the warriors dropped, but the firefight continued as reinforcements appeared from some unseen breach in the dilapidated castle wall.

Letting loose a series of shots, most missing their mark, A'sok noticed his energy cell gauge dipping into the red. Grimly, he watched as their adversaries, attired in dark spike covered armor, dropped behind the bodies of their fallen comrades, using them as cover. With only two energy clips left, they weren't going to be able to last much longer.

Klux, diving from the Ghtroc's loading ramp, hit the ground running. In his right hand his lightsaber ignited with a "snap-hiss", cobalt blue blade stabbing into the darkness.

Behind him, Baal landed the Skull' in the castle's courtyard, less than a hundred meters from the dark crumbling fortress.

Feet carrying him atop the marsh, Klux felt the blaster bolts before they left their weapons. Bringing his weapon up, the blade intercepted the crimson energy as it lanced out of the darkness in a beeline towards his chest.

Batting them away, he remained focused on the large wooden doors set into the durasteel facing of the building. Gripping the side of the door, a wave of anguish hit him like a

punch, sending him stumbling back where he landed on his back. Bringing his weapon up, he barely deflected two bolts that would have burned into his face.

“Watch out!” Baal roared, two lethal red blades leaping to life in his hands as he vaulted from the darkness. Still woozy from the pain he felt from within the building, Klux rolled aside as Baal leapt high into the air, landing ankle deep in the mire beside him. Materializing out of the darkness like some sort of nightmare, two armored creatures charged, emitting a throaty rasp as they closed with the Jedi. Their helmets, black with spikes erupting from the top, were set with two fierce glowing red eye coverings nestled in the helmets faceplate.

“Die Jedi!!!!!!” one screamed, brandishing a murderous cutlass over a meter long. The curved weapon hummed with the energy of a vibroweapon, and ended in a lethal pointed hook.

“Die Jedi? That’s a bit tired don’t you think?” Baal snorted, swinging his blades in a deadly arc. Without warning the duo moved in tandem and intercepted both blades. Eyes growing wide, the Trianni stepped back as the metallic blades swatted aside the red shafts of energy.

“Uh...Klux?”

Shaking the cobwebs away Klux sprung to his feet, bringing his own weapon into guard. Energy resonated from the creatures black armor and he realized he was going to have to fight off the dark energy as well as their attack. Lunging, the warrior nearly took off an arm, but Klux dodged aside, avoiding the humming weapon. Batting at the curved blade, he dipped and rolled, erupting into a standing position behind the warrior. With a powerful swing he brought his blue blade down, directly onto the odd metal of his opponents sword. Sparks erupted from the impact but the blade didn’t break...instead the material surged with an unnatural red glow and faded. Knocking aside the warriors retaliatory thrust, Klux pivoted to the right and plunged his lightsaber into the warriors ribs. Letting out a resonant scream, he stumbled away, pulling free of the blade. Steam erupted from the wound in a black spray and the soldier dropped to the wet ground where it ceased to move.

“These Nerfchuckers are difficult to kill,” Ball said panting beside him. A few meters away Baals unfortunate opponent lay in three separate pieces.

“I’m tired of wasting time on errand boys, I’m going to find Da’Jony.” Storming the great door, Klux cleaved it in two with one powerful swing of his saber, both dies falling open into darkness. Stepping into the castle, he allowed his eyes to adjust to the darkness. They stood atop a step in a massive hall, two elaborate stone staircases on either side sweeping up to an obscured upper balcony. Wooden columns, some intact, some splintered and broken,

ringed the room; from high above, water poured in thick columns as big as his forearm, hitting the stone floor and pooling throughout the room.

Stepping into the calf deep water, Klux avoided a floating wooden bench and the black and fluorescent green slug that moved atop it.

At one time the castle had been the picture of opulence. Besides the small lagoon of waterlogged furniture, the walls were adorned with ornate hanging tapestries, their embroidery long ago consumed by mold; in the center of the hall a fountain, crafted in the form of a twi'lek female, stood in mid pirouette missing an arm and lekku. Covered in green sludge and crawling with dozens of the fluorescent slugs, what should have been a moving and erotic sculpture was reduced to a nightmarish reminder of the fortresses downfall.

Above them on a balcony where the two staircases met, doors exploded open. Lightsabers crashed in a mind-boggling swirl of sound and light. Moving through the water, they were no more than a handful of meters into the room when the golden felinoid let out a powerful scream, causing them both to cover their ears against it's power.

Stumbling towards the staircase, Klux blinked away tears as the creature knocked Da'Jonys weapon out of guard and plunged his pulsing golden blade through the Jedi midsection.

"NO!!!" Klux screamed as the old mans body dropped like an empty sack over the balcony.

Baal, still reeling from the creatures attack, moved to intercept the falling Jedi Master, but was knocked back by another excruciating scream. Da'jonys body smacked into the water face down, green cloak billowing around the crumpled body.

"Da'Jony!" Klux screamed, racing through the water to his masters side. Warm tears burned from his eyes as Baal peeled off towards the staircase. Gently turning the older man over, Klux pulled wet strands of white hair clear of his face.

"Klux...you came...Araf...he brought you safely..." Da'Jony muttered, eyes wandering in lazy circles. A coughing fit brought a gout of blood from his mouth and déjà vu sent a cold shiver down Klux's spine. "Don't move Master, I'll get help..."

The old man, with the last bit of strength he could muster, waved away the notion.

"Waste of time Klux. You must go to Aquanuric IV. There you must find-" he coughed again, this time more blood erupting from his mouth and nose.

Klux bundled the man closer to him in his robes. "Jospi Cass, on Aquanuric IV," the old man's eyes glazed over as he tried to focus on some distant spot. Water from above spattered atop Klux's head and peppered the older mans face.

"Jospi will help you fulfill the prophecy. You must fulfill the Prophecy Klux..it is...your destiny-" he coughed again, the last breath of life wheezing from his damaged lungs.

"Da'jony, no.." Klux whispered gathering his masters frame to him. For years the old man was part father part teacher and the only real family Klux had. Now he was gone.

Clutching the body tightly Klux felt the weight lessening. Opening his eyes, he watched silently as Da'Jonys form faded into transparency and eventually disappeared altogether, leaving behind a wet bloodied tunic that fell from his grasp and floated atop the waters gentle waves.

Kneeling in the water, rain from above poured onto him in thin streams, replacing his warm tears with a cold that chilled his body. Outside, in the distance, the sounds of the firefight died away, replaced by the roar of a ship.

Dropping off to an annoying drizzle, the thunderstorm charged away into the Pleestab night, leaving behind green clouds streaked with occasional flashes of light.

A'sok slapped his last energy cell into the Groundpounder and glanced around the tree trunk. There were at least three targets still out there putting up resistance, sending the occasional streak of blaster fire into his now-flaming tree cover. Minutes before some sort of craft broke from the trees a kilometer away and raced into the thick murky atmosphere, leaving a swirling vapor trail as it disappeared into the night..

"Vic...I'm on my last cell," he called out to the Outlaw who had advanced up a few trees. The fire from his partners LRB had decreased as well, with only a few sporadic shots coming from the weapon.

"Sit tight Sok', we might have to wait this one out till we get some backup."

A'sok, gritting his teeth, rose from cover and let loose with the rifle. Silence answered his volley and the courtyard, after an arduous period of intense fighting, fell eerily silent. Pulling a vibroblade free from it's sheath, he was attaching the weapon to the

Groundpounders barrel when an earsplitting scream pierced the silent courtyard. Expecting an ambush, A'sok discarded the rifle and readied the vibroblade, crouching low and emerging from behind his cover.

Beyond the smoke and flame of his burning tree, a towering shadow strolled from the shadow of the fortress and into full view.

Araf, adorned in full Coynite battle armor, moved with a purposeful stride. Pulling his large boots free of the sucking mud, he seemed to lose no step to the abominable terrain. In his right hand he gripped a sat'skar- a brutally long and lethal Coynite sword; in his other gloved hand he clutched the neck of an armored soldier, who laced together a string of expletives that carried all the way to Vic and A'sok.

"I left this one alive, as you requested Vic," he snarled, lifting the humanoid and slinging him the five meters to where Vic stood in the bog. The soldier, landing head first into the muck with a tremendous splash, was temporarily silenced.

"Good job Araf," Vic said, slinging his LRB. "Now maybe we can get some answers out of this joker."

The crew clustered in the cargo hold of the Skull'. Chance, ribs bandaged and wearing a compress against his forehead sat with his back against a crate sporting the Garnib Crystal Corporation logo. After his suicide dive, he lay in a deep marsh, barely conscious. Eventually Baal retrieved him, hauling his broken body back to the Skull'. A shot of painkillers and glass of Rava allowed him to sit in on the impromptu team meeting. Lying on the cargo floor, trussed with several meters of rope, the armor clad soldier continued to spit slurs and insults at the group. The armor looked like something from one of Chance's childhood nightmares. It's Jet black metal gleaming under the bays lights the most noticeable feature was the helmet; designed to look like a skullcap, it sported a ridge of deadly sharp spikes along the top, dividing it into two hemispheres. Two deep red eye coverings sat atop what could only be described as "fangs" jutting from its center and falling to the neckline. Behind them Chance could just glimpse the mottled green skin of some alien species...he wasn't sure which. The rest of the armor was of the same material, with less intimidating spikes erupting from various spots at the elbow and knee joints. He had never seen anything like it and hoped that he never would again.

"OK partner, how about telling us who you work for?" Vic asked slamming the bay door shut. Araf and A'sok stood on either side of the door while Baal, crouching, and Klux shifting uneasily, stood a few meters away watching with rapt interest.

"I tell you nothing...I" the being hissed in a raspy deep voice.

Tossing his Terminus helmet to A'sok Vic shook his head. "Wrong answer Frell-Face," he said landing a vicious kick into the creatures codpiece. The armor held but jammed violently up into the aliens abdomen. It let out a shriek and rolled onto it's back, writhing in agony.

Pulling his hair out of his ponytail, Vic shook it loose, the auburn locks falling around his shoulders. "So I'll ask again, who...do...you..." he fired another kick into it's back. "...work for?"

Behind Vic, Chance noticed Araf quietly slipping through the cargo bay door. A'sok watched impassively while the Jedi exchanged concerned glances.

"Vic, perhaps we can do this another way..." Baal said stepping forward.

The Outlaw cocked an eyebrow, "Really? Well by all means my friend, take your shot at him, my foot's starting to hurt anyway."

Stepping forward, Baal leaned down and pulled the helmet free of the creature. It screamed again, making his first scream sound nothing more than a whimper.

Baal, visibly shaken stepped back and let the helmet clatter to the ground. "What the..." The creatures face, a flat affair with a sunken nose and two bulbous orange eyes, contorted in unimaginable pain. Slowly, the creatures coloration faded slightly.

“Hey! Nice work!” Vic said smiling.

Baal threw him an angry glance and shook his head. ‘I’m sorry! I didn’t do it on purpose!” he said to the creature.

Klux, up to this point holding his silence stepped forward. “His armor is tied to his life force, if he loses it, he dies,” he said, staring down at the writhing body.

“How do you know that?” Vic said looking from the Jedi to the prisoner. “Ah, Jedi stuff. Right, never mind.” he said.

The creatures screaming caused Chance’s head to pound even harder and he felt as if he might throw up.

“Wow...so they are basically living in a prison,” A’sok observed.

Stepping up, Vic reached down and tore away the creatures shin guard. Another shriek followed, along with the same diminishing coloration.

“Damn, your right!” he said looking at the armor.

“Vic...please!” Ball stepped forward.

The creature, now panting angrily, studied the two Jedi. “Master Anjhai will make you both pay. You both will pay for this with your filthy Jedi blood,” he snarled.

“Anjhai, is that the gold felinoid?” Baal asked, dropping to one knee beside the creature.

“Srros’tok,” Vic clarified, recalling the species from the info they gathered in Mrlsst.

Nodding, the creature spat at Baal, a clear globule spattering against the Triannis face..

“He will see you die, then I will go on to defecate atop your grave. Jedi scum!”

“There are more of them, they are called Ventral Warriors by their master,” Klux said, eyes fluttering. “This one was following orders to kill us on sight.” He opened them fully and looked around, “this isn’t over.”

“Question though...these guys had air support...Imperial air support. Why not just blow us eight ways to hell?” Vic asked. Silence filled the bay as the question crept around in each of their minds.

“I don’t know, maybe they don’t want to kill us? Maybe they need us?” Klux asked.

“Or something we have- like the artifact,” Baal said.

Pulling a fat cigarro from his belt, Vic jammed it in his mouth and nodded towards the writhing creature. “So what are we going to do with Mr.Personality here?”

“We could leave him on planet, just kick him out the hatch,” Chance offered shrugging. Sharp pain erupted through his ribs and nausea twisted his insides into a knot. “Ow.” He made a mental note to move as little as possible as the world spun.

“No good, he would kill the first sentient he found to find a way off planet,” Vic said, checking the charge on his LRB.

“We could take him with us,” Baal offered, stroking his blue goatee thoughtfully. The Outlaw snorted a laugh and simply shook his head.

“I don’t know, I have no idea what we can do with him” Klux admitted, staring at the nightmare who was now trying to grind his restraining cuffs against one of his armored spikes.

“I know what we can do,” Vic said, shoving LRB against the Ventrals forehead.

“Vic NO!” Baal cried.

The Outlaw pulled the LRB away and turned on the Trianni.

“WHAT BAAL? What do you want to do with him? We can’t let him go, we aren’t taking him with us-the second he got loose he would do everything he could to kill us, himself, whoever he could! So tell me, in that big Trianni brain of yours, what option do you see here?”

Staring at the outlaw for a moment, Baal cast a curious glance back to Klux. The Jedi, studying the creature shrugged.

“I don’t know,” Baal admitted, hopelessness evident on his face.

Irritation filled Chance, every time a difficult decision needed to be made the Jedi wavered, incapable of handling the situation. Repeatedly it came back to Palisades and his toadie A’sok, who decided the outcome.

And he let them train him. Sitting for hours in the dark with Klux and acting as Baal’s sparring dummy was getting tiring; he felt his power growing, was learning how to harness his ability, but if he was going to turn out like these two, was it worth the effort?

Silence filled the cargo bay, the only sound being the constant scraping of metal on metal as the Ventral Warrior tried to break from his bindings. Chance looked from the group to the pathetic creature writhing on the ground.

“Kill him,” Ball whispered, turning away.

Chance felt his heart leap into his throat as Vic dropped the weapon in one swift move and pulled the trigger. Two massive bolts leapt from the weapon, striking the Ventral Warrior’s head and super heating it in a microsecond. With a loud “pop” it burst like a ripe fruit.

Gore rained down around the corpse, some landing just inches away from Chance's boots. "What the frell! What did you do that for?!?" he screamed at the Outlaw. Without responding Vic turned away and walked towards the bay doors.

"Come on A'sok lets grab some grub," he said catching the helmet the hacker pitched to him. Struggling to his feet, Chance moved to intercept Vic but Baal was in front of him, holding a hand up. His ribs throbbing in agony he stopped, staring vibroblades at his "Master".

"Let it go," Baal said, staring him down.

"HOW? You killed an innocent!" Chance shouted at Vic's back as it retreated through the cargo bay door.

"He wasn't innocent," Klux interrupted from behind him, triggering an access hatch set into the floor of the bay.

"He was unarmed! You signed the death sentence for an unarmed sentient!" Chance screamed, jabbing a finger in the Triannis chest.

"We had no choice Chance. He was a tool of the darkside and would have continued to kill." The Trianni never met his stare.

"It isn't your decision to choose who lives and who dies!" Chance growled. "You may be Jedi, but you aren't Gods!" he screamed, backing away. He needed to get away, needed time to think. For the first time in hours he didn't feel pain, in fact, he didn't feel anything at all.

The door to the bay slammed closed and silence hung in the air of the cargo hold like noxious gas. Climbing atop a crate, Baal let his shoulders slump while Klux secured the hatch staring through it to the ground below.

On the floor the Ventral's armor began to bubble, it's shiny black surface rising and falling in a thousand different spots. Staring closely, Baal realized the armor was disintegrating around the corpse, large black drops of the liquefied metal hitting the bay floor.

"Klux, look at this," he said gesturing to the phenomenon. Turning from the hatch, both watched in awe as the armor sizzled away, leaving the nude green corpse covered in a slick black film. Beneath, the liquefied armor pooled, following creases in the Ghtrocs bay floor in three different directions.

"Great, I'll be having nightmares for the next year," Klux said shaking his head.

“These warriors were difficult to take down, and not just because of skill,” Baal said. “I do not envy us if these are the warriors the darkside will be sending against us.”

“Whatever. They killed Da’Jony, so they can send whoever they want to die.”

Baal felt the Jedi summon the force and the Ventral’s body begin to rise, the tendrils of black liquid retreating back to the puddle beneath the corpse. Just as quickly it dropped back to the bay floor, splashing into the black liquid.

“Screw it, I’m not even going to waste the effort,” Klux snarled and violently kicked the corpse across the bay until it dropped through the hatch and to the ground below.

“Feel better?” Baal asked, looking at the streak of green and black gore that marked the body’s gruesome trek.

“Not until I catch up with the one who killed Da’Jony.”

“Well, looks like you’ve got a sizeable mess to clean up,” Baal said leaning back against the crate.

Locking the hatch back and smearing his hands absently against his tunic Klux turned. “Get your Padwan to clean it up when he’s done scrubbing out your refresher,” the Jedi said making his way around the smear and towards the bay door.

“You take care of your own dirty work!” Baal shouted but Klux ignored him, letting the bay door slam shut behind him.

“Egotistical ass,” Baal snarled. He and Klux would have to come to some sort of agreement in the future. Many things were driving a wedge between themselves and ultimately the team as well: The way to train Chance, the way to handle the sith threat, many things that were simply left unsaid that had to be cleared up.

Dropping to the floor, he unclasped his lightsabers and began a series of drills, loosing himself in the twirl of the brilliant red blades.

She was beautiful, in a familiar way. He followed her across a field that he recognized, though couldn’t quite place it’s whereabouts.

“Come on Klux, it’s right over this hill,” she said, pulling at his hand. Raven black hair fell from her head and down her back, a gentle breeze blowing it across her ivory shoulders. The bright white sundress she was wearing had no back, instead exposing much of her slender shapely figure.

Mesmerized, he focused on her, trying to peek a glance at her face, but she never seemed to turn. Her thumb, playfully rubbing against the rough callous of his hand, was warm and gentle.

Thin stalks of rust-colored grain parted before them as they made their way to the top of the hill. A brilliant blue sky flecked with white clouds hung above them; it was a perfect day.

“Who are you?” he heard himself ask. He didn’t want to upset her or drive her away, but curiosity forced the words from his mind into his mouth. A gentle giggle was her only answer as a large villa loomed into view.

The building was crafted from white stone and roofed in translucent glass dome that conformed to the villa’s shape. For the first time in years he looked down upon his home on Xanath IV.

“Hey! This is my house! Where my parents raised me!”

The young woman began running, tugging him along by the hand. A light sheen of sweat covered her palm and Klux’s heart skipped with excitement. Urges that a Jedi were supposed to suppress and bury away tugged at him, despite never seeing her face.

Bera and Jandal, Klux’s parents, were in the kitchen cooking. This meant it was the servants day off, as his parents generally let the help have every fourth day off to be with family and friends.

He often referred to his parents as bookends; both were athletic and prided themselves in their appearance. His mother, an attractive woman in her late forties, had a pair of lush lips set in a heart-shaped face framed by brilliant white hair.

Today she was wearing a periwinkle jumpsuit that ended above a pair of sandals, her “gardening outfit” is what she used to call it.

“Hey the kids are back!” Jandal said, turning and smiling. He always seemed out of place in the kitchen, moving about the rooms large island with the proficiency of a blind womprat. Before him a pot of bubbling hash filled the house with a spicy scent; if he concentrated Klux could pick out the scent of no fewer than three kinds of meat in the broth.

Jandal wore his smile easily, and along with a pair of warm brown gentle eyes he never had any trouble putting his family at ease. “Dinner will be ready in a moment,” he said, bumping his brown crew cut against a hanging fruit basket as he reached for a spice shaker on the glass-topped island

Abruptly the young girl stopped and turned towards Klux. His wildest dreams couldn’t have prepared him for her beauty. Her lean face, crafted from ivory skin smiled with full red lips; flirtatious black eyes narrowed and locked onto his like a tractor beam. He had seen her before... but where?

“I’ve got exactly what I want right here,” she said drawing him to her. Soft lips locked onto his and he closed his eyes, letting her warmth envelop him. Her hand snaked around his neck and her fingers massaged away the weariness of the past few days.

“Nomi, stop teasing your brother like that,” he heard his mother laugh from the kitchen counter. Suddenly, realization hit him like a runaway swoop and he jerked back, remembering where he’d seen her face.

“Nomi!?!” he exclaimed trying to pull away. Her eyes were dark now, the flirtatiousness replaced with a sinister glare. The same glare that cut through his stormtrooper disguise back on Dejer Prime, during Operation Windfall.

“Klux,” she smiled still caressing his neck. The warmth of her hand was gone, replaced by cold steel that sent a shiver along his spine.

Pulling free her he went for his weapon, only to find his Jedi tunic and gear replaced by a simple black jumpsuit.

“What...how did...”

Jandal stopped stirring the hash and stood frozen, staring beyond the floor to ceiling windows that surrounded the kitchen. “Nomi, your friends are here!” he called. Pulling his eyes from Nomi, Klux stared in horror as a column of ventral warriors appeared in the outer courtyard, pouring from a hoverscout into his mothers’ garden towards the villa.

“Mother! Father! Get out!” he screamed to no avail. Red blaster bolts pierced the windows, reducing the kitchen to a fiery hell. Moving to throw himself before his parents, two bolts of energy pierced his jumpsuit, burning fiercely into his abdomen and setting the material ablaze.

“Mother! “ Klux screamed hitting the ground.

Pain racked his body as his intestines, heated by the precision blaster shot, smoldered and boiled in his stomach. Jamming his eyes shut, he called upon the Force to relieve his pain, to neutralize the wound, but the Force didn’t respond.

Through his tears the world began to swim; rolling his head to the side and blinking away the warmth so he spotted his mother, face down, smoke tendrils wafting from her chest.

“It betrayed you Klux, when you needed it most, it betrayed you,” a new voice said. Articulate and filled with rolling verbiage, Klux found it oddly comforting and grasped at it as consciousness threatened to leave him.

A pair of black leather boots appeared beside his head, reflecting his face back to him. He followed the boots up, where they disappeared into a dark silhouette. There, a smoldering red oval crackled and sizzled amidst the darkness, dropping tiny red embers onto his face.

“The darkside will never betray you Klux. Will never leave you to suffer in pain and helplessness. The dark side may even have saved your family’s life, that summer day long ago.”

The world spiraled and Klux felt himself loosing his grip on the moment. Darkness washed into his field of vision, obscuring the flaming corpses of his parents and leaving only the smoldering red orb.

The red light continued to hover before him in the darkness. Grinding a shaky fist into his eyes he blinked again. The light didn't go away but he could begin to pick out shapes in his cabin. Sitting up, Klux reached out and apprehensively touched the red light. It was his comm, set on "standby mode".

"Great, I'm going insane," he mumbled, rolling over and snatching a bottle of water from his nearby desk. Pulling from it he cool liquid race down his dry throat and into his stomach. He rubbed absently at the spot the blaster bolts struck in his dream.

The dream.

Sitting in the darkness of his cabin he closed his eyes and recreated the dream, forcing the haunting images to roll through his mind. The violent assault by the Ventral Warriors, the lethal kiss that signaled the assault on his family. Family. His mother had called Nomi his sister right before the attack and he felt an irritating pull from somewhere in the recess of his memory.

Fuzzy images of his family danced before him as he let the Force flow along his body. Da'Jony took him when he was only a child, hiding him away from the roving agents of the Empire. Among the blurred faces and memories of his parents he could almost pick out an older raven-haired girl in the background. But was it a real memory or something manufactured that his bothered mind was now turning into a reality?

Bundling his blanket about him he rolled from the comfort of his cot onto the cold deck of the Skull and let his breathing calm. He could only hope an hour worth of meditation would wash away the burning he still felt in the pit of his stomach.

Dry hot wind blew across the surface of Aquanuric IV, kicking up a cloud of thick red dust that seemed to stick to everything it touched. Brushing at his navy blue coveralls, A'sok realized the dust simply moved from the fabric onto his hand, where it married with his sweat to form a tacky maroon paste.

"Dammit! Can't we land on a nice planet that isn't covered in lightning or dung?" he asked Vic who stepped down the ramp joining him beneath the belly of the Skull.

Motionless under the blazing rays of the planets twin suns, the ship was among four others docked at the out-of-the-way landing pad almost a kilometer from the planets main city.

Pulling a tawny cloak on over a blast vest, the outlaw smiled behind a pair of mirrored sunglasses. "Nope. I told the travel agent to book us on the 'A'soks Personal Hell Tour,' next stop is a Jawa massage parlor."

Brushing past the duo, Chance shoved a blaster into his belt and nodded towards the shimmering brown buildings in the distance. "Let's go. its hot and I don't have time for standing around trading jokes."

“You aren’t going anywhere. You stay with the ship,” Baal said, stepping into the dust storm and bundling a black cloak about his body.

The swoop racer’s expression shifted from anger to confusion. “Why? I’ve got just as much right to go as anyone!”

A’sok suppressed a snicker. In the last week since they left Pleestab the swoop racer had littered their dinner with sarcastic comments and uncalled for remarks. He brushed the insults aside for the most part but was getting sick of the man’s smart mouth and attitude. “Yeah, why don’t you keep the droid menagerie company” A’sok said nodding to the mechanical menagerie that watched from the top of the loading ramp. Standing in a single file, Ten Spot the armor droid, C-Beez and Two-EE, the R2 units and Chance’s L-Z Repair droid watched them with a mixture of interest and worry.

“We would love to have you!” Ten Spot called from the ramp.

Turning, the swoop racer stalked over to A’sok, hands balling into fists. “Why don’t you shut your mouth?”

A’sok smirked. “You know, for a ‘transportation specialist’ you sure do crash a lot. How many swoops have you gone through now?”

“Chance!” Klux bellowed from the ship. All turned to watch the Jedi descend the ramp, deep blue robes wrapped around his body twisted wildly in the wind. “Do as Baal says, stay with Araf and the droids.”

Fuming, the red haired man bulled past A’sok and back up into the ship, cursing every step of the way.

“Yeah, he’s stable,” A’sok said to Vic, who stood aside smiling.

“Don’t worry, he’s just as likely to kill himself with that lightsaber as he is to hit you with it,” Vic said.

Wrapping a black head covering around his face, A’sok snorted. “I just hope this crappy planet at least has a bar.”

The Lonely Lekku Saloon was as crappy as the planet was and A’sok felt his spirits sink even further. While his species wasn’t as water dependent as say, a Mon Calamari, the planets heat was starting to irritate his skin, sapping the moisture through his pores where is saturated his jumpsuit. He hoped the bar would be cooler, but the squat domed building felt like a sauna.

Inside, a minefield of rickety tables and broken chairs spotted a floor covered with the same red dust blowing outside. A banged up holoprojector in the corner played a concert

of a Rodian pop star whose fame peeked a decade before. Amid the darkness and haze of dust motes the pop stars' shimmering image turned and belted out lyrics that fell short of syncing with its snout.

Parked in the rear a surly looking Twi'lek stared intently at a datapad while lounging behind a long wooden bar. His red skin was mottled with patches of yellow and his apron, stretched across an ample gut, sported a rainbow of stains. A pair of headtails, known as "lekku" sprouted from the hemispheres of his forehead and fell lazily down his back, letting go with an occasional twitch. "Does this planet have ANY redeeming qualities?" A'sok said aloud.

"Yeah, we do a brisk business in smart-assed tourists," the barkeep said without looking up.

"Mmmm! Sarcasm! I'll have a double-shot of that please!" A'sok said stepping back outside. Baal and Klux passed him going in and he crossed the street to where Vic stood, shading himself under the rusted awning of a dilapidated one-story ferrocrete building.

Aquanuric Proper, the planet's only main city, was laid out in a straight line that stretched on for a half a kilometer. On either side of the main street, squat wooden and ferrocrete buildings sat nestled in small groups, ringed by derelict vehicles and the occasional vendor kiosk.

Some buildings, including those that rose to the height of two stories or more, were crafted from the same red clay that covered the entire planet. No buildings were more than three stories tall, save for the administration building, a squat four-story structure that sat parked at the opposite end of the strip.

"That place is a wash," A'sok said, leaning against a sun bleached support post. "I think I could search this entire dumpy town and find not one thing that I would need or want."

"Probably. Oh, incidentally, we've got a sniper on the second floor in the building off to our right," Vic said, nonchalantly pulling his stub of tobacco from his mouth and keeping his sunglasses locked on the street.

Turning, A'sok realized the outlaw wasn't joking. "What? How do you know?" Adrenaline rushed into his body and he dropped a hand to the Thunderer Heavy Blaster Pistol at his hip.

"Calm down," Vic said, flicking the smoking butt out into the red dust. "If he wanted to tag us he had plenty of opportunity... we rolled in here like a traveling circus." He looked down the street and nodded towards the opposite side they were on towards a squat building partially obscured by large stacks of cargo crates. "Then we have that place," he said.

A'sok peered closer and realized two large brutish Gammorreans stood sweating in the shadow of the building's foyer. "I haven't figured it out yet but something askew is going on in there."

“Ya know, I just wanted a drink,” the hacker said shaking his head, “Just a drink and no drama. So what’s the plan Bossman?”

Looking between the two buildings, Vic pulled his blaster pistol free and checked its charge. Draped in the overhangs shadow no one would have been able to notice the movement. “Well, I say we drop in on our shooter. Stupid Gammoreans are easier to deal with than someone who knows their way around a sniper rifle.”

“Hey there friend,” Baal said, dropping onto a worn, rickety bar stool. The seat creaked under his weight and the Trianni held his breath waiting for it to collapse, but through luck or superior craftsmanship, the stool held. Klux did likewise, both trying not to make eye contact with the smattering of patrons scattered throughout the musty saloon. Behind the bar various bottles and decanters sat atop a shelf collecting a film of red dust; the more ornate the container, the thicker the dusting. The barkeep never took his eyes from the datapad he was reading. “Yeah, whatcha need?”

“How about we have some of that?” Baal said pointing to what appeared to be the oldest bottle on the shelf; a curved red glass triangle that may have once been blue. Head tails twitching, the Twi’lek looked up, to the bottle and back to Baal.

“You want a shot of Kessel Fire Elixir?” he asked, eyes growing wide.

“Sure,” Baal replied shrugging. The barkeep stared at the Trianni for a beat and then shrugged, sitting aside the datapad and gingerly picking up the bottle, placing two shot glasses in front of the Jedi. Uncorking the container, the bartender dipped his nose close to the bottle’s mouth and jerked it back as quickly.

“Your funeral,” he said pouring.

Murky brown liquid sloshed into the small glass, rising almost to the rim. The pungent odor hit Baal’s nose and curled several hairs in the process. The last time he smelled anything this repugnant was in a public refresher on Kadon. The Twi’lek repeated the process with the glass in front of Klux, offering the Jedi a small smirk.

“Hope you enjoy this. Want me to recommend a good doctor?”

Smiling, Klux picked up the drink and toasted the barkeep. “Not necessary,” he said and downed the shot of viscous liquid. Baal felt the force spark beside him and guessed Klux was detoxifying the alcohol and pollutants even as it made it’s way into his stomach. Not flinching the Jedi dropped the glass back onto the grimy bar and winked, offering a wide grin. “Not as good as homemade, but it’ll do,” he smiled.

Astounded, the barkeep slowly backed away from Jedi. Hands trembling, he placed the bottle back on the shelf. “Uh. Right. That’ll be uh, eight creds.”

Pulling a one hundred credit chip from his tunic, Baal pitched it to the Twi'lek who snatched it in midair.

"I'll get your change."

"Keep it. I'm not just buying drink here friend, I'm buying info," Baal said smiling.

Turning, a smile stretched across the barkeep's face, revealing several missing teeth and more than a few diseased stubs. "Really? Well for two creds I'll show you where you can plant your furry black lips," he said tossing the coin back to Baal.

The disc landed in his hand and Baal realized he had pulled a ten-credit coin instead of one hundred. "Uh...heh. Sorry about that," he offered pulling the correct coinage from his tunic.

"Real smooth Baal," Klux said, rolling his eyes.

"You boys are making quite a spectacle," someone said from beside him. Baal turned and looked into the familiar features of Perfo Kryll. The Rebellion spec force operative was clad in a dusty black poncho and wide-brimmed hat. The last time he had encountered the soldier was on Dejer Prime during Operation Windfall.

"What are YOU doing here?" Baal said stepping back. Quickly scanning the room he noticed Hobbie, another of Perfo's Vornskr Pack teammates, sitting at a table in the rear of the building. The young blonde haired man, shrouded in a tan poncho, locked eyes with Baal. Smiling, he nodded and gave him a two finger salute.

"Having a drink, I suggest you both join us," Perfo replied, scratching at his scruff of beard.

Turning back to the bar, Baal offered the Twi'lek a large grin. "Keep the change," he said, swapping the hundred-credit chip and replacing the ten. Anger clouded the barkeep's features and he mumbled something about Baal's heritage as he snatched the coin from the bar.

"Let's go compare notes," Baal said as Perfo turned away and headed towards their table.

The lock looked like a standard push key entry pad but A'sok took no chances. Squatting in front of the buildings rear door he popped the lock's rectangular metal facing free and peered inside-letting out a low whistle.

"We're dealing with pro's," he told Vic, who was hugging the buildings wall and watching the narrow alley behind the building. With the Outlaws dusty brown cloak and lack of movement he blended almost seamlessly into the buildings matching texture.

"How so?"

A'sok mopped beads of sweat from his brow. "There's a trip line spliced into the door lock pad. You hit ANY button on this thing and someone gets alerted."

"So? Can you bypass it?" Vic asked out of the corner of his mouth. The alley remained empty and quiet save for a rickety evaporator clattering somewhere in the distance.

"Look who you're asking," A'sok snickered.

Moment later the door slid aside easily and A'sok straightened, winking at Vic. Drawing his own weapon, he hugged the dry cracked duracrete wall and watched as Vic prepared to enter.

A sudden beeping caused his heart to leap into his throat. Scrambling to silence his comm he pulled the tiny cylinder from his pocket and toggled it on.

"What!?!?" he whispered urgently, leaning away from the door.

"A'sok, it's Klux. I just wanted to give you a heads up. Vornskr Pack is on planet."

Letting his breath out, he waved Vic over. "What?" the Outlaw growled, keeping an eye on the open door and the darkness beyond.

"Vornskr Pack is on planet," he repeated. Curiosity then mischief played across the Outlaw's features.

"They have anyone on station?"

"Yeah, in the two story catty-corner from the...bar," A'sok smiled and glanced up at the building his back was nestled against.

"Really?" Vic smiled. "Let's have some fun."

"Oh I don't like the sound of that," A'sok whispered, shutting down his comm and dropping it back into his pocket. Winking, Vic stepped through the door dropping quietly to a knee in the entrance and scanning the room through his blasters scope. Without taking his eyes from the interior he moved aside and waved in A'sok. The hacker, crouching, moved through the door and into darkness. Stepping back he swept his Thunderer to the left and right, trying to spot any moving targets or opportunities. The building was easily twenty meters wide by twenty meters across and appeared to be abandoned. Shafts of daylight fell between the wood slats of the second story floor and illuminated several piles of decaying lumber and mounds of dirt. Off to their right towards the buildings front door an unstable ladder ran up the wall and through a trapdoor set into the ceiling. Hanging before it a black rope dangled from the opening and pooled into a small mound on the ground.

Casting his eyes upward, he noticed small clouds of dust falling through the white shafts of light. Silently, he gestured to the clouds and the slight movement along the second floor that caused them.

Nodding, Vic lowered his weapon and both covered the span to the rope. A'sok watched him inspect it, turning it over in his hand. Stepping back, he let it drop and slid his blaster into its holster. Throwing A'sok a grin, he cupped his hand to his mouth.

“RONTACK!” he shouted at the top of his lungs. Above, bodies hit the unstable floor, sending a shower of dust and splinters raining down on the two. Bursting into laughter, A'sok pulled the comm from his pocket.

“Tell Perfo we found his team,” he said and shut it back down.

“Bastards!” a female voice shouted from above. Moving quickly, a shadow made it's way to the trapdoor emerging as a shapely figure in black utility coveralls. A'soks heart leapt into his throat as the woman's body dropped into full view, a pair of long aqua lekku curling around her neck and waist.

“Deuce!” he shouted running over to her.

Turning, her anger diminished and was replaced by a massive grin. “Fingers!” she screamed and intercepted him in an embrace. He pulled her close and closed his mouth on hers, letting the kiss linger on for a minute. Feeling better than anything he had touched in a month he refrained from letting his hands wander across her taught athletic frame. Drifting into his nose the scent of her sweat mixed with the antiseptic aroma of military bodywash, and still managed to make his head swim with delight. A cough brought him back to the ugly world of Aquanuric IV.

“I would suggest you two get a room, but on this rock I'll reconsider,” Vic said, shouldering a massive sniper rifle. Sliding down the rope, Rontack, a thick brown Klatoonian, followed his partners lead. Once down, Vic handed the large weapon to the sniper and turned back to A'sok and Deuce.

“Uh... 'Fingers'?” he asked looking suspiciously at the two. Deuce's aqua face flushed a deep violet and A'sok smiled.

“Sure, you know, cause' I'm a hacker and all.”

“Riiiiiight,” Vis smiled. “Well A'sok, if it's ok with Perfo, maybe Deuce can help you with some of the Skull's system problems we've been experiencing since the storm on Pleestab.”

A'sok looked curiously at the outlaw. He didn't know of any...”Oh! Right! Yeah right! I could really use your help Deuce,” he lied, the pieces falling into place.

Planting her hands on her hips, Deuce nodded. "Sure, let me comm him and make sure he doesn't need me," she said, her eyebrow arcing high.

Slapping Vic on the shoulder he watched her head for the door, head tails bouncing gently against her backside. "You know Bossman, I was wrong. This planet has EVERYTHING I need."

"So you guys saw the holiovid," Perfo said nodding solemnly. Klux leaned forward and gestured to Vic who stepped into the saloon. "Yeah, it was brutal," he said, pulling a mug of lum close. He was about to take a drink when Baal's hand fell across his arm. "Barkeep!" the Trianni called, collecting the three untouched mugs into one group. "We would like fresh drinks and mugs, this time minus the urine-please."

"Hey I didn't" the barkeep began but the denial died on his lips when he realized the Trianni wasn't going to accept the excuse. "Yeah, I'll bring those right out," he mumbled, collecting the mugs he shuffled off to the rear of the saloon.

Hobbie, watching the back and forth with interest, looked down at his own half finished mug of ale. "I think I'm gonna be sick."

Leaning over, Baal dipped a large blue finger in the mug. Closing his eyes, he opened them a moment later, "Don't worry, yours is fine," he said withdrawing the wet furry digit.

Staring at the mug, Hobbie offered a sarcastic smile. "Great, thanks a whole bunch."

Slapping Perfo on the shoulder Vic dropped into a chair. "Hey partner, what you doing here?"

"Hey Vic, hang on," Perfo turned to Baal. "How did you know he pissed in the mugs?"

Smiling, Baal shrugged. "Just a guess."

"There's a blue hair in here now," Hobbie grouched, still staring at his ruined drink.

"Perfo, you were telling us about the holovid," Klux said trying to get the conversation back on track.

Nodding and leaning in, Perfos voice dropped to a whisper. "Correct. We were tracking a lead we found in some of Jax's files that mentioned Aquanuric IV." Sitting back he shook his head. "For some reason some deep cover Imperial agents he was tracking showed up here and did some snooping around. We've yet to find a connection, though I wouldn't be surprised if your old buddy Skidna wasn't involved."

“Yeah, no surprise, but I’m not sure if he’s tied to this rock,” Vic said. “Skidna’s gone off the deep end...looks like we are going to have to neutralize him.”

“I think I know why Aquanuric was in Jax’s files,” Klux said, pushing aside the fresh mug of lum the barkeep set before him. The group grew silent as the barkeep finished passing out the mugs.

“Anything else?” he asked.

“No thanks,” Hobbie said, swapping his mug with Baals’, “I think we’re fine now.”

“We’re here looking for a being named Jospa,” Klux continued. At the mention of the name the barkeep, moving away from the table, froze. Casting a nervous glance at the group he turned back around.

“What are you guys looking for that crazy old fool for?” he asked, scratching at a worn hole in the front of his apron.

“You know him?” Klux asked. A glimmer of hope sprung up in his gut.

“Sure do. Little snake owes me forty creds. Sit around here long enough and he’ll probably come wandering in begging for a drink,” he said, not trying to hide his disgust.

“Well, tell you what,” Klux produced a hundred-credit coin. “Take this to settle his tab...and if he does come in, let me know.” The barkeep hooked under his arm and scratched.

“Do I get to keep this one?”

Flipping the coin into his hands Klux nodded. “You just let me know when he shows up.”

“Hey, what is the connection,” Perfo hissed as the Twi’lek retreated back to the bar. Klux waited until he was out of earshot before he continued.

“My Jedi master had a run in back on a planet called Pleestab with an Imperial Unit.” He then proceeded to fill Perfo in on the events of the past few months leading up to their arrival on planet.

“So you think those Imps were poking around here looking for this Jospa character?” Perfo asked.

“Sounds reasonable. Also explains why Jax never got a chance to follow up. If this Anjhai is sending out different teams to different planets trying to find a Jedi, it means he’s got some resources,” Vic said.

Flashes of his dream assaulted Klux and he tried shaking away the visage of the glowing red orb. “I don’t think it was Anjhai,” he said, a cold shill running along his spine despite the saloons oppressive humidity. “I think it was someone with a red cybernetic eye, possibly a Dark Jedi or Sith.”

Vic and Perfo froze, sharing a concerned glance.

Klux sensed the unease immediately, as did Baal.

“What is it?” the Trianni asked.

“Black robes, glowing red right eye, red lightsaber...” Perfo said, the words emerging as a statement rather than question.

The chill turning into a full-blown shiver encased Klux. “Sounds like you know him...”

Vic, face growing pale, nodded. “We’ve run into him before...back on Vol Kol.”

Deuce lay on top of A’sok, her warm flesh pressed against his. The cool interior of the Skull’ didn’t seem too bad but he still gathered a thick green field blanket up around them.

“Well I’m glad I could help you with your system complications,” she smiled, rolling off and nesting against him in the crook of his arm. Planting a small kiss atop her lekku, he grinned.

“Oh you did at that. All systems are go!”

Giggling, she bundled the cover up under her nose so only the top of her aqua head peeked out. “What are you guys doing here anyway?”

He closed his eyes and soaked up her warmth. “Klux’s Jedi master got struck down, and before he died he pointed him to this place. We are supposed to find some being named Jospa.”

“Killed? Who killed him?” .

“Don’t know. Some golden cat with a lightsaber named Anjhai,” he said, sleep pulling at the corners of his consciousness.

“A’sok...this all sounds...this sounds dangerous,” she said, concern driving away the playfulness in her voice.

He pulled himself awake, opening his eyelid a slit. “Babe, everything we do is...”

“No...no,” she interrupted. “I’m not talking ‘blasters and explosives’ dangerous. You are running around with two JEDI, and you guys seem to be attracting the wrong kind of attention,” she said, rising on an elbow and turning to face him.

“Hey, Honey, don’t worry, Klux and Baal seem competent, I’m sure if anything happens they can handle the “weird” side of things,” he said the claim ringing hollow in his ears. She stared at him for a moment then cast her eyes away, focusing on a point farther down the cot.

“I just...I know you can handle yourself but...if anything happened to you, I...” her voice trailed off and he spied a lone tear drop from her eye onto the blanket. “I lost Sadik and I don’t think I could handle losing you.”

Pulling her back, he folded her into the warmth of his arms. “Stop that. You know nothing is going to happen. Vic’s got this team pointed in the right direction, if he sees something going down that shouldn’t or thinks a plan stinks, he pulls out,” he said, trying to comfort her. “Don’t worry, everything will be fine.”

“I hope so, because...”

Shaking her gently, he tried prompting the rest out of her, “Come on, don’t hold back.”

Turning to face him again, her large lavender eyes swam with worry. “Because someday I want to have a real life that doesn’t involve running around and killing Imperials. A life where I can live in a nice place with the man I love and grow old together. A life that doesn’t include you getting shot on some backwater planet because of some stupid cat and his short human partner!”

“Ah, you worry too much,” he said, grabbing playfully at her. She slapped his hand away in irritation.

“A’sok, I’m serious. You are joking about this like it’s no big deal. I’ve had comrades get shot up because they thought everything was a big joke,” she pulled away and turned her back towards him.

“Hey! I can be serious!” he snapped. This afternoon was going from great to irritating in the blink of an eye. He loved Deuce more than anything, and would do anything for her, but for her to all of a sudden get nervous about the job...well she would just have to get over it.

“Deuce, Raptor Squad needs me, Vic can’t handle the goofy Jedi on his own ya know.”

“And what about what I need?” she retorted, reaching down and pulling her clothes from the floor. “You go running off fighting Jedi with no regard for your own safety and what? Expect me to stand by and watch?” she stood, grabbing her trousers from the floor and began sliding them over her shapely legs.

“Hey! That’s not fair!” He sat up in the cot, resting his back against the frigid bulkhead. Cold paralyzed his body. “Ah! Look...” he shivered, “You go and run off to missions all the time! It worries me too! What’s the damn difference?”

Pulling her olive green tank top on she turned, jabbing a finger in his chest. “Exactly. And that’s why I was going to resign my commission after our next drop, so you and I could be together,” she said. The admission hung between them for a full minute before either spoke.

“You were?” he finally asked.

She stared at him for a moment, her eyes going soft. “Yeah, I was. The Rebellion has a big offensive in the works, and we got orders to head there once we were done here. Afterwards...” she shrugged.

Thoughts and ideas and possible futures tumbled through his mind too fast to grasp. “Babe, I don’t know what to say,” he said shaking his head, “I mean, I’m flattered, but I’m just not sure if I can leave the Raptors like that...” he said.

“Really? Well Vornskr Pack has been my FAMILY for years, and I’m ready to leave them to be with you...so?”

“So what?” he asked. He didn’t know what he was expected to say. If he left the team, where would they go? Was he even ready for this kind of commitment? Too many questions were coming too quickly; questions he never even bothered to consider until now, when they were staring him in the eyes like a run away Rancor.

“So what?” she said quietly, eyes narrowing. “So don’t worry about it,” she jerked a thumb at the cot. “I guess you got what you needed and I can just go to Hell, right?” scooping up her boots she smacked the doorjamb and stormed from the cabin into the corridor.

“Deuce! Wait!” he called, scrambling from the cot and pulling a pair of shorts on. She was already on her swoop and racing off towards town by the time he stumbled down the cargo ramp.

“Dammit!” he screamed, slamming a fist into the ramps hydraulic piston.

“Wow, you have a knack for getting on everyone’s nerves,” Chance said from behind him.

Without thinking, A’sok spun, planting a fist into his gut. The swoop racer uttered a grunt and folded over, dropping to the ground with a thud.

“You...Bastard....” the red haired man gasped.

“Blow it out your ass you laser-brained dip,” A’sok snarled, storming past Araf and back to his cabin.

“I was the LT for the Ivory Brigade, and things on Vol Kol were, shall we say, less than stable,” Vic said knocking back a shot of ravaa. “The Empire had designs on setting up a relationship...our sovereign had different ideas. When word reached the populace there were riots, bombings, even an assassination. Needless to say the IB had it’s hands full.”

“It was rough,” Perfo added nodding. Most of the people on the planet were happy with things the way they were, but a small faction wanted change...and were willing to kill to get it.”

“Why would anyone want to serve the Empire?” Baal asked.

“Propaganda. Protection. The illusion of freedom with benefits,” Vic replied, smirking. “The Empire wants you to join them you generally have no choice. Their strength is that they control the media and communication throughout the galaxy. You never know the difference between truth and lies.”

“Right, just look at Alderaan,” Klux added.

“Right,” Vic took another shot. “So we were spread thin, tired and had the Empire breathing down our backs. Then Sadik...”

“Deuces’ brother. Infiltration and hand to hand combat,” Perfo added.

“Yeah, Sadik slips me this holodisk over a bottle of port one night. I was about to go on a two day leave with my family up in the mountains,” he grew quiet remembering the days he spent alongside his father Garek and mother Fenna. “Like an idiot I wanted to get things wrapped up before I left. I went back to my office and played the disc, then played it again.”

“This doesn’t sound good,” Hobbie said. Running a hand through his spiked blonde crewcut it came back soaked with perspiration.

“It doesn’t end good. The holodisc contained footage showing the Prince striking a deal with the Imperials.” Vic eyes grew narrow, his jaw setting as he squeezed the next words through gritted teeth. “The little bastard was going behind his fathers back, was planning a coup.”

Leaning in, Perfo dropped his voice, “Yeah, I was just coming back from a riot run when a couple of stormies showed up and demanded I take them to Vic. Shrugging, he looked down, reliving the memory. “They took Vic and I to a basement level in the IB headquarters generally reserved for prisoners and...”

“Interrogation,” Vic finished. His mug was empty and he realized the bottle beside him was as well. “It wasn’t a widely publicized area...most folks don’t like to think of HOW IB intel got their info, just that they got it.” Leaning back he gestured to the Twi’lek. “Hey! Red! More of this minus the piss!” Several Aqualish sharing a corner booth stared curiously at Vic, mumbling under their breath.

“So they tortured you?” Baal asked leaning across the table.

“Worse..” Perfo said, standing and intercepting the bartender in the center of the saloon.

Depression threatened to consume Vic and he fought it back with anger. Beside him, Klux slightly recoiled. “They didn’t torture you...” the Jedi said, eyes growing wide.

“No. We walked in just in time to see Sadik’s head hit the floor,” Vic held his glass out to Perfo who refilled it to the brim. “There were two of the Empire’s worst there that day...one was Tremayne...”

“The other was Vader,” Perfo finished.

Silence hit the table like a proton torpedo and the entire group, save for Vic and Perfo sat stunned.

“Vader. THE DARTH VADER?!?” Hobbie asked, voice carrying above the Rodian’s wails and snorts.

“Yeah, Big in Black and the Old Red Eye...Bastards,” Vic mumbled.

“You never told us you met Darth Vader,” Baal said in awe.

“Not only did he meet him, Vic snapped, took a stormtrooper heater and blasted our way out of there,” Perfo snickered.

“I take it you didn’t do much damage?” Klux asked, crossing his arms.

“Not as much as I would have liked. A few days later the king was dead, the prince in power and I was wanted for the murder of a sovereign,” he said, the memory still burning a hole in his mind.

Another hour passed with the group making small talk and striking up a game of Sabbacc to pass the time. In the interim, Deuce arrived, planting herself beside Hobbie and ordering a mug of lum. She remained quiet, silently nursing the drink while the Rodian holoprojection wailed in the background.

Anxious, Klux continued watching his chronometer with anticipation. Outside, the winds had picked up, driving more of Aquanuric IV's inhabitants into the Saloon. While he nursed a clean glass of lum, Vic and Perfo caught up on old times, welcoming Rontack, who joined them shortly after Vic finished his story.

"Well, this has been fun, but it looks like our mission here was a bust," Perfo said, "I guess this Jospi is just another dead end."

"This whole trip was a dead end," Deuce groused.

"Well, guess I'll cancel that wedding gift I ordered," Perfo said, winking to Vic.

"You are such an ass when you are drunk," Vic said, polishing off the rest of his drink.

"Vic, you're drunk as well," Baal observed.

"Not me man! Gonna take more than rava to take down the scourge of Vol Kol," he joked sarcastically, knocking the empty mug over. Several of the nearby patrons cast curious glances at the table. "So..." he said leaning conspiratorially across the table, "Who's up to go check out that building at the edge of town?"

Baal and Klux exchanged glances. "What are you talking about Vic?" Klux asked. The Outlaw was always dropping ambiguous comments just to see if the team would jump at them. Baal, not as used to Vic's sense of humor, often jumped into the proposals feet first.

"He's talking about a squat building being guarded by a couple of stoned Gammoreans," Perfo said, resting his forehead on the table. "We scouted the place out when we arrived Vic, scum goes in but scum doesn't come out."

"I think we are going to wait for Jospi," Klux said, declining the offer. "Just don't count on us to bail you out of trouble."

Smiling, Vic stood on unsteady legs. "Never do, Kluxxy, never do."

"It would be nothing to shoot him in the back, next time there's a fight," Chance said aloud. The words, spoken softly, seemed to echo in the dark cavernous cargo bay. The pain in his gut lingered, and every time he turned, a dull pain racked his abdomen. The hacker was already gone, taking the last swoop from the bay and speeding off after his girlfriend.

Standing, he gripped the cold shaft of metal in his hand. “But then, why shoot him when I have this?” he said, igniting the blue blade. It hovered centimeters in front of his face and he closed his eyes, letting the energy warm the cool wet trails streaking down his cheeks. Behind his closed lids a scene of gore and vengeance played itself out. The bodies of his teammates, dissected with surgical precision, littered a black charred landscape.

Atop the corpses, Chance remained, lightsaber humming ominously in one hand, the head of A’sok in the other. The hacker’s expression was one of anguish, frozen in time by the grip of death. His headless body lay sprawled over a chunk of ebony rock, Deuce’s body stretched atop it with a telltale hole smoldering in the center of her back.

“You brought this on yourself, all of you,” he said, drinking from the raw power that surged through his body. The corpses of Vic, A’sok and even Baal stared back with dead eyes, saying nothing.

“Brought what on?” a deep voice asked, cutting through the gruesome visage. Snapping his eyes wide, Chance was startled to see Araf watching him intently from the bay’s door. The Coynite’s massive arms were crossed over his chest, and he regarded the swoop racer with a suspicious gaze that came to rest on the still ignited lightsaber.

“Nothing, just, going to work through some practices,” he said, shutting the weapon down and clipping it to his belt. “Did you need me for something?”

Letting his stare linger a moment longer, Araf gestured into the hallway. “The droids and I need some assistance with a faulty repulsor coil, thought you might be able to lend a hand,” he said.

“Of course, whenever there is crap work to do I get stuck doing it,” Chance said, heading for the bay doors. Araf didn’t move and the swoop racer stared a meter up into a pair of dark challenging eyes.

“Lightsabers are not like conventional weapons. They require a deal of mastery to wield,” he said, sizing up the smaller man. Anger flaring, Chance forced his voice to remain calm.

“Yeah, I realize that. Can we go do this thing now?” he asked, motioning for the large hairy Coynite to move. Nodding, Araf grudgingly stepped aside, allowing him just enough room to get by. Great, another know it all getting in my business he thought, heading for the cargo ramp.

The battered speeder sputtered to a stop in front of the Lonely Lekku, knocking over a small cargo container situated next to the building. A’sok, straddling the team’s last working swoop, hovered to a stop several meters to the rear of the vehicle, alongside Deuces swoop.

The driver, an older human with a halo of mussed white hair hovering several inches above his head, stumbled out into the red dust. From top to bottom the man looked like a mess; stained trousers disappeared into a pair of worn black knee-high boots. A blast vest, it's color long ago faded under Aquanurics harsh winds, now carried the same rust color as the rest of the planet.

“Smatter with this town? Dunnah anyone wanna drink?!?” he asked no one in particular.

A'sok, eyeballing the man, hopped down from the swoop. After he and Deuces argument, he'd scrambled to get dressed and back to the saloon as quickly as possibly. In his rush he inadvertently grabbed Deuce's discarded undergarments, and Deuce, while shapely, wasn't nearly as big as A'sok.

“I've got a damn wedgie,” he said, walking strangely. The drunkard stood staring at him, eyes growing wide with A'sok's unnatural gyrations.

“Boy, you acting like you got some red rovin' dust mites in those pants.”

Suddenly, the entrance to the Lonely Lekku swung wide and deposited Vic and Perfo into the mid afternoon sunlight. Both were stumbling slightly, covering their eyes from the planets unforgiving sunlight.

“Hey! Sok'!” Vic said, leaning against his former Ivory Brigade Teammate.

“Hey Vic,” A'sok said, catching a whiff of alcohol as he drew near the man. “Good night! How much have you had to drink?”

“Not much!” Vic replied indignantly, “You just cover me when I need it,” he said, pulling away and walking unsteadily towards the end of town

“I'm uh, going to go inside and talk to Deuce,” he replied, turning back towards the saloon. He no more than took a step when an iron grip closed around his forearm. He turned looking into Perfos cold stare.

“Come along with us, you chances of survival are better.”

Glancing back, he nodded. “Great,” he muttered to himself and fell into step with the duo.

“Sounded like you pissed Deuce off pretty bad,” Perfo said from beside him. A'sok didn't respond for a moment, trying to decide on what to say.

“I didn't mean to, we just, we just have different views on some things.”

“Normally I wouldn't say anything, but since she's a member of my crew,” Perfo tossed a glance in his direction, “if I were you, I would try to fix whatever is broken. She's as fine a woman as grunts like us could ever hope for.”

Nodding in agreement, A'sok remained quiet, wondering how he could ever undo his stupidity.

Approaching a squat single story building, Vic, weaving between several cargo containers, stepped up to the larger of the two Gammoreans. Perfo's eyes, before simply cloudy, seemed to clear and narrow. Peering closer, A'sok noticed two blaster carbines propped behind the Gammoreans near the door.

"Sup'? Need ta let me in," Vic slurred, jabbing a finger into the Gammoreans chest. The large green brute, particularly ugly for a Gammorean, turned up his snout at the man.

"Password."

The request emerged more like a challenge, and the creature puffed his chest up, small red eyes peering down at Vic. Festering boils ringed the creatures snout, pumping a steady stream of opaque fluid down it's thick neck. Pretending to focus on a spot farther down the street, A'sok let his hand subtly slide towards his hip where his hold-out blaster was concealed.

"Oh...shat..." Vic mumbled, wavering. In one fluid motion he turned around and fired a kick into the Gammorreans knee.

With a loud "Snap!" its eyes flew wide and he dropped squealing into the red dust. It's partner, slow on the uptake, swung a slow green fist towards the Outlaw. Ducking, Vic dropped to one knee and brought an elbow up into the creatures midsection. Doubling over, the guard began hacking violently, eyes bulging from their sockets. Snapping back into a standing position, Vic brought his boot heel up, where it smacked against the Gammoreans pig snout and deposited his unconscious body beside his partners.

Perfo stared in awe. "They didn't teach us that in basic."

Smiling, Vic nodded. "No they didn't." The drunk act was gone now and the Outlaw was as sober and in control as ever. "Now let's find out what's behind door number two," he said, walking over the large bodies and grasping the doorhandle.

They stepped into another world. The entrance sloped down into the ground, revealing a small subterranean chamber easily fifty meters long and slightly less wide; a low ceiling supported by thin wood struts hovered a third of a meter above their heads.

Smoke and the stench of burning spice filled the expanse, along with a mass of beings all shapes and species. Rows of small boxes, perhaps two meters by two meters lined the walls, appearing and disappearing into the dark patches between the sparse illumination. Light seemed to be a precious commodity, provided by occasional lanterns hanging on the opposite walls ever twenty meters or so. At the end, on a tiny raised platform, a grizzled Rodian led a young blue female around by a slave collar.

Gnawing on a thick reed of tabbac, he rattled off his pitch into a wireless cylinder.

“...Beautiful with only a few scars. Direct from Wroona. Do with her what you want, when you want and as long as you keep her happy and spiced up, she won't complain. Will you?” he jerked the chain with such force the young woman, clad only in a torn grimy tunic, dropped onto the stage with a grunt of pain. “That's right, not a complainer this one!” he shouted.

Peering around, A'sok realized the boxes had eyes. Small, scared eyes that belonged to bruised dirty faces that peered out from between thick durasteel bars.

“Holy...” Perfo began. Peering closer at the frightened faces.

“Slavers,” Vic growled, pulling free his blaster.

Klux was wondering if Jospa was ever going to show up when the barkeep let go with an unusually loud cough. Glancing up, he noticed a unkempt elderly man badgering a bored patron parked on a barstool. The old man appeared weathered and weak, but a minor ripple in the Force caused Klux to think otherwise.

“C'mon Avery, just a, ah, one or two credits. That's all I ask,” the old man said, shaking the other man's shoulder.

“No Jospa. Why don't you go somewhere to dry out...or maybe die?” The patron snapped, turning away. Nudging Baal, both stood and left Deuce, Hobbie and Rontack to man the table.

“Jospa, your tab has already been cleared, but don't think I'm going to serve you jack,” the Twi'lek snarled, glancing at Klux. The older man's eyes, glistening with moisture, turned towards he and Baal.

“Whoa! If you are looking to shake down an old man, I know ...I'm a shockboxer!” he threatened, swinging a frail hand at Klux's chest.

The Jedi avoided it easily and put a reassuring hand on the old man's shoulder. “We aren't here to trouble you sir,” he nodded to Baal. “We were just going to ask you for a few moments of your time.” Under his hand Klux felt warmth spread, and realized it was the Force flowing from Jospa's frail body.

“Drinks! You give me drinks and I'll give you some of my precious time!” he snapped, jerking a thumb at the Twi'lek. “Tell ugly to set em' up and keep on comin!”

Baal rolled his eyes and gestured to a nearby empty table. “Perhaps we should sit,” he offered.

Grudgingly, Jospa nodded. “Yesh. Yesh. Less chance of uh...spillage when you sitting,” he said, running an hand through a mess of white hair. Matching white stubble peppered his lean face, and Klux realized the old garments beneath his vest he mistook for a simple tunic were in fact cut in a Jedi style.

“Shee, it’s not like I’m a drunkard..I simply enjoy an occasional beverage,” Jospa slurred, pulling from another pint of lum. “Take Cocroth here,” he said gesturing to Baal, who listened to the old mans rambling with a mixture of boredom and irritation. “Ever since I knew him he hasn’t touched the stuff.”

Klux was about to scrap the whole evening when Ball stopped. “What did you call me?” he asked, eyes narrowing. Hitting the mug again, the old man stopped.

“Cochroth. Why?”

Looking at Klux, Baal drew back slightly. “I never told you my name.”

“Why would you? We’re old friends,” Jospa said, slapping Baal’s shoulder.

“I’ve never met you before today.” Baal said, shaking his head.

The old man continued to drink, chuckling to himself. “Heh. You are having old Jospa on aintcha! Okay, if we don’t know each other,” he tapped off points on his fingers, “ how do I know you’re from Fibuli, and a Protector and that you have a little cub named Balthazar...’

“Whoa, you mean he IS Balthazar,” Klux interjected, feeling the hair on the back of his neck starting to rise. The old man turned a lucid stare on the Jedi.

“NO...I mean that he has a SON named Balthazar. And his name is Pandzarik.”

Mouth agape, Baal looked from the old man to Klux. “Klux...he thinks that I’m my father...”

Gripping his hold-out, A’sok braced himself, sliding quietly into a nook. Perfo did likewise, taking up a position on the opposite side of the door. In front of them, Vic leveled his heavy blaster at a support strut near the middle of the room and squeezed off a bolt.

The red energy leapt from his weapon and split the smoke and darkness with a brilliant glow. The strut disintegrated, sending charred flaming chunks of wood down on the throng of buyers. Silence fell across the crowd, with over two-dozen angry faces turning towards the trio.

“That was a warning shot. For those of you not good with numbers, we three are training as many blasters on you now. In this space the odds of your survival are slim. So you’ve got an option...”

An obese Gran, situated near the front of the pack, made for something under his robes. Vic dropped the weapon and fired, the bolt burning through one of the aliens' eyestalks and dropping him lifeless to the ground.

"Leave now empty handed and alive, or spend the rest of eternity keeping that dumb bastard company," Vic finished.

"Hey you can't do this!" The Rodian screamed from the stage. Vic aimed the blaster at the slaver and his green snout clamped shut. "We ARE doing this," Vic said, waving the crowd towards the door with his weapon.

No one moved for a moment, then, silently, a few of the buyers pulled away from the group and headed for the door. Stepping aside, A'sok kept the group covered until the last filtered through the door. Across the room, Perfo was comming for backup. The only ones left were the Rodian, the Wroonian female and occupied cages.

"Let them loose, Sok" Vic said, crossing the empty expanse towards the Rodian. Inspecting the locks, he had no trouble disengaging the main toggle, allowing all of the cages to open in unison. Pouring from the prisons, the slaves, all female, A'sok noticed, seemed to gather into a protective knot in the center of the room. Stepping over to the throng, A'sok turned to Vic, who was addressing the Rodian auctioneer. "Vic, we got..." he was in mid sentence when he was struck from behind. He hit the ground and felt several hands close around his weapon. Jerking it free, a rotund Squib swung the weapon around and let go with a shot. Seeing what was going down, Vic dove for cover as the bolt slammed into the Rodians head and dropped him lifeless onto the stained wood of the stage.

"So much for that," A'sok said, still pinned on the ground by a shapely human female. She offered him a smile and wrapped her arms around his neck. "Uh, look you really don't need to thank me," he said trying to pry her arms from around his neck. He rolled over just in time to see Deuce, watching from the entrance, retreat back through the door.

"Blast!" he snarled, pulling away from the slave's vice grip.

He caught up with her as she mounted her deep blue swoop. "Hey! Hang on!" he said skidding to stop in the dirt. Turning a tired stare towards him she gave in.

"What?"

"Uh," he fidgeted in his pockets, "look, what you saw back there...that was..."

"It was nothing. If you having a roll with some pathetic slave girl was the least of our troubles I could handle that..."

“So let talk. Let’s finish what we started back on the ship.”

Holding a hand up she shook her head. “Forget it. I said too much and got burned for it, let’s just forget it happened.”

He tried to snake an arm around her waist but she pulled away. “Don’t...don’t do that,” she said, giving him a sideways glance.

A feeling of defeat crashed down upon him. “But why? Look, I screwed up, I shouldn’t have...”

“‘Shouldn’t and couldn’t won’t fix the hyperdrive,’ my brother used to say,” she snapped. “Look, A’sok, you are a sweet guy, but I think we just need to cool our heels, maybe this relationship just moved faster than we were ready for.”

Shaking his head he rubbed away some of the red dirt from his hair. “I don’t want that Deuce, I don’t think that’s the case and I don’t want that at all.”

Gunning the swoop’s repulsors to life, she pulled her helmet from the sidesaddle and nestled it onto her skull. “You’re making the mistake of assuming you have a choice” she said, and, gunning the engines, left him standing in a cloud of dust.

“I’m telling you, Pandzarik was my father, I’m his son!” Baal exclaimed, jabbing a thumb into his chest. Jospi looked backwards from Klux and Baal and shook his head.

“No...Baal was much smaller.”

“I give up!” the Trianni said and motioned for the barkeep to bring him a drink.

“Jospi, my Jedi Master Da’jony told me to find you,” Klux tried, hoping it would mean something to the old man. At the mention of his masters name, the gleam in Jospi’s eyes died and his vision focused.

“Da’jony was a great Jedi. It was he who first told me of the prophecy,” the old man said looking up and away from the table. Klux felt a surge of the force flow through the older man and leaned forward.

“Go on...” Klux prodded.

“Klux, we already know about the Mew Tao Prohecy,” Baal interrupted, pulling the black artifact from his robe. “Do you know anything about this?”

“No...not that prophecy,” Jospa said, hands moving towards the object and stopping just short. “Ah...the key...” he looked at them, eyes wide. “No, not your Mew Tao prophecy, the Galactic Prophecy of Balance” he murmured, now in a voice so low Klux could barely hear him.

“The Galactic Prophecy of Balance? What’s that?” he asked.

Jospa’s eyes fluttered and the Jedi recited something that seemed to be buried deep in the recesses of his mind. “Two planets, in an elliptical path...when the planets in the Prophecy are in a straight line, light and dark will meet, and be released into the galaxy. On Farzhul, fate will be decided, and on En...End...” the old man’s voice trailed off. The clarity slowly vanished from his eyes, but not before he gripped the hem of Klux’s robe. “I’ve got something...at my home of great importance. You must come with me and take it...take the key” he said gesturing to the artifact.

“What is it? What do you have?” Klux asked, gripping Jospa’s hand. Confusion returned to his face and he shook his head.

“What?” he asked looking between Klux and Baal. “What’s the matter?”

“We need something you have, you wanted to give it to us,” Klux said.

Jospa looked suspicious for a moment, then over to Baal. “Is that right Pandzarik?” he asked.

Replacing the artifact in his robe, Baal nodded. “Yes, you were going to take us to your home.”

A moment passed and the old man nodded. “Then let’s go. Daylight is almost gone!”

“Perfo and Vornskr Pack will drop the slaves off before they take off on their next mission,” Vic said beside him. A’sok, sitting atop his hovering swoop didn’t really care, and paid little attention to the plans. Deuce had sped away into the retreating sunlight, not even making an attempt to avoid running down his heart in the process. He needed to do something to show her he was serious. Some way he could let her know he would throw this life away in a second. Sure, fighting and adventure was great, but at the end of the day...

“A’sok!” Vic yelled, pulling him out of his thoughts.

“What?”

The Outlaw rolled his eyes and leaned against the rough wall of the Lonely Lekku. “Do we need to leave you back at the Skull with Chance?”

“No. No, I’ll be fine,” A’sok said, shrugging away his problems.

“Okay then. Perfo...”

“Vic! We need to head out to Jospis house,” Klux said stepping from the shade of the Lonely Lekku. Baal followed with the crazed old man he saw earlier sandwiched between them.

“What? Whoa! Hold on...this old guy? What’s at his house?” Vic said, turning towards the trio.

“What’s that thing on your head?” Jospis said, staring at the violet tattoo that arced over Vic’s right eye.

“It’s your mother...”Vic snarled.

“Woah! Woah! It’s ok Vic, he’s got something we need to get,” Klux said, guiding the old man towards the rickety speeder. Looking around in disgust, Vic threw his hands up in the air.

“Great! Maybe someday we’ll quit having senile old men guide our every action!”

The Hummis, occupied by A’sok and Vic, roared along behind Jospis speeder, just itching to cut lose and bypass the slower vehicle and it’s exposed trio of Jedi. The twin Varner & Parvil engines of the large durasteel beast brimmed with the kind of energy you didn’t typically find in even your high-end speeders.

Sitting for months in the cargo hold of the Skull’ it was an expense A’sok thought at first frivolous. Purchased on a whim by Baal, Vic grudgingly agreed to go in and pay half for the military grade speeder. A’sok kept it maintained and was the only one with enough skill to pilot it and not get them killed. He eased off of the power a bit; at the current speed they would overtake Jospis in seconds.

“Rides great! Kinda surprised, you know, with the armor plating and all!” Vic yelled above the engine. Unlike some other speeders, this one had a hard top, making it not only powerful but safe under fire; not that it had seen much action.

“Yeah, hey Vic, you seem to know how to deal with women...Deuce wants a commitment from me and...I just don’t know,” the admission didn’t sit well with him but it was the truth. He wanted Deuce more than anything but was he really ready to just turn his back on Raptor Squad?

The Outlaw sat silent for a moment, watching the twin suns settle on the horizon, turning the planet a deep red. “Well, Deuce is a terrific gal ‘sok,” he said, pulling a cigarro from his jacket. Producing a lighter he touched the glowing tip to the end of the plug of tabbacc and inhaled deeply. “My advice would be to do whatever you can to make her happy.”

“What?!?” The advice almost caused A’sok to smack into the back of Jospis speeder. He expected Vic to tell him to stick with the team and give her the cold shoulder. “I thought...”

“What? A’sok, at the end of the day you need to be happy. I know you well enough to know that Deuce makes you happy. Now, don’t get me wrong, I know you have a blast hacking and playing hero, but those things are just fun...that’s temporary,” he kicked his boots up on the dash.

“But...the love of a good woman? That’s happiness that sticks around for the long term.”

A’sok sat in stunned silence. Not for the first time Vic surprised him with a degree of insight he didn’t think the Outlaw had in him. “Well, if I’m gonna make her happy,” he said, spying a squat red colored villa in the distance, “You and I are going to have a talk as soon as we get back to JIE.”

Dark energy flowed from the villa. Baal could feel it simmering under the surface, like a aquatic predator circling in a knee-deep pond. The villa was a tall structure, stretching thirty-six meters into the sky. Jutting from either side of the domed main building, a wall crawled across the landscape, ending in two large towers. The tower off to the right was crumbling, decay causing its support beams to buckle under the severe weight of the red-stone material. The tower to the left was still standing, and Baal could feel something tugging his attention in that direction.

“Klux, something isn’t right here,” he said over the clattering of the repulsordrive.

“SONSABITCHES!” Jospis screamed, gunning the unstable vehicle. Baal almost toppled from the back seat, gripping the sides at the last second. From the left tower red blaster bolts began hammering the ground near the speeder. Jospis, twisting the controls erratically, made it impossible for the shooter to get a clear shot.

From the front of the building, two black armored Ventral Warriors appeared, racing to the cover of the crumbling right tower. As they ran they squeezed off several shots from their LRB’s, the majority of the bolts missing their mark and sizzling off into the distance.

One lucky shot smacked against he front of the speeder and shut down the systems. The vehicle skittered to a stop, dropping lifeless to the ground near the left side of the villa. Igniting his twin blades, Baal parried several bolts fired from the tower, sending them back to smack into the red stone of the building.

“My house!” Jospis cried.

Klux, igniting his own saber, hustled the old man towards the wall of the home. “Don’t worry old timer, more important things to worry about,” Baal heard the Jedi say as he followed the duo to the cover of the buildings overhang.

“Making a hole,” Klux warned and jabbed the blue blade of his weapon into the building. With ease that saber cut a ragged round hole; Baal finished it off by kicking the remaining obstruction into the darkness beyond.

“Damn!” A’sok snarled as blaster fire erupted from the villas far tower. Peering through the windshield of the vehicle, he could barely make out a spiked helmet peering above a mounted heavy repeating blaster.

“Looks like Ventrals,” he said as Jospis speeder pulled hard to the left, drawing away the blaster fire.

“Great, don’t these Frellknockers ever take a vacation?” Vic said around his cigarro. He already had his Netfali Arms LRB out and was double-checking the charge. From two wooden double doors set into the main building, a pair of Ventral warriors emerged, sending blaster fire into Jospis retreating vehicle as he sprinted to the right. A’sok tagged their destination: a mass of crumbled stone less than ten meters from the Hummis. Gunning the engine, the Hummis roared to life, heading for the chunk of stone.

“Hey! Hey!! HEY!!!” Vic screamed as the hacker plowed the armored vehicle into the pile of stone and the bodies huddle behind it. Jerking violently, the Hummis drove the stone hard into the Ventral warriors, crushing them against the towers still-standing rear wall. Vic, neglecting the safety of the vehicles harness, jerked forward, smacking face first into the dash. “FRELL!” he screamed, rubbing his nose. Dropping the vehicle into reverse, A’sok backed it away from the gore, and pulled it near the building.

“You break this thing you buy it,” Vic growled, pulling a smashed stub of Cigarro from his mouth and slinging it angrily away. Grabbing his helmet from the back he jammed it onto his head. “Ready to earn your pay?” Terminus asked.

Nodding, A’sok produced his own single barrel light repeating blaster from under his seat. “After the day I’ve had, a bellyful of killing will do me good.”

Baal twirled his blades in unison, creating a wall of glowing red light between he and the barrage of red bolts that struck at them from the darkness. The home appeared to be some sort of old fort, and the entrance Klux cut into the wall dropped them directly into the center of what used to be a lounge. The room, easily a dozen meters wide and circular, was designed around a recessed sitting area littered with pillows and worn cushions.

Smoke from the blaster fire filled the room, with several small fires erupting along the walls, where old tapestries quickly burst into flame. Protecting Jospa, Klux joined Baal in smacking away the red death fired from a group of shadowy figures across the expanse. The old man, moving more nimbly than Baal thought capable, sprinted off to the left down a recessed corridor.

“If these guys are here it means Anjhai is too,” Klux said, batting a bolt into a shadowy figure on the opposite side of the lounge. The soldier took the shot in the exposed flesh of his neck and spun, landing lifeless on the ground.

“Then we must find him,” Baal said, taking two shots directly in the center of his crossed blades and redirecting them into the ceiling.

The words were no sooner out of the Jedi’s mouth when a scream pierced the sound of combat. A wave of anguish struck Baal and sent a shiver of agony through his body.

“Hold them off!” he shouted, sprinting down the same darkened hall Jospa disappeared into moments earlier.

Shouldering his way through a flimsy wicker door, he found Jospa’s body, trembling with convulsions, amid a pile of clothing and overturned furniture. Perched on the room’s balcony, the golden felinoid Anjhai grasped an object in his hand.

“Too late Jedi!” the Sith taunted, rising to his full height of almost three meters. “The enslavement of your people will be nothing compared to the darkness that will consume this galaxy!” he screeched, shaking the object at Baal.

The Trianni’s heart sank instantly; the object was the same size and shape as the artifact he discovered in the sacred Trianni Temple back on Fibuli. The coloration was different, this one crafted from white stone, but otherwise both were identical.

With a spin, the creature’s black cloak billowed out and he launched himself high and far out into the air, quickly dropping from sight.

Sprinting to the balcony, Baal dropped back as a volley of blaster fire peppered the overhang from below. Dropping back to the safety of the room, Baal shut down his weapons and scurried over to the dying Jedi Master.

“Don’t move, we’ll bring help.” Baal, said, inspecting the wound that severed Jospa’s spinal cord and left a cauterized hole in the center of his abdomen.

“It’s too late Balthazar. Look under the bed.” Jospa said calmly. As the glow of Aquanuric’s sunset bathed the room in a serene orange, Baal stepped over to the man’s bed and peered underneath.

A large sack lay near the wall, covered in a fine layer of red dust. Pulling it out, Baal opened it to find a artifact identical to the one Anjhai gripped in his large clawed hand. Its color was a marbled white, with deep purple veins spreading across the smooth reflective surface.

Anjhai has a replica, he realized as a faint pulse of energy reverberated along his forearm.

Entering from the hallway, Klux did a double take and shut down his humming blade.

“Is he gone?” he asked, dropping beside the body. Baal nodded. The darkside was scoring victory after victory it seemed. First Da’Jony, and now Jospi.

“He has left this world for a better place,” he said, handing the artifact to Klux.

“Vic and A’sok did some clean up, took out the last three Ventrals,” Klux said, gingerly hefting the item. Almost dropping it to the ground, the Jedi’s face twisted in disgust as a wave smacked against Baal at the same time...a wave of pure darkness and evil. Sotmach twisting into a knot, Baal felt his Lonely Lekku spirits surge into his throat; so pure and so diabolical was the wave that it almost seemed to be a conscious attack against the two Jedi.

“Agh...that...wasn’t good...” Klux said, hand clamping around the object. Fighting back a mouth full of bile, Baal nodded in agreement.

“This must be some sort of counterpart to the item I found on Fibuli.”

“Yeah, but what are they?”

Baal stared at the object and thought back to his own, nestled deep in his Jedi tunic.

“Jospi called mine a ‘key’...but I don’t know what they would open.”

Staring at the smooth white surface, Klux pulled a towel from the rooms cluttered floor and wrapped the object tightly in its folds. “We better get back to the ship. Jospi mentioned Farzhul...and if I’ve learned anything, it’s that we got another trip to make.”

The Lorinar Strike Cruiser rose into the dark sienna sky, leaving a streak as it headed for the planets atmosphere; it’s yellow engines disappeared after a moment into just another speck among the stars. A’sok sat watching from the top of the Skull’ throwing his hand up in a wave that he knew Deuce would never see.

After he and Vic returned from Jospi’s house he tried to get on board but Hobbie would have no part of it.

“It’s best you just give her time partner, you go in now all you are gonna do is make her even more angry,” the young soldier told him. Deep down he knew the man was right, and thanked him for the advice. A day full of bad decisions and stupid comments landed him in this spot, and now all he could do was watch as they loaded the slaves onto the cruiser and headed for a Rebellion safe house somewhere in the Outer Rim.

“Give her time,” the words rattled around in his head like a hydrosponder in a cargo crate. Didn’t she realize they didn’t have time? That they might be heading to their death tomorrow or the next day? Stopping, he realized it was the same thing she tried to explain to him earlier, but his ridiculous bravado and thick-headedness wouldn’t allow him to see it.

“Blast,” he snarled and slung his half-full can of Dew Brew into the darkness. Leaning back, he rested against the Skull’s dorsal laser cannon and stared at the tapestry of stars in the sky.

“Want some company?” Vic asked, climbing from an access hatch near the rear.

“Sure.”

The outlaw scrambled over and dropped beside him, uncorking a black and red bottle. Taking a hit, he shoved the decanter into A’sok ribs until he took it.

“Ahhhh...man that hits the spot. Glad It’s not my turn to fly us offa this crappy rock.”

“Vic, I’m not thirsty,” A’sok said, holding the bottle out.

Shaking his head, Vic refused it. “Sure you are, you just don’t realize it yet. Now drink,” he ordered.

Tilting the bottle, A’sok let the liquid pour down his throat-and almost gagged. Soccoran Rava, the kind found on some backwater planets, can often be the equivalent of decades-old hyperdrive coolant.

Stifling a cough, he let the spicy rich mixture crash into his gut, where it sent a warming glow through his limbs. A moment later he took another hit, then a third.

“Drink up pal. We got a meeting in the lounge in about an hour and I want you good and sloshed so you can lay there and ignore the ramblings of our teammates,” Vic said, staring at the running lights of a nearby YT-1300 that just appeared from behind a nearby mountain range.

“Shouldn’t I be sober?” he asked. His voice was coming slower than he was used to and he shook his head to clear away the fuzziness.

“Nope. You’ve had enough crap to deal with for one day. When they start wasting our time and telling us about how we need to go here and do this and that and get this Jedi Master and talk to that Jedi master, I just want you to ignore it all and smile.”

Nodding, A’sok hit the bottle again. “This stuff seems more potent than I remember” he said, words slightly running together.

Vic nodded and looked down. “Yup. Laced with spice...not the hard stuff, just a mild intoxicant that takes the edge off,” Vic said pulling a cigarro from his pocket. He stared at it then replaced it. “I need to cut back on those things,” he said to himself. A moment later he pulled it out anyway and lit it, the glow of the lighter illuminating his tired features briefly.

“How do you do it Vic? How do you fall in love and just...ya just leave man...you just leave em sitting,” A’sok said, sliding down the turret so that he lay sprawled on the hull staring up at the sky.

“You really want to know?” Vic asked. He couldn’t see the Outlaw now, just the stars. He also realized he wasn’t holding the bottle anymore.

“Sure. Tell me.”

He heard the bottle slosh momentarily. “You leave a piece of your heart with them when you leave. And you hope to hell it’s still there when you come back to get it,” the Outlaw said softly. Tabaac smoke drifted in a thin cloud above him, eclipsing the stars in a fine white haze.

“I wasn’t able to give Deuce any pieces of anything,” he slurred.

Chuckling the outlaw nudged him. “From what I saw of your bunk I find that impossible to believe.”

“You know what I mean!” A’sok said indignantly, still watching the curl of smoke roll by.

“Yeah I do. But don’t worry partner. She knows. I’ve known her since she was a little girl playing in the streets of Lazhan and I know her well enough to know she still loves you.”

The words, true or not, warmed A’sok more than any spiked liquor ever could. “Thanks Vic, you are a good friend.”

“Yeah, yeah, just remember me in your will pal,” the outlaw said standing. “Come on, lets go listen to the spiel the Jedi have worked up.”

“Absolutely not. It’s another two week trip and we have already been out longer than I wanted,” Vic said, crossing his arms and shaking his head.

“Vic, Jospi said the prophecy was of galactic importance,” Klux said, trying to bring the outlaw around to reason. He and Baal expected resistance, but didn’t realize the outlaw would be so adamant about not going. “That means if we don’t get to Farzhul, people are going to die. Lots of people, maybe a whole galaxy worth.”

“And you know this for sure? You are certain that we are the only ones who can make this trip?” Vic challenged, leaning over the table and shoving a finger in his face. To his right Baal shook his head. On his left Chance stared daggers through the outlaw. A’sok

who had been holding his comments to himself, stood weaving in the doorway of the corridor. Klux, with or without the Force could tell the man was drunk.

“Yes. Too much has happened for this to just be a random series of events,” he explained. If need be he and Baal would find transportation elsewhere; they had already decided on that point.

Turning, Vic paced in a circle around the lounge. “Great. So we leave for another month to go running around on your little quest. Meanwhile I’ve got droids and people I don’t even know running my business back on Garnib. You realize how dangerous that is?” he asked.

Again, Klux nodded. This conversation was going nowhere; eventually the outlaw would give in...Klux had foreseen it.

Pulling away from the doorway, A’sok weaved back and forth down the corridor. A pleasant numbness dulled his senses and he barely noticed smacking into a overturned cargo crate. For the first time that day his problems didn’t seem that bad. In fact... A glimmer from up ahead caught his attention. With the exception of Araf, who was asleep in his bunk the rest of the team was back in the lounge.

Slowly moving forward, he realized a red glow was intermittently bathing a portion of the corridor in flashes of light.

Stepping quietly up to the doorway and peering in, the fuzziness and haziness of his enjoyable inebriation was gone, replaced by fear, rage and a sense of panic.

Ten spot, Vics armorer droid, hovered in front of his workbench, a red lightsaber glowing in his hand. Switching it off, he turned it over and ignited it again, slowly moving it in a small circle.

“What the FRELL ARE YOU DOING?!?!?” A’sok screamed, backing out of the doorway. Startled, Ten Spot nearly dropped the humming weapon.

“Excuse me?” he asked, tilting his head to the side.

“VIC!” A’sok screamed. Slowly backing up he never took his eyes from the droid or the lethal red blade in its grasp. Footsteps pounded along the corridor and the outlaw skid to a stop in the corridor beside A’sok.

“Holy HELL!” Vic screamed backing away. “Where the frig did you get that?!?” he demanded.

Confused, Ten Spot shut the weapon down and set it on the table. “Him,” he responded pointing beside Vic. Pulling his eyes from the blue and white hilt, A’sok turned to see Baal’s face contorted in irritation.

“I...uhm.. had him analyze it,” the Trianni mumbled.

“What the hell? Why?” Vic demanded, turning from the room to the cat.

Baal, shaking his head, shrugged. “I needed it analyzed, for the schematics...so I could make my own,” he crossed his arms and looked up defiantly. “It’s really not a big deal.

“Oh! Oh! I beg to differ Furface! A droid walking around on this ship with a lightsaber is a HUGE frigging deal!” Vic screamed, spittle flying from his mouth. “This WILL NOT stand! I prohibit you from ever using these droids for...”

An unusual sound that emerged like durasteel grating against durasteel emerged from Ten Spot and A’sok realized the droid was trying to mimic a cough. Stopping his tirade the outlaw turned. A’sok stepped away from the doorway, just in case the droid went rogue.

“What was that?” Vic asked in a low voice.

“Sorry to interrupt,” the droid said, picking up the weapon and hovering towards Vic.

The Outlaw stood his ground, but A’sok sensed a change in his demeanor, from angry to dangerous.

“Yeah?”

Turning the weapon over in his hand the droid ignited the weapon, the red blade leaping from a white shaft adorned with three red buttons and an unusual blue series of glyphs. It shimmered between the two and Vic stared hard at the droid. “When I ignite it, it emits a very minor, almost inaudible frequency,” the droid rattled off in his passive voice. His sarcasm was now replaced with curiosity and interest. “That’s what I was researching before your little friend here began screaming like a two year old Mynock.”

Looking from the saber to the droid, Vic finally turned to Baal. “Where the hell did you get this?”

“It’s Nomi’s. Back on Dejer Prime when I slashed at her hand she dropped it. I just shoved it into my robe and forgot about it,” he said. Silence hung between them.

“Oh, don’t tell me you kept her saber,” Klux whispered from the back of the group. Everyone turned to him; his face, drained of all color, stared nervously at the weapons and back to Baal. “Please...tell me you...”

“What is the big deal?!?!?” The Trianni snapped, planting his large hands on his hips. “It’s simply a...”

“HOMING DEVICE.” Klux finished, jabbing a finger into the Trianni’s chest. “It’s a Jedi method Baal, some Jedi...or SITH...can plant homing devices in their weapons. So

if they lose their lightsaber they can relocate it. Either down the street or on the other side of the galaxy.”

“Yes...that does make sense...” Ten spot said, turning the weapon over in his hand.

“Homing ...they’ve been following us,” Vic said, eyes locked on the shimmering blade. “Pleestab... here...they’ve shown up either right before or right after we have,” he looked up at the armorer droid. “Except on Fibuli...why not his us there?”

Through the ravas haze the revelation hit A’sok directly in his stomach. “Because Ten Spot was busy trying to get the harvester to work and helping the Trianni rebuild their village,” he said. The group looked at him in unison. No one had any color left in their faces. “He was too busy to work on Nomi’s saber, so they weren’t able to track us there,” he finished.

Slapping the armorer droid on the shoulder, Vic plucked the weapon from his hand and shut it down. “Congratulations Ten Spot, you may have just doomed this entire crew.”

Looking back and forth among the team members, the droid dropped his head. “I’m sorry. It’s just...my programming encourages me to analyze and improve on designs and technology...which is why your armor is so effective and...” his voice trailed off.

“It’s not your fault,” Vic said, tapping the white hilt against the droids chest where it reverberated with a “clang”. “It’s his,” he said tossing the weapon to Baal. The Trianni, lost in his thoughts, juggled the weapon, catching it before it dropped to the deck.

“You don’t ever use my droid for your Jedi nonsense again, got it?” Vic snapped, shoving a finger in Baal’s face. Nodding in agreement, the Trianni slipped the weapon into his robes. “And dismantle that damn thing. I would like them to at least not meet up with us when we get to this Farzhul place,” Vic said heading down the corridor.

“So we’re going to Farzhul?” A’sok asked the outlaws retreating back.

Vic kept walking, never turning around. “Of course, not like we have much damn choice I guess,” he replied.

It was the most degrading job he ever had. Even when he was a slave belonging to a crime lord on Etti IV, Chance never had to scrub refreshers and clean ship’s ventilations filters.

“Oh, but it will teach you humility and character,” he mumbled to himself, mocking Baal’s teachings. After hearing the story about the lightsaber and how it was attracting darksiders he lost any real respect for his “masters”.

“Bunch of saber wielding wannabe’s” he said to the refresher bowl. The stench of human and alien secretions filled the small room and he grabbed a squirt bottle filled with cleaning solution. Spraying a long stream into the bowl, the acrid fruity aroma replaced the stench, not necessarily for the better.

But things would be changing soon.

They were a week out from Farzhul and he had no doubt those Darksiders would be there. Letting the cleaning rag hit the ground he leaned back and closed his eyes. Before him lightsabers clashed and he moved and parried like a real Jedi. He even wore some robes that Klux didn’t use anymore. Dressed and moving like a Knight of the Old Republic, he slashed and dropped a legion of Ventral Warriors...finally making his way to the large golden cat named Anjhai.

With one final swing of his weapon he cut the Darksider down. The team would of course see his usefulness and battle prowess. Vic would start taking orders from HIM once in a while...and A’sok? Well, he would subtly suggest A’sok be removed from the team. After all how often did they really need a hacker? And the Jedi? The Jedi would realize HE was the Master. All of the time he spent by himself training when they weren’t around or were out of the ship would finally come in handy.

Sure, he had struck his boot once or twice with the blade, but the crystal Baal had placed in the hilt insured no real damage, just singed dewback leather. But that wouldn’t matter. Soon, when the chips are down, they are going to turn to him for help.

“You done cleaning this thing yet? I need a shower,” A’sok said leaning against the doorjamb; the idiot was still hung over and reeking of rava.

“Done as I’m gonna be,” Chance said, standing and grabbing his tub of cleaning supplies. He muscled past the hacker, knocking him from the doorway and into the hall.

“Watch it!” A’sok said, stumbling backwards.

Chance kept moving, “Get over it junkie,” he said, tossing the comment over his shoulder. Yeah, just a few more days and they were going to see what he was REALLY made of.

Prophecy of the Fates Nexus

Strolling with purpose along the corridors of the Star Destroyer Reliant, Anjhai Rahmma's golden-furred chest swelled with pride. In the span of mere weeks he not only massacred two Jedi, but he retrieved that which his master desired above anything else:

The Key.

The white triangle-sphere configuration weighed down the side of his black cloak as he rounded a corner in the dull white glow of the hallway. Slapping heavily against his thigh he could almost feel its power, trapped deep within.

Dormant, the soul of a light side warrior remained encased, shrouded by the strongest of dark side Sith energy. Once the key was relinquished to his master, the key would remain hidden, far from the grip of any meddling Jedi. Jedi, Anjhai thought with disgust. This galaxy had no room for Jedi.

Appearing at the end of the corridor, a column of white armored stormtroopers marched towards him in unison, hard-soled boots stamping ominously against the black durasteel floor. Before him they parted, allowing him to pass through them like a golden lightsaber through a dense white mist.

Behind their helmets, beneath the layers of Imperial training and brainwashing, he sensed their fear, and paused briefly to soak it in. Long ago the Master taught him that fear bred weakness, and gave rise to power.

Power.

Power he had been promised and power that was now waiting for him lay just within his grasp. Before the Master found him he was nothing, no more than a mere creature to be laughed at and discarded like so much trash. His race was one of feral grunts and savages, barely worthy of bother, and certainly not a species revered or respected in the known galaxy. They were a doomed race, and obsolete race, and he was one of them.

But no longer.

Now, after cultivating his latent force abilities and teaching him the dark arts, his Master molded him from an insecure knot of fur into a lethal entity of power and darkness.

Soldiers were his to command, and the Force was nothing more than a tool he used to eradicate pathetic Jedi from the galaxy forever.

“And now I will deliver this prize to my master,” he said, allowing his three thick powerful fingers to encircle the key. Gripping it tightly, he felt no power coming from it, as he expected.

Jedi trickery he thought. No matter, as long as the light side spirit remained entombed, his mission would be a success.

Slowing his pace, he approached a corridor where the lights were cut to half power, bathing corners and cubbyholes in darkness and shadow. Ahead, two Ventral Warriors flanked a plain hexagonal blast door; their gleaming black armor reflecting what little light wormed it's way into the hall.

Approaching the door, neither warrior moved to intercept him, nor acknowledged him in any way. At the rear of his mind, dark tendrils picked lightly at his brain and he opened his mind up to his Master. He had nothing to hide. Not yet, anyway.

Without warning, the doors slid apart, revealing absolute darkness beyond. Anjhai's eyes quickly adjusted and the rigid metal stabilizers and studded support pillars rising from the left and right of the cavernous room revealed themselves to him as he entered the darkness.

Walking slowly, the soft pads of his feet fell noiselessly as he crossed the expanse; lights leading up to an observation deck sprung to life one by one and he peered up, not

surprised to see his master silhouetted against the round observation window, framed by the tapestry of stars beyond.

Dropping to a knee at the base of the stairs, Anjhai awaited acknowledgement. At one time, years ago, he would suffer through this exercise, biding his time with dreams of revenge inflicted upon his master, but no longer.

His Master was his world now, showing him the glory and beauty of the Darkside, and allowing him to drink from its intoxicating pool of strength and excess. His release came after several minutes of silence, only occasionally broken by a steam release, hundreds of levels below in the intestines of the mighty vessel.

“Rise.” A single word, but it carried more power than the entire Imperial fleet. Pulling himself upright, Anjhai stood, chest wide and shoulders thrown back in triumph.

“Master,” he replied.

“Come, I want you to witness the galaxy as it is now, before our destiny changes it,” the smooth voice invited. Advancing, the Sros’Tok approached his Masters broad back with reverence and awe. It was always like this, his mere presence was enough to topple an AT-AT.

“But you could be so much more powerful than he,” a tiny voice murmured in the back of the felinoids’ mind.

Just as quickly he banished it. Yes, if he struck down his master, he would surely take his place, leading the most powerful branch of the Empire in this system. And then what would he do? Why, take down Vader of course... a mere puppet of a crippled Emperor who....

“Ambition is a powerful ally,” High Inquisitor Tremayne said, his voice rolling across Anjhai like a warm caress. “It empowers us to rise to heights we might not otherwise reach. It drives our soul to excel, to become the very best at what we do. It is a virtue to be admired and coveted,” he said, turning in a billow of black cloth.

The right half of his face was encased in a polished metallic mask, while a brilliant red orb sat where the right eye once was. With a whir and click the red orb, set into a pitch-black recess, turned towards him.

Nodding, Anjhai let his gaze linger on the throbbing red light, dousing any further thoughts of betrayal. “Yes Master. A powerful virtue, but one best used with temperance,” he agreed in broken basic. Pulling his gaze away and down, he produced the Key from his robes. “I have succeeded in obtaining the key,” he said, again dropping to a knee and holding the object high.

Plucking the item from his hand, Tremayne turned, slowly strolling across the observation deck, his polished black boots clacking in rhythmic succession. “So smooth, and yet so powerful. Do you know why it took us so long to find this?”

Embarrassed by his ignorance, Anjhai merely shook his head. “No.”

“Of course you don’t,” Tremayne let loose with a snicker. “When the Jedi imprisoned Master Coba they encased him in a monolith on Farzhul. The key the Trianni carries unlocks that monolith. They then created a similar structure housing a Jedi holocron that details how to combat Coba and the DarkSide. This key,” he hefted the white artifact, “unlocks the Jedi monolith.

Tremayne traced a finger along the artifact, staring at it curiously. “We searched long for the keys because they were both imbued with force energy. The Jedi, in a stroke of genius, imbued the keys with opposite energy signatures. The key that unlocks Master Coba’s prison was immersed in light side energy, thus whenever we searched for it, that damnable energy prevented us from finding it. The opposite was true with this artifact.”

“The Jedi are sneaky,” Anjhai agreed. His Master seemed lost in thought, so he quietly stood by in silence.

“The Prophecy will favor us Anjhai,” Tremayne said, strolling along the catwalk. “Those foolish Jedi have no idea what they possess. The Trianni, Cochroth, doesn’t even realize that he holds the key that could release Master Coba. If he did, I don’t hesitate to believe the fool would destroy it,” he snickered. “Jedi can be so predictable, that is why it was so very easy to wipe them from the face of the galaxy,” he stopped, pivoting on the heel of his boot.

“It favors us, but that does not mean there won’t be complications, does it?” he asked.

“No master, adversity is... resilient... foe,” Anjhai answered.

Tremayne smiled. “Yes, resilient. Much more resilient than Twi’lek bartenders, hmmm?” an evil smile stretched beneath the smooth metal faceplate.

“Yes Master, much,” Anjhai nodded. Hours earlier they’d pried any information they could gather from the owner of the Lonely Lekku Saloon on Aquanuric IV- an unfortunate red Twi’lek who met his end as the probes of a black interrogation droid bored into his flesh. “We will intercept the Jedi on Farzhul, and take what is ours,” Anjhai snarled. What would his reward be, he wondered? A legion of warriors to command? Or perhaps command over a Star Destroyer? So that he may spread his power...

He spotted the object a millisecond before it struck the side of his head. Moving too fast to be stopped, the white stone Key smashed hard against his temple with a thud, sending him backwards and down the rigid metal steps. Unforgiving corners cut and jabbed into his flesh as he fell, tearing out tufts of golden fur and opening no less than a dozen wounds along his body.

Hitting the durasteel floor, he crumpled into a ball, blood matting his soft fur. His Master was on him then, turning him over and shoving the white key, now spattered with blood, into his face.

“IF I WANTED AN EMPTY PIECE OF WHITE MINERAL WITH NO USEFULNESS, I WOULD HAVE JUST TAKEN YOUR SKULL!” Tremayne screamed, his red eye blazing fiercely in Anjhai’s wavering vision.

With no real effort Tremayne crushed the key into chunks, a fine white powder rising from his hand.

“Sorry...Mast...” Anjhai managed, eyes watching the dust of the imitation key falling like fine white snow. Something internally was sliding around and he felt warmth rising in his throat. Death was slowly tightening his grip, and he realized he deserved it for this failure. How could he be so easily deceived? By incompetents Jedi no less...

“So...sorry...” he managed.

Black leather gloves cradled his head, smoothing out the bloody tufts of hair. They warmed him, chasing away the cold chill of death. He felt at peace, his wounds no longer racking him with agony as the Force wove it's way among his broken and battered body, sealing cuts and fusing bones back together.

“Quiet, quiet my pet,” Tremayne murmured in his ear, rocking his body and gathering his black cloak around Anjhai. “No need to speak. You must rest...we will get you healed. You have a long journey ahead if you are to intercept the Jedi at Farzhul and reclaim our property,” he said, wiping away the blood from the Srrs'Tok's mouth with his own cloak.

“Yes Master...I will...make them suffer,” Anjhai said, using all of his strength to force the words out.

“Don't speak. Heal. And then, soon, we will fulfill the Prophecy and bring our reign of darkness to bear on this galaxy,” Tremayne soothed, his words lulling Anjhai into a deep lumbering sleep.

Excitement knotted Chance Mulgrew's stomach so tightly that he could barely sit still. In the dim cargo hold of the Ghtroc freighter Skullduggery, the members of Raptor Squad sat parked atop cargo crates working out the details of their plan before setting down on Farzhul.

“Klux and I will deal with the Darksider threat. With Anjhai showing up at Pleestab and Aquanuric IV, I have little doubt he won't resurface on this 'Farzhul',” Baal said, the black key sitting in his lap.

Even five meters away, Chance could feel its power, pulsating Force waves that lapped gently at the fringes of his senses.

On an opposite cargo container, Klux, the Trianni's human counterpart, held a white object identical in shape to Baal's. Oddly enough, Chance could feel nothing coming from Klux's object, but the Jedi's darkened eyes and pallid skin told him the key was extracting a toll nonetheless.

“I agree. Vic, you and A’sok can handle the Ventral’s...they seem tough, but if you can aim for the weak points in their armor they should go down easier,” Klux said, scratching absently at his thick brown goatee.

“Fair enough, as long as we don’t have to go toe to toe with any of those lightsaber wielding freaks, we’ll be fine,” Vic said. The outlaw sat on the deck, his back pressed against a crate marked “Garnib Seafood”. A violet tattoo arced over his right eye while a braid of auburn hair curled around his neck and fell across a powerful chest sporting a “Pzob Brawlers” gravball jersey.

“What about me? If I’m going to cover your back I need more than this kiddie toy you saddled me with,” Chance said, slapping the training lightsaber that hung from his belt.

The blue felinoid turned his brilliant green eyes to Klux and back to the swoop racer. “You will be teaming with Vic and A’sok.”

The words hit Chance low in the stomach and knocked the breath from him. Anger and confusion, old friends by now, swelled up from within. “WHY!?!” he demanded. For weeks he anticipated the showdown, was at a point where he felt he would be able to hold his own with a lightsaber, and now the opportunity was being pulled away-again.

“You aren’t ready to face foes such as these,” Klux said. The Jedi nodded to Baal and continued. “We discussed it and you would simply be too much of a liability, with foes such as these, they could potentially corrupt you...even turn you fully to the darkside.”

“Bantha dung!” Chance screamed, standing and shoving a finger in the Jedi’s face. “You both have been training me for months...to what end? So when the chips are down and its ‘go’ time you can just stick me with the ‘b’ team? No thanks!”

“Hey!” A’sok said from behind him. Turning, he leveled a gaze at the pale near-human who was parked atop a nearby crate, clad in grey coveralls and, until a moment ago, tapping away listlessly at a datapad. “You can shove the B-Team noise up your wahoo, partner,” he said, dropping the datapad and standing.

“Well that’s what you and Vic are...come on...you think your weak-ass blasters are any match for our lightsabers?” Chance asked, smirking.

“Let me tell you something boy,” A’sok said, strolling over and towering a head taller than Chance. “If it weren’t for me and Vic, your two Jedi Masters would have been cut into bite size pieces by Anjhai when he was handing them their ass down in the Mrlst catacombs,” he jammed a finger into Chance’s chest.

“And we almost didn’t make it, cause’ some swoop-tard doesn’t know thing one about concussion grenades.”

Slapping the hand away, Chance stepped back and dropped his hand to the metallic cylinder hanging from his belt, “You...” he began but Vic was between them in a flash.

“Woah! You both curb that noise right now,” he said, holding A’sok back with a hand and jabbing a gloved finger in Chance’s face. “Raptor Squad is a TEAM. No one element is more important than another. We don’t keep scorecards on who did what and who saved who, so you both better get that through your skulls right frelling now. If you can’t, then I will personally shove your ass in an escape pod and space you right now.”

Silence hung in the hold and grudgingly, A’sok nodded. Chance knew he would...the hacker was Vic’s pal and would always run like a lap dog to cover his partners tail.

“Whatever. I don’t like your rules, but I’ll play by them,” Chance said, crossing his arms. “But I totally oppose being on a team with you,” he turned to the Jedi. “You are going to need me down there...why don’t you stick Araf with them and take me along?”

“Araf is staying with the ship in case there is trouble and our minds are already made up,” Baal said, slipping the black item back into his robes. “With any luck, Vornskr Pack will be able to complete their mission and make it back out to Farzhul...we are going to need all of the help we can get I’m afraid.”

“‘Afraid?’ Of course you’re ‘afraid’, all you people do is talk about how ‘dangerous and lethal’ these Darksiders are,” Chance spat. “But when it comes time to take them out you can’t take care of business.”

Irritation roared through him and the words fell from his mouth without thought or remorse. “You both trip over each other like a pair of clowns, you barely have any idea of what real power is and you take orders from some long haired goof who doesn’t know the first thing about the Force,” he jerked a thumb in Vic’s direction, “Yeah, you guys are a real “Team” alright...a team of losers.”

Standing, Klux absently dropped his Key onto the top of the crate behind him. “I think it’s time the Padwan retired to his quarters,” he said, locking a stern gaze on the swoop racer.

Chance balked. “I’m a damn adult, I don’t need to be told when to go to bed.”

“You’re mistaking it for a request. Go to your cabin. Now.” Baal said, rising and standing beside Klux.

Dark thoughts pressed against Chance’s mind, not for the first time. “Great. The only time you bozo’s can show solidarity is when you rail against me for being right,” he spat and turned, storming from the group and heading towards the bay doors.

“Someday you are going to see, you are going to see that I’m more powerful than you give me credit for!”

Vic settled on an orchestral piece from the Vol Kol Symphony. When he was a young soldier in the Ivory Brigade, he attended numerous engagements, performed on the Royal Lawn for the ruling Monarchy. Woodwinds and string instruments weaved together to form beautiful music that reminded him of warm summers and the smell of sweet scooner plants that rode the cool breeze across the great lawn.

His family, spread out on a thick white blanket near the stage, would wave to him occasionally while they forgot their troubles and lost themselves among the delicate sounds of the musical notes. Standing on ceremony near the stage, Vic would forget his troubles as well, letting his mind drift and wind among the notes riding on the evening wind.

Vic pushed the memory away and focused on braiding the top-knot of his Terminus helmet. The surface was dented and worn, and the plume of hair exploding from it's top had become singed and frayed by constant use and the heat of blaster fire. His fingers wove it together with care, twisting each length delicately and tightly around one another. The confrontation in the cargo hold between A'sok and Chance worried him. It wasn't the first time both had almost come to blows; anger simmered between them whenever they were around each other.

On the Skull, that was often enough to make the rest of the crew restless and edgy, and it was wearing everyone's patience thin.

"Why do you not banish Chance from the ship?" Araf asked him earlier. The Coynite brought up a good point and Vic couldn't come up with an argument to allow Chance to stay. Deep down, he knew the truth. During his time as a lieutenant in the Ivory Brigade he prided himself on always being able to bring the worst soldiers into line with the rest of the team.

While his unit was often tasked with lethal engagements and other brutal missions, he was always able to keep a cool head about himself, and instill the same in his unit. He took such pride in his ability to turn bad soldiers around that he and his best friend, Brak Nordis, who commanded his own platoon, would often battle to recruit the worst disciplined soldiers in the IB.

Then his world went to hell. After viewing a treasonous holo that one of his men procured, he witnessed that same soldier, an honorable Son of Vol Kol named Sadik' get cut down by two pillars of pure evil. Both carried lightsabers and both wore black. The only difference between them was a shiny black helmet wore by one and a glimmering metallic masked beset with a glowing crimson eye on the other.

"Bastards," Vic snarled, pulling the topknot tighter. Sadik's death crippled him and he fled his home planet, labeled a traitor and saddled with the accusation that he murdered his King, the man he swore to protect with his life.

Lies and the fear of losing another teammate haunted him. "I don't run this team, it's Klux's decision," he'd told Araf. It was the most reasonable yet hollow excuse he could muster. When Perfo was departing Aquanuric he asked Vic for the team's contact man if the Rebellion needed to in touch with Raptor Squad. Without hesitation Vic told him Klux, prompting a questioning glance from his former medic.

“I thought you ran this crew,” Perfo responded, herding several female slaves into the Lorinar Strike Cruiser. Shrugging, Vic slipped his sunglasses on and lit a thick cigarro.

“Nope. Just along for the ride pal. I’m out of the leadership business,” he replied around the smoking plug of tabacc.

Snickering, the younger man simply rolled his eyes skyward. “Sure Vic. If there is one thing I learned since being in the Rebellion, it’s that you never choose leadership, it chooses you,” he sealed the cargo bay door and turned to his old Lieutenant. “We are going to drop these ladies off at a Rebellion safe house a few systems over, then hit our objective. I’ll tell the Rebellion to contact Klux if they need to. Hopefully we’ll catch up with you on Farzhul,” he said, slapping Vic on the shoulder.

Vic watched the striker cruiser depart and wondered at the man’s comments. Often he found himself calling the shot’s on various missions, and A’sok had even taken to calling him “Boss”...at first a joke regarding the position Vic held at his shipping company Jaded Ivory Enterprises...but the name seemed to take on a different meaning as time wore on.

“Cripes, let’s not get into that whole mindset now,” he mumbled to himself, tying off the last of the braids. The thought of watching any of his current teammates die was a brutal reality he had come to accept, but to see them perish because of something he did or during an action he initiated...he just couldn’t accept that. Throughout the cabin the wail of a horned instrument ended abruptly, replaced by the heavy baritone hammering of a tumber drum.

“Let someone else take the damn responsibility,” he snarled, sitting the helmet on the deck and leaning back in his bunk. Less than a week out from Farzhul, they were heading into an unknown situation that they probably wouldn’t walk away from. Darksiders and madmen, the Force and angry teammates...there was little that seemed to be going well and it worried the hell out of him.

“I’m telling you both he’s poison, and when something bad happens it’s going to be on your head,” A’sok snapped. After Chance’s explosion he herded Baal and Klux into the rear of the bay and was sparing no expense in dressing them both down. The large blue-furred Trianni, massive arms crossed over his purple tunic, stood like a pillar, staring down at the hacker. Klux, leaning against the containers, wore a weary mask of disinterest.

“You have no idea what you are talking about. Klux and I have complete control of this “Chance” situation,” Baal said, his deep voice reverberating in the tiny alcove of crates and containers.

A’sok knew better. Since the swoop racer joined the crew he had brought nothing but bad decisions and unrest to the relatively cohesive group.

“I don’t? Did you see your little psycho in training go for his freaking saber when we were arguing earlier?” A’sok exploded, gesturing wildly towards the empty bay area. “Look, he’s like...he’s like a pet Vornskr. You make a decision to take it in, it becomes your responsibility. You feed it, train it, shelter it...but you make sure it’s contained. That it doesn’t get out to tear into the neighbors Voorpak cages for a midnight snack, right?”

He pointed at both of the Jedi, “He’s YOUR Vornskr, and you sure as hell ain’t taking care of him.”

“Look, A’sok, just calm down. Chance is young and still working through his sister’s death. I’m sure when he saw Anjhai back on Pleestab it churned up some emotions that were...repressed,” Klux said.

“That’s a load of drek, Klux,” A’sok replied, parking his hands on his hips. “You Jedi are getting worse. You spend hours locked in your cabins with these little trinkets you found, you pull us off to every known corner of the galaxy, so we can fight super-soldiers in black armor. You give some immature goof like Chance a lightsaber...” he trailed off, measuring both with a narrow gaze. “Look, I don’t like it. I don’t like the turn you’ve taken and I don’t like the direction you are pulling this team. If it doesn’t change, I’m going to Vic and we are all going to sit down and iron out some changes.”

Rolling his eyes, Baal brushed past the hacker, “I don’t have time for this,” he said, heading for the bay door.

“Oh you better make time, Sith-Boy,” A’sok shot back at the retreating Trianni. The large cat froze in his tracks, turning slowly around.

“What did you call me?”

“You heard me,” A’sok said, standing his ground. He was tired of playing games with these jokers and decided to lay it on the line. “Don’t think I’ve forgotten where your precious Mew-Tao comes from. Some dark lord shows up spinning his lies and your people jump headfirst into servitude. And now you are dragging us around the galaxy cause’ they’ve unloaded some prophecy nonsense on you...”

Stalking over to him, the Trianni’s maw pulled back in a snarl, revealing glistening white fangs. “Why you little...”

“STOP THIS!” Klux’s voice commanded. The Jedi stepped between them, shoving them both in opposite directions with a strength that surprised A’sok. “This is pointless! Stop this juvenile bickering and grow up!”

A’sok stared daggers at the two Jedi. Making a mental note to move up his conversation with Vic, he shrugged off the adrenaline and walked in a wide circle around the two Jedi.

“Sure. I’ll stop,” He wished he hadn’t even bothered, the Jedi weren’t listening to anyone but themselves anymore.

“You know, someday you both are going to have to face the responsibility of what you are and what you are turning other people into,” he said, triggering the cargo bay door, “I just hope to hell we all stay alive long enough to see it.”

“That insolent little nerf-chucker,’ Baal fumed, pacing back and forth. “All he sees is what is in front of him, he has not idea of anything beyond his tiny little mind. If it’s not computers, datapads or twi’lek’s, it doesn’t even hit his sensor array.”

Turning his attention from A’sok’s exit, Klux stared tiredly at the Trianni.

“Baal, drop it, he’s right,” the Jedi said, plopping cross-legged onto the deck. Beneath him the Skull hummed and groaned, its structure twisted and contorted by the pressures of hyperspace travel. Letting his breathing slow, he attempted calming his mind, to lose it among the stars that were speeding by somewhere underneath.

He couldn’t.

The trials of the last several months were wearing on him, draining him of much needed energy.

“How can you say that? Do you also think I am some sort of Sith Lord?” Baal challenged, crossing massive arms over his chest.

Dropping back onto the deck, Klux stared up at the ridged ceiling of the bay.

“No, he’s not right about that. I mean about Chance...about how he is being trained. I think we may be making a huge mistake trying to train that boy.”

“I think we make a mistake every time we waste breath discussing this,” Baal said, bounding onto a stack of cargo crates with a mighty leap. “We’ve gone over this to the point I’m about to call it all off. It bores me.”

Klux was about to disagree when the bay doors slid open. Araf, all three meters of him filling the doorframe, stepped into the bay and triggered the door shut.

“I’m glad you both are here,” he said, his normally booming voice toned down to a mere bellow.

“Great, are you coming in to lecture us as well?” Baal asked from his perch.

The Coynite looked up, silver hair glowing white in the bay’s florescent lighting. “No. No...I’m here to discuss you,” he said pointing to Klux.

“Me?” Klux asked the Coynite warrior, now towering above him.

“What is it Araf?” Klux asked, pulling the white Force artifact from his robes and hefting it between his hands.

“Klux, before Da’jony sent me to find you, he told me that someday you were going to be a powerful Jedi, it was a vision he had. Now, while many of these visions can be written off as ‘possible futures’ he clung to this one with fervor I’ve not seen since leaving Coyn,” he crossed to a container and sat down.

“I realize you and Baal are relatively inexperienced in the ways of the Force, but Da’jony told me, ‘if you stay true to yourselves, and the other members of this team, you will find the strength to do what you need to do when the time comes’, he believed that and I think you should too.”

Klux sat up. “He said I would be a powerful Jedi, huh?”

“Wow, that’s a lot to drop on someone right before they sit down on a strange planet to fight who-knows-what,” Baal said from his perch. Araf tossed him a smirk and shrugged.

“You both made a decision when you picked up your lightsabers, you surely didn’t think it would be an easy life you chose, did you?”

The Loronar Strike Cruiser “Darkmoon” roared through the black of space, as oblivious to it’s surroundings as a giant asteroid. Emotionless, it existed as a paradoxical force of nature; While not alive, it teemed with life, as thousands crept along its corridors in hushed silence, working for the grater good of the whole.

Its crew worked with fluid efficiency, wasting no movement and executing every order to precision. Systems checks were performed on time and the vessel’s operating levels constantly ran in the green. In the Imperial Navy, only a handful of ships could boast such a flawless record; the Darkmoon was one.

Captain Drevin Morjure stood ramrod straight, impassively watching the galaxy from the Darkmoons’ bridge. In his twenty years of service, he had the honor and distinction of commanding only three vessels. Two were Victory-Class Star Destroyers that went on to be captained by capable officers, the final being the Darkmoon, which he commanded for the last five years.

Off to his right and down in the technician pit, an ensign by the name of Frebore stifled a sneeze. Tilting his head slightly, he cocked a thick black eyebrow. “Troubles Ensign?” he asked, allowing a bit of contempt to slide across his tanned handsome features. The young man, jolting upright, kept his eyes glued to his console. “No Captain Morjure, Sir!” the young man snapped, voice echoing off of the consoles and durasteel of the pit.

“Very well lad, carry on,” Morjure ordered, turning his attention back to the large observation viewport. His handsome reflection stared back; jet black hair framed a lean face and brilliant green eyes. Many hearts had been shattered by his looks and charisma, and he imagined each star in the galaxy was a tiny monument to those emotionally scarred women he’d rejected.

Behind him, the doors to the bridge slid open, followed by the stamp of hard-soled leather boots. He could feel Mistress Nomi before her reflection materialized in the viewport. In his years of service, he'd only ever been in the company of one other who commanded such a presence-Lord Darth Vader.

"Captain Morjure, situational update," she commanded from behind. Smiling, he turned, allowing the beautiful young woman a chance to gaze on his chiseled features. He had entertained thoughts of being an actor when he was younger, but his desire to serve the glory of the Empire was simply too strong.

"Moving along at optimum speed, we should make the Farzhul System in less than three days Mistress," he said, letting the sentence slither along his tongue like a Rodian Svaper.

"Excellent," she purred, sliding a black leather glove up the front of his drab gray tunic. "I trust everything is in working order?" she smiled, curling her crimson lips into a flirtatious invitation.

He stiffened under her touch, displaying a straight back and lack of interest-for the benefit of his men.

"Perfectly. All systems are operating above one hundred percent," he snapped.

Her hand lingered around his abdomen for a moment and she turned, her black cloak billowing around her athletic frame. "See that it stays that way. Carry on, Captain." She seemed to glide out of the room and he realized her exit wasn't marked by the same stamp of boots her entrance was.

"Odd," he whispered to himself, shaking off the cold chill that curled in the pit of his stomach-exactly where her hand lingered moments before. For some reason he felt as if his life depended on this very ordinary, average journey.

"Morjure is slime," Anjhai said from the gravcouch.

The large gold felinoid was lying on his back, stretched out to his almost three meter height, staring at the large skylight set into the ceiling of Nomi's private quarters. Rolling her eyes, she discarded her cloak, revealing a tunic made of the dark crimson silk. Almost immediately a small round droid hovered from a nearby nook and pulled the garment from the floor with a thin metallic arm, disappearing just as quickly.

"Didn't I tell you to stay out of my chambers?" she snarled.

The quarters in question were extravagant, even by Imperial standards. A large silver desk hovered in front of a wide viewport that ran five meters from the floor to the ceiling and curved into the skylight.

Stretching from the door to the transparasteel wall, the carpet was as red as her tunic, crafted from a fine weave only found in the Corporate Sector. Decorated with an intricate design of black spirals and curves, it promoted an uncertain serenity to any who looked upon it. As if in the blink of an eye the design would unravel into tentacles that would pull an uninvited guest into its sea of red.

Behind a thin screen of black Corellian Silk, her bedroom sat off to the left like an afterthought. Occupied by a round gravbed and recessed entertainment center, neither luxury had ever had much use to her, but she kept them nonetheless.

Besides the gravcouch that was parked off to the right under an Imperial-issued portrait of the Emperor, the quarters were void of any seating.

Dropping into a black leather chair, she swiveled towards the reclining felinoid. "I trust this visit is related to Farzhul?"

"Yes. Much is riding on this mission. We must destroy the Jedi and take the keys, releasing Master Coba," Anjhai said in his clipped dialect.

She hadn't seen him for months, but knew of his successive failures; given the heel Tremayne had him trapped under, they both were in equal peril if they failed this mission.

"Well, that certainly appears to be the situation," she said, passing her hand over the desk and triggering to life several holo files that hovered in the air.

Three-dimensional holos of Klux Martin and Balthazar Cochroth stared back, side-by-side, while text scrolled along in the air underneath. "We must capture the Jedi, Klux, he will be a strong ally."

"And what of the Trianni?" Anjhai asked, rolling into a sitting position and rising from the couch.

"He's yours, cut him down, turn him into your slave, do whatever you want, he's not our concern," she snapped, pulling up the visages of several other sentients. Imperial dossiers scrolled beneath each one, and all carried numerous bounties of no less than twenty thousand credits. The large cat stopped before the desk and jabbed a lethal claw at the group.

"What of these beings? While we occupy ourselves with Jedi, what will we do with them?"

A tight, devious smile curled Nomi's lips apart, "Oh, I think the surprises they find on Farzhul will be more than enough to deal with whatever 'threat' they pose."

Anjhai shook his head. "They are resilient. One has an uncanny knack for strategy and the other follows his lead...we shouldn't underestimate them. They caused significant losses on Pleestab."

"Then throw some of your precious Ventral Warriors at them," she sighed, waving off his nervousness. Her attention was focused back on Klux's file, a file she'd memorized from front to back...not that she needed to.

“The Ventrals aren’t enough. They cut down the units on Pleestab, and Aquanuric IV. I do not think...” Anjhai began, gathering his black cloak about him.

“Then throw MORE at them!” she screamed, slamming her fist against the polished desktop and eliminating the holofiles. Startled, Anjhai stepped back.

“You should mind...your anger...” he stammered. Nomi sat back in the deep black chair and crossed her legs, the supple fabric hissing as made contact with itself.

“Really? And what of your anger?” she purred.

Throwing an anxious glance towards her, the cat turned away. “I don’t know...what you mean,” he said, ducking his head and focusing on a patch of the lush carpet. She sensed his inner turmoil and decided to toy with him-it was, after all, a long trip to Farzhul.

“Yes, you do. When Tremayne plucked you from that Sith-forsaken rock and turned you into his pet, I sensed your anger, your hatred...all you wanted was a way, an opportunity to end his life.”

“Do not remind me. I was nothing. I didn’t know the power he would give me, MY power...to command and rule...I was young and stupid. But not now.”

Sliding silently from the chair, Nomi rounded the desk and slipped behind him, running a black glove down his back. “I know, but what if you had ALL of the power? What if you followed through on those long buried feelings of hatred and anger and cut him down? Think of the power you would have then.”

Beneath her hand, she could feel him trembling; confusion and weakness poured from his skin like sweat. “The Master saved me, he gave me power.”

“Saved? I think the word you are looking for is “tricked.” She ran a finger along the raised white flesh that made up the scar that dissected his fur and zig-zagged across his right temple. She did likewise to a healed scar that ran under her eye; the result of a severe beating Tremayne inflicted just over a month earlier. “Between us, our combined might would crush him, leaving his power to claim as our own.”

Puling away from her touch, Anjhai turned a disapproving glance towards her. “You shouldn’t think such things.”

Grabbing him by his cloak she pulled him close. “He hurt us Anjhai,” she growled, letting her dark eyes bore into his, “and have no illusions, that someday, when the mood strikes him, and we’ve outlived our usefulness, he will kill us both.” She held him steady for a full minute, never letting her gaze fall. Eventually he nodded.

“Perhaps you are right,” he said.

Letting him loose, she turned and stepped back behind the desk. Depressing a switch, Klux's face appeared over the desk once more. "A change is coming Anjhai, you can either reap the whirlwind, or be destroyed by it."

Silence filled the quarters. She dropped back into the chair, staring hard into the impassive familiar face of the Jedi. "When the time comes...it will be evident where my loyalties lie," Anjhai said.

In a heartbeat he was gone and Nomi was alone, save for the dark of space and the translucent visage of her brother.

Klux stared at the components of Nomi's lightsaber. Scattered across his bunk, the lethal weapon was now reduced to nothing more than harmless pieces of metal and crystal. Closing his eyes, he gently rolled his fingers across them, pausing and letting the Force trickle through his fingertips and onto the deep red Dalwyn crystal.

Silently, it began telling him a story. Images of battle, pain, anguish and darkness danced a macabre ballet through his mind. In one instance he saw the entire destruction of a family, from Father down to infant, slain, for the glory of the Empire. A cold chill raced along his spine, and his hand, ever so slightly, trembled.

Moving it over to the handle, he viewed more of the same, including flashes of Nomi, bathed in red, lovingly cradling the white cylinder in her hands. Tipped in a blue emitter and matching pommel, its bone white hilt was inlaid with cryptic indigo glyphs that ran the length of its body. Klux had hoped the visions would give him an answer to their origin or meaning, but thus far he'd come up empty handed.

"This is useless," he said, pulling his hand away. His fingers still tingled, and he slowly placed the housing, crystal and remaining components in separate bags.

Vic had been all for spacing the object, but something deep within Klux raised a voice of alarm.

Since the startling dream depicting Nomi as his sister, he had been racking his mind to come up with a memory or piece of evidence establishing his link to Nomi, but so far had uncovered nothing.

They were no more than a few days out from Farzhul and the prospect of what they were heading into had him concerned-and frightened. Eyes still closed he leaned back against the ships bulkhead.

"A Jedi shall not know fear," he assured himself aloud.

"Really? Sound's like a dangerous outlook to me," Vic said from the cabin doorway. Klux looked over as the Outlaw uncrossed his arms and strolled into the room, dropping onto a fold out chair. In one hand he cradled a steaming mug, in the other, a sheet of flimplast.

"Its part of a Jedi mantra, Da'Jony taught it to me."

“Yeah, hey, damn sorry about you losing your master and all that,” Vic said taking a sip from the mug. The level of sincerity would have insulted other beings unfamiliar with Vic, but Klux accepted the comment with appreciation.

“Thanks Vic, it was just time for him to go.”

“Right. Araf told me a bit about him, sounded like a hell of a Jedi.”

“He was.”

Nodding the outlaw continued. “Speaking of time to go,” the auburn haired man waved the light blue flimplast in the air, “when our little field trip is done we need to head back to Garnib, ASAP. I’ve got several newsnet reports about Imperial movements in that sector, not to mention we need to regroup and find out what happened to Jax.”

Crossing his legs, Klux nodded. “Understood. Look, Vic, I know you aren’t that interested in this Force stuff and this prophecy and all that, but...I just want to stress that it IS important. Too many coincidences have occurred for this to just be a random series of events.”

“Sure, sure. Look, Klux, you are right, I don’t give a damn about the Force. When I was back on Vol Kol, the only thing I trusted was my skill and savvy. There wasn’t some sort of magical blade that I could use to take down a million enemies at once. Strategy and training...those provided my edge in the field. You and Baal can train Chance and twirl your weapons all you like, but, it seems to me your Force is like any other weapon...you rely on it too much, someday it’s going to let you down-hard.” The outlaw took another sip from the mug, watching him over its rim for a reaction.

He had none. Everything the man said was true, and on some level he might understand the Force even better than the Jedi. “Well, once we figure out what’s going on, we’ll head right back to Garnib,” Klux agreed.

“Good! Then it’s settled.” Standing, Vic stretched and finished off the mug’s contents. “We make Farzhul in a few days. I don’t know what’s going to happen, but I suggest you get some rest. You look like hell,” he said stepping through the door and into the hall. Lying back on his bunk, Klux couldn’t agree more. Since Aquanuric he’d felt drained, as if something were leaching away all of his energy and motivation. Drifting off to sleep, his mind tumbled uncontrollably into unwelcome dreams and lurking nightmares.

The Skullduggery dropped out of hyperspace and into the Farzhul system without any ceremony or fanfare. Huddled in the tiny cockpit, Baal sat hunched over the ships

controls, adjusting the approach vector and disengaging the hyperdrive systems. Towards the rear A'sok initiated the sensor mask, reducing the ship on any passing radar to nothing more than a tiny blank spot in the center of incoming data.

"Don't know why I'm wasting time doing this, not like they are going to gun us down while we have those nifty little Jedi souvenirs," A'sok mumbled.

"The less they know the better," Ball replied. He had no energy or desire to argue with A'sok; he and Klux had much more important things to worry about.

"Great, another dry ball of cracked dirt," Vic said from beside him. Pulling his eyes away from the console, Baal studied the planet more closely.

It was a dingy brown, planet with numerous craters dotting an unforgiving landscape. A brilliant white dwarf sat off to the right, causing the ship's solar compensators to filter out the star's powerful rays. Tucked behind Farzhul, a tiny moon peeked out like a scared child, only a slice of its drab red face showing.

"A'sok, when we break atmo, drop the mask and start probing the planet for signs of life or landmarks," Vic said, as Baal angled the Skull away from the brilliant star.

"Sure. Quick question. Why can't these universe altering prophecies direct us to a sweet pleasure planet like Aderlon or Wroona?" A'sok asked.

"Just keep your eyes open," Klux said from the doorway. "With the mask engaged we can't use our own sensors and I don't want to smack into an asteroid. We are flying blind out here."

"Flying blind into an Imperial ambush more than likely," A'sok quipped, adjusting the sensor mask.

Busying himself with piloting, Baal pushed away the nagging cramp developing in the pit of his stomach. Anticipation, excitement and a touch of fear mixed, causing his hands to sweat and his body to tense. He needed to relax. Above all else, calm determination was what he needed to focus on now.

Plunging into the planet's thin atmosphere, the Skull's viewport distorted slightly as the atmosphere enveloped the ship. Breaking from the haze, they soared out over a desert, crossing massive sand dunes that stretched away as far as they could see. Entire mountains of sand were moved and shifted by powerful winds, reduced to fine particles that floated in clouds across the ground.

"We've got a structure about four hundred clicks off to the East," A'sok said, peering at the console's screen. Banking the ship, Baal altered the Skull's bearing, dipping close to the ground. Minutes later, small objects began dotting the barren landscape.

Three pyramids, clustered in a group, rose from the ocean of fine brown sand. Stretching from the base of the largest structure, a narrow wading pool, long dead, stretched for over a hundred meters, ending in a small dais that stood at the base of a massive statue.

Vic peered intently through the viewport. "What the frell is that?"

Circling the immense figure, Baal was able to pick out details in the carved face and torso. At one time it appeared to be a Bothan, standing upright with both hands brought forward and open, palms up, in a manner of offering. The harsh winds and damaging climate had worn away many of the finer details, submerging the lower half of the statue in the endless sea of shifting sand.

“It appears to be the upper half of a Bothan,” Baal said aloud. In the back of his mind, gently, he could feel a tendril of consciousness probing along the fringe of his mind. “They are waiting for us,” has said, turning to Klux.

Leaning against the doorway, the Jedi’s face was a mask of weariness and dread. “I know. Nomi is calling for me,” he answered.

“He’s here,” Nomi said, opening her eyes. She stalked back and forth across the stone floor of the massive chamber, her thumb absently rubbing against her lightsabers hilt. Twenty meters overhead, all four walls converged to a sharp point, barely visible in the flickering torchlight.

Running the perimeter of the room, a stone walkway, no less than ten meters above the ground, ended in two steep flights of stairs that jutted crudely from the pyramids walls. Everything—the floor, walls, support columns appeared to be carved from the same rugged tan stone as the Bothan monument that towered hundreds of meters above them.

A fine coating of sand covered every surface in the room, save for the glistening black pyramid sitting in the center of the chamber. Nestled in a wide recessed pit with circular narrow stairs leading down, the object’s onyx sides reflected back the dozen or so torches nestled in hooks that hung from the six massive circular columns that ringed the chamber.

“You should relax,” Anjhai said, touching the tip of his weapons glowing blade to the last torch. The charred chunk of wood sputtered and sparked, a flame rising from its center.

“I am relaxed. I’m also anxious to see the prophecy fulfilled.” Slowly descending three meters into the pit, she crossed to the large monument jutting from the dusty ground. Its tip peaked just below her chin and she looked down at the black mirror like surface; her own reflection stared back, a mischievous smirk crossing her face. Encircling it slowly, she let her black leather glove gently brush the smooth material.

Mysterious glyphs and ancient symbols had long ago been carved into the smooth face, now altering her image in the flickering firelight. Reflecting off of her thin silver torso armor, the same firelight just as quickly disappeared in her thick black cloak.

“I wonder how long Master Coba has slept inside, how long he has waited for someone like us to release him?” she asked, stopping and placing both hands side by side.

“I do not know, perhaps thousands of years. The Sith were once powerful and mighty, or so Master says.”

“Yes, Master says a lot of things,” Nomi said, looking up from the pyramid. “Just remember he wants Klux alive.”

“Of course. I’ll handle the real threat.”

“Do you think you can take him? The Trianni?” she asked, gently pressing her cheek to the cool pyramid face and closing her eyes. Deep beneath an ancient energy resonated, like a rabid animal trapped and yearning to break free.

“He won’t be...a challenge,” he replied, stopping to stand at the top of the pit. She kept her eyes shut, now pressing her body flush with the pyramid. Deep within her body, dark energy cascaded upon itself in waves, warming her and causing her breath to come in quick gasps. Soon, very soon, years of planning and waiting would come to an end.

“The Trianni is powerful. Dual lightsabers, agility to match yours, and from what we can tell a very nasty violent streak-even for a Jedi,” she gently pushed away from the pyramid. “He will be a formidable foe, but perhaps,” she kneeled, dragging a gloved hand through her raven black hair, “perhaps we could use his anger. Perhaps we could turn him into a powerful ally.

Anjhai, absently twirling the golden blade of his lightsaber, stopped.

“Ally?” he replied.

“Of course,” Nomi replied, “If you want to demonstrate some real skill, turn him fully to the Darkside...that will be much more challenging than simply running him through like some decrepit Jedi Master whose best days were back during the Clone Wars.”

Shutting down his weapon, Anjhai slid the hilt into his belt clasp. “I think,” he struggled with the words, “you underestimate the abilities of old Jedi Masters.”

Slowly, Nomi ascended the steps, and brushed lightly past the hulking Skkor’tok.

“Perhaps.”

His claw closed around her shoulder and immobilized her. Small needles of pain exploded through her shoulderblade but she refused to cry out in pain or surprise. Instead, she slowly turned towards her partner.

“Just be certain you do not underestimate the STUDENTS of old Jedi Masters,” he growled. “We cannot afford to fail the Master this time.”

“Are you sure you don’t need me on the ground?” Araf asked from Vic’s doorway.

The outlaw was strapping on his black torso armor when the Coynite appeared. Wrestling with a particularly difficult strap, he finally jerked it through one of the suits non-reflective loops.

“Nope, while I have no doubt you would be a better asset than the red-haired idiot, I need someone competent manning the ship. The droids...” Vic trailed off and threw a nod towards the makeshift repair bay, “...can’t fire weapons. Last thing we need is a group of storm commandos breaking in here and stealing our ride home.”

Nodding, Araf adjusted the lethal meter-long sword that hung from his belt.

“Agreed. Speaking of Chance, I know that you do not approve of how he is being handled by the Jedi, do you not have faith in their abilities?”

Vic stopped, clenching the Terminus helmet in a gloved fist. “Araf, there are a lot of things I don’t understand in this universe. The Force, Sabbacc, women,” he turned towards the large warrior. “I wouldn’t give a toddler a blaster to play with and I don’t think it’s wise to give Chance a lightsaber. That boy has been nothing but trouble for this team, and if it weren’t for the Jedi he would have been left holding his bags a few planets back.”

The Skull’ jostled slightly as it settled on the uneven sand of Farzhul. Vic steadied himself against the bulkhead as Araf stood motionless.

Shaking his head, Vic absently pulled at the helmets newly braided topknot. “When I saw Ten-Spot handling that lightsaber, my blood went cold. The Jedi are irresponsible, and now they are passing that off to an irresponsible...what do they call him? Padwan? The whole thing has bad news written all over it.”

“I understand your point. I too am concerned about the decision the Jedi have made. In fact, I find the whole situation unsettling.”

Inspecting his armor for any openings or unnoticed damage, Vic ran a hand over the non-reflective black material finding nothing; Ten Spot, as usual, had done a top-notch job.

“I’m right with ya pal. It’s not that I don’t trust the Jedi themselves. It’s just that... I’ve seen what they can do, I’ve seen them do things that normal beings just shouldn’t be able to do,” he shook his head, “and sometimes it scares the hell out of me.”

Stepping into the cabin, Araf looked Vic up and down, raising a thick silver eyebrow. “You don’t seem to show it.”

“I can’t,” Vic said, shrugging. “I’ve got a young hacker across the hall who wants to get back to fix things up with his lady, I’ve got a ship full of droids I have to worry about, and a business and employees that rely on me staying alive long enough to pay them.” Pulling the Terminus helmet on over his head, he engaged the seal between it and the black bodyglove.

“Too many people to worry about,” his voice emerged as a metallic crackle as the smell of durasteel and polished leather filled his nostrils.

“Then why do you not call yourself Raptor Squad’s leader? Why do you shy away from that title and responsibility?”

Pulling his light Repeating Blaster from the cargo crate under his bunk, Vic/Terminus hefted the large cannon and checked its charge. “Gave that leadership job a shot once before, got a lot of good men in trouble or killed. Let someone else handle that burden.”

“But you are heading into trouble now, and you will be leading the team on the ground, what is the difference?” Araf asked, pulling his own weapon out and running a calloused finger across the flawless blade.

Shouldering the blaster rifle, Vic shrugged, “Just because I AM doing it doesn’t mean I WANT to.”

Holding both keys in his hand, Klux could feel the power dancing from the objects. One, black as night, pulsed with light Force energy; the other, as white as the icy surface of Garnib, throbbed with immeasurable evil. “We could end this now Baal, just take our weapons and destroy both of these things...” he turned a haggard glance upon the Trianni.

They were in Baal’s cabin, suiting up for their excursion into the harsh Farzhul sandstorm. While the felinoid suited up, Klux worked at blocking out the knot of nausea stirring within his stomach.

Pulling on a blast vest, Baal turned a troubled stare on the man. “I think that would be a very BAD idea Klux, we have a prophecy to fulfill, good or bad, our path is chosen.” Grabbing a cloak the Trianni pulled it on over a bulky black chest protector.

“Armor is something new for you isn’t it?” Klux asked, eyeing the cat suspiciously. Since their flight from Fibuli, Baal’s personality had been changing, his habits straying from his Mew Tao teachings. He previously scoffed at any sort of body protection, and now was relying on a modified piece of armor to aid him in the coming battle.

“A lot of recent events have caused me to rethink some of my earlier perceptions and ideas,” Baal said, adjusting the cloak. “Finding this object, the revelation of my religion’s origins...I’ve come to realize that the ‘old ways’ are not necessarily ‘My ways’, if you understand my meaning.”

Dropping onto the cot, Klux turned a curious eye on the felinoid.

“Da’jony used to say, when we have disorder and chaos within, it disrupts the balance of the Force. Makes it harder to control it, and often, ourselves.”

Clipping his lightsabers to his opposite sides of his belt, Baal tapped a large knuckle against his chest. "I'VE never had any trouble with the Force, I think if you have any issues with it you resolve them before we step from this ship...I would hate to have to..." his voice trailed off and he briefly glanced towards Klux.

Silence hung between them like a wall and both didn't speak for a moment. Klux knew the consequences of what they were about to face. This was the end of the line, His master was dead, the artifacts were in their possession, and this planet was the point in the prophecy where light and dark would meet. Their future, the future of the team and the future of entire galaxy, hung in balance.

"I'll be fine. Whatever happens, I know the consequences of going over to the Darkside, and I'll run myself through before I'd let that happen," Klux said quietly.

"As will I. In fact," Baal reached into a wall locker and produced a small black duffel bag, tossing it on the cot. "Stick the artifacts in this, I've got some insurance to make sure they won't fall to the Darkside."

Curiously, Klux unclasped the bag and peered inside. Nestled towards the bottom, reflecting just the faintest bit of light, sat a thermal detonator.

"You want me to put those in there?" Klux asked, unable to take his eyes from the orb of destruction. In the recesses of his consciousness he could feel cold tendrils slithering their way across his mind like Coruscant sewer slugs.

Nomi was close, and she was trying to pry into his thoughts. Through sheer will he pushed back, blocking her out.

"Best place for them. If things get out of hand," Baal pulled the purple sash on his tunic tight, "then we destroy everything."

"Right, including ourselves," Klux said, gently placing the first of the two artifacts into the bag.

A'sok shut down the holoprojector and ejected the small silver disk. Everything in his cabin was as it should be; computer suite powered down, decryption programs still running; he was ready to go. The light camo armor wrapped around his torso was especially warm, causing rivulets of sweat to run from his hairline and down his neck where they sank into the thin fabric of his coveralls.

Dropping into the battered swivel chair parked in front of his desk, he pulled himself up to the durasteel shelf jutting from the Skulls' bulkhead. Shoving aside a stack of intercepted messages and random pieces of flimplast, he cleared a spot on the surface and pulled out a label and lightpen.

Across the dark sticky strip he scrawled “Give to Deuce”, the words glowing with a faint blue hue. Sticking the strip onto a clear disc case, he gently placed the silver recording disc into the fitted slot of a plain white slipcase.

“Time to go! Time to go and save the galaxy or die trying!” Terminus’ jovial metallic voice rolled along the Skull’s corridor and into his cabin.

“Hope you never have to see this,” A’sok muttered to the disk. Opening his spacers chest, he slid it between two datapads jammed alongside various chunks of electronic innards and cables. Grabbing his helmet, he made sure his Thunderer blaster pistol was secure on his hip and stepped into the corridor.

To his right, Terminus was rounding a corner and heading into the cargo bay, his LRB slung over one shoulder, the topknot of his helmet swaying back and forth across a tan poncho.

From his left he heard footsteps. Chance, pulling on a green blast vest, stepped from his cabin and into the corridor opposite A’sok. The swoop racer was decked out in his black racing leathers, a vibroblade jutting from the top of his right boot; on his right hip hung a DL-44 blaster with a reinforced grip.

Looking up, the young man saw A’sok watching him and stared back.

“What?” he asked.

Running a hand across his brow, A’sok turned and walked towards him. If they were walking into an ambush, if, in fact, this was the end of the road, he wanted to tie up any loose ends. In the end they were teammates, and that had to mean something.

“Look,” he began, “I know you and me have some different ideas of how this team needs to be run. But let’s try to focus on this job, and we’ll worry about sorting out our personal problems later. Deal?”

Extending a hand, A’sok waited for a shake or for it to be slapped away. Eyes narrowing, Chance absently gripped the hand in a black leather glove.

“Why the turnaround, earlier you acted like you wanted to brain me against the cargo bay floor,” Chance smirked. “You scared now?” he continued, holding A’sok’s hand in a tight grip. “You worried some big bad Darksider is gonna crawl up your hind end and old Chance is going to be the only one around to save ya?”

A’sok returned the squeeze, knuckles popping slightly as he applied the pressure. “No, but I don’t want to get down there and find a blaster shoved into my ribs by someone who holds a grudge.”

“You know hacker-man, I get stronger and stronger in the Force every day. I’m guessing, heck, a few months from now,” Chance whispered, shoving his pale freckled face into A’sok’s, “Me and the Jedi aren’t even gonna need you and your partner.”

Anger and adrenaline mixed and roared through his body, but A’sok forced it down, matching the younger man’s gleeful stare.

“Newsnet flash for ya laser-brain, me and Vic need you and the Jedi like we need a Kowalkian Monkey Lizard growing out of our neck. But wait! Maybe, someday, we might need a lame has-been swoop racer who crashes all the time...lucky for us we already got you.”

Jerking A’sok forward, Chance caught him off guard and slammed a shoulder into his chest, driving him hard against the bulkhead. Pain exploded throughout A’sok back as rivets and a junction box dug between his shoulder blades.

Instinct took over and he drove an elbow down into the center of Chance’s back; something popped and Chance collapsed to the deck of the ship, gasping for air.

Sidestepping the wheezing swoop racer, A’sok crouched into a fighting stance, blocking out the dull throb pulsing along his spine.

“What’s going on?” Baal’s voice echoed from somewhere behind A’sok. Without turning he nodded to the still kneeling swoop racer, now coughing up gobs of mucus onto the latticework of the Skulls metal flooring.

“Better straighten him up Baal, cause if the Darksiders don’t finish him off,” he stood tall, seeing that the swoop racer was going to offer no more resistance, “I’m going to.”

Looking up, Chance’s eyes burned holes through A’sok and beyond. “You and me are gonna have a day of reckoning you piece of hybrid trash,” he said, snarling.

“Yeah, whatever you say,” A’sok snapped, turning away and walking back down the corridor.

Araf and Klux joined Baal, all watching the back and forth now. So much for settling unfinished business, he thought as he brushed past the trio and headed for the cargo bay.

With a screech of metal, the loading ramp of the Skull’ descended, allowing brilliant sunlight to pour into the darkened receiving bay. Terminus stood in front, helmet filtering out the fine granules of sand that gusted in, carried by a wind that turned his armor into a small self-contained furnace.

Beyond the ramp, Farzhul revealed itself; sand dunes stretching to the horizon created an unforgiving baked landscape bleached white by a blinding orange-white sun.

Less than half a kilometer away, two pyramids rose from the sea of sand, dwarfed by a larger pyramid positioned directly before the two.

In the distance, the upper torso of the massive Bothan monument towered above all, its sand blasted face scowling at the planets latest arrivals.

“Great. More sand. More heat, does anyone get the feeling we were just here?” A’sok asked, his voice crackling inside Terminus’ helmet comm.

“Cut the chatter ‘Sok, knowing our luck the Imps have already cracked this frequency,” he said, stepping down the ramp.

“Yeah, there’s a good point. Why not just blast us to dust when we landed?” A’sok screamed towards the Jedi. A dull gray helmet covered most of the hacker’s face, allowing his scowl to decorate the visible lower half.

“They can’t run the risk of us destroying these,” Klux screamed back above the wind, slapping the small black duffel that hung from his black leather waist wrap. A dark blue cloak billowed around him, his face and upper torso disappearing in the navy wrap. Neither he nor the Trianni wore a head-comm, a decision Terminus was going to rectify once the op was over with.

The wind wasted no time in bombarding the group, causing anything not tied down to whip and twist uncontrollably in its powerful gusts. Keeping his eyes fixed forward, he trudged along, fighting with every step to prevent being sucked down into the endless world of sand.

“Dammit!” Chance screamed from the back of the group. Turning, Terminus realized the younger man had stopped and was studying a bloodied hand he’d pulled away from his face.

“What happened?” Terminus asked, stepping up. He reached for the gash running along Chance’s cheek but had his hand batted away.

“I’m fine! A piece of...I don’t know...glass or something whipped through here, it cut me,” he said, pulling a scarf from around his neck and wrapping it about his head. Terminus stopped, and flicked his tongue, killing the white noise of his internal comm. Faintly, almost imperceptibly, he heard a series of clicks against his helmet. Quickly he toggled the comm back on.

“There’s glass in this mix people, let’s move before we get sliced to ribbons,” he said, double timing it towards the pyramids. Running through the sand, his armor felt like a wet Bantha pelt; sweat ran in rivers along his body, pooling in small pockets throughout the tight bodyglove. Instinctively, he shoved his LRB under his cloak, protecting it from the damaging grit and wind.

Random cursing and swearing exploded from various members of the group. The wind gusts were roaring now, and the deadly sand/glass mix wasted no time in shredding clothing and chipping paint from armor. Raw data began scrolling down the left side of his helmets heads up display and the pyramids, seemingly crafted from blocks made of the lethal mix, grew larger before him.

“Almost there, how’s everyone holding up?” he asked.

“Fine, just dandy!” A’sok screamed.

Less than ten minutes out from the ship they reached the safety of the pyramids. Bypassing the smaller two, they headed directly for the largest, swinging wide to the left and scrambling up its rugged face, away from the hazardous sand-gusts.

“Baal and I are headed there, that’s where they are,” Klux screamed gesturing beyond the dried wading pool to the small dais set before the Bothan monument.

“Yeah, watch you tail in there!” Terminus shouted, helmet amplifying his voice so it cut through the noise.

Nodding, Baal grabbed his tail, now whipping wildly in the wind and threw the outlaw a thumbs up.

“Crazy ass,” Terminus muttered under his breath.

Without further discussion, his team ascended the pyramid while the Jedi scrambled down towards the monument.

Twelve meters up the face of the pyramid a small alcove burrowed into the sandstone; Terminus spotted it and made a beeline, only turning once to make sure A’sok and Chance were in tow.

Once tucked into the nook he inspected the inner wall, noticing a thin seam running in an uneven zig zag pattern from top to bottom. Tracing a finger along its edge, several tiny ball bearings easily gave way under his touch; reaching the bottom, the wall separated, one half swinging in while the other swung out, allowing just enough room for each of them to pass through one at a time.

“Look’s cozy. Wonder if anyone is making tea?” A’sok asked, ducking into the darkness beyond. Waving in Chance, Terminus followed, descending a short flight of stairs to the sand covered floor.

The light from the secret entrance revealed a small four-by- four-meter room, identical walls crafted from the same material as the exterior and a single hallway stretching away into the darkness to their right. “Guess this eliminates the guesswork of where to go,” Terminus said, gesturing to the lone corridor.

Before he could turn to secure their exit, the shaft of light narrowed into a sliver and extinguished altogether.

“The door!” A’sok screamed. With a thud its edges merged, sealing them in absolute darkness.

“Nice work, maybe you can hack our way out of here,” Chance said from somewhere in the darkness. Toggling on his helmets infrared filter, Terminus ignited a glowrod and handed it off to A’sok.

“Sok’, you do some recon down that hallway, Chance and I will be along shortly,” he said activating another glowrod and handing it to the swoop racer.

Nodding, A’sok gingerly made his way into the darkness, the glowrod’s circle of light bobbing along the wall and then disappearing completely a moment later.

“He can barely find his ass with both hands in his pockets,” Chance said but was silenced as Terminus held a finger up to his face, the bounty hunters visor glowing an ominous red in the semi-darkness.

“Shut up,” Terminus ordered in his flat metallic tone. “Look, I don’t care about your juvenile tendencies and your personal problems with A’sok. I don’t care about your Jedi training or any of that nonsense. You are on my team now, and I swear by my sassy little topknot, you act up while we are down here, I will snuff you out like a candle. Got it?” Both stared in silence at one another, Terminus quietly toggling off the safety of his LRB with an audible “snap”.

He’d hoped he wouldn’t need to have this conversation at all, but the swoop racer, through attitude and insolence, finally forced his hand.

“You wouldn’t.” The stupid bastard said, glancing to the LRB. He almost sounded like he believed it.

“I would. And will. The second you start thinking I have a problem ventilating your ass to save myself and A’sok is the second you need to strap your swoop to your ass and run along home.”

“But Klux and Baal would stop you, they wouldn’t let you do a damn thing to me.”

The snicker that came from the helmet sounded like a metallic triphammer. “Boy, down here the only thing that is going to allow you to live or die is me. Your ‘Masters’ are off fighting their own demons, and, if recent history is any indication, they have their hands plenty full.”

Terminus glanced around the ancient chamber. “This place is damn unsafe looking. Bet its full of loose stonework, hidden traps, unpleasant creepy crawlies,” he locked his stare on Chance. “It would be nothing to report your untimely demise as an unfortunate ‘accident’.”

In the red display of his visor he watched Chance drive back the waves of anger that swelled from his deep reserve. Disgust, rage and eventually submission all played out across his freckled face until he nodded, shadows bouncing in time.

“Fine,” he said through clenched teeth. “But look here-you aren’t entirely on the level either Palisades. People just don’t go around helping other people like you do. Not in this galaxy anyway.”

“The name is Terminus, and you’re right boy, EVERYONE has an agenda. And that,” he shouldered his LRB, “Is even more of a reason you better watch yourself down here.” The younger man stared for a moment, first at the weapon, then at the ruthless Bounty Hunter that held it.

“I’m tired of listening to your threats.”

“Then let’s get moving,” Terminus replied.

“I’m not going to get shot in the back am I?”

“Not unless you give me a reason,” Terminus said, gesturing towards the hallway with the weapon. “Now move.”

At the foot of the Bothan statue they found an intricate door, crafted from an unidentifiable metal blasted clean of any markings, set into the base of the small dais. The general ease with which it swung wide told Baal that they weren't the only ones to use the entrance that day.

Clutching his own saber, Klux took the lead and slowly led their way down a spiraling staircase illuminated by his blue blade.

Drawing ‘Strength’ and ‘Honor’ from his robes, Baal thumbed the weapons to life. Coupled with the blue hue coming from Klux’s weapon, the dual crimson blades cast faint light along the stone corridor walls, allowing them to cautiously make their way down the uneven stairwell into the bowels of the temple.

“You realize this is a trap...right?” Klux asked, glancing back.

“Yes. But we can't concern ourselves with that,” Baal brought the weapons closer as the hall narrowed, “our destiny lies ahead, there-” pointing with the tip of “Strength”, the tunnel suddenly opened into a wide room ringed by glowing torchlight. Stepping from the last stair, Baal’s boot padded onto the sand covered floor, kicking up a small plume of dirt.

“I can't sense anything...like...the Force is muddled,” Klux said, shaking his head.

“The room seems clear...but there is something in the center,” focusing on the onyx pyramid, Baal closed down his weapons and cautiously crossed the expanse to the ancient artifact. Unlike Klux, he could sense everything in the room, and detected no presence of evil or the darkside.

“This pyramid mirrors the appearance of my key” he said, descending the stairs. Kneeling, he let his hand run across its surface, slowing over the glyphs and stopping when his fingers dipped into a small depression set into the base. “There is a hole here...”

“A hole? Like a keyhole? Round enough for...”

Baal nodded. “Yes. Hand me the black key...”

Shutting down his weapon, Klux approached the pit, fumbling with the clasps on the duffel. A moment later he produced the black key from its folds. “Are you sure this is the right key?”

The Trianni shrugged, plucking the artifact from his hand.

“This key emits light side energy, and given that it matches the color of this pyramid, it only makes sense that it would unlock this...well...whatever it is.”

Klux let his gaze nervously shift to the upper levels of the temple. “Fair enough, just do it quick...I get the feeling we’re working on borrowed time here.”

The alcove split off from the main hall and allowed Terminus and Chance just enough space to enter shoulder to shoulder. A’sok remained behind in the main corridor on look out.

Less than ten meters in, it ended in a nondescript wall, adorned by a small hole at chest level, just big enough for a human to slip his hand into.

“That looks too damn inviting,” Terminus said, inspecting the ceiling and running a gloved hand across the smooth walls.

“Maybe it’s a lock,” Chance offered.

“Maybe it’s a trap, I say we leave it. Come on.” He had no more turned away when an audible “crack” filled the chamber.

“You didn’t just reach in that hole did you?” Terminus asked, not bothering to turn around.

“Yeah, I did. Not everyone is afraid to take risk’s ya know,” Chance snapped from behind him. “It was just a lever, I turned it and...” The remainder of the swoop racers voice vanished as the grinding of massive stone blocks and rain of sand began filling the small corridor.

“Dammit!” Terminus snarled, powering his way down the corridor through the sucking calf deep grit that poured through various slits from above. Ahead, a door was descending from the ceiling, threatening to seal them both into the small space for eternity. Terminus could think of nothing as bad as that.

Sliding on a small hill of sand, he reached the entryway and jammed his shoulder against the stone block, briefly slowing its descent. Stumbling past, Chance fell out into the main hall as Terminus rolled forward, allowing the thick impenetrable stone slab to drop into place.

“THIS IS WHY WE DON’T TAKE UNNECESSARY RISKS!” he shouted, pointing to the sealed entrance.

Digging sand from his eyes the swoop racer said nothing, focusing on merely pulling himself from the ground and shaking sand from his body.

“Bossman! We need to get out of here. While you guys were dancing around in there I kept hearing echoes of something moving above us...” A’sok said, casting nervous glances down both ends of the corridor.

Checking his LRB for damage he was relieved the weapon escaped unmarred. Nodding, Terminus gestured for A’sok to lead the way. “Agreed. Let’s move.”

Moving along carefully but quickly, the trio began a slow climb up a mild grade. Several meters later it evened out, dipping slightly. The terrain remained unchanged; smooth, stone blocks made up the architecture, and A’sok took to igniting the torches they found anchored to the wall every ten meters.

“Are we even going in the right direction?” Chance asked quietly.

“We’ve been staying to the main corridor...we must be higher in the pyramid now though...” A’sok offered, casting his glowrod’s beam across the ceiling.

Terminus stopped. The increased auditory pickup in his helmet was registering a constant grinding, as if someone were pulling a vibroblade across the rough stone floor. “Quiet,” he said, holding a finger up. In the ensuing silence the grinding grew louder, and Terminus glanced around quickly to assess their surroundings.

The corridors width had grown to four meters and was just as high. Ahead of them were two small nooks and then beyond, darkness. Cocking his head, he could tell the sound was coming from behind them...as if they were being followed.

In the blink of an eye, two dull black orbs, illuminated by the orange flickering torchlight, rolled into view at the end of the hall. Both stopped abruptly, and sat in silence for a heartbeat.

Deep within their guts, dubious mechanisms shifted and whirred with noise and activity. Without warning, the noise stopped and the balls rocked back, unfolding into a pair of insectoid tripods, glistening with oil and weaponry.

“Sithspit! Destroyer Droids!” Terminus shouted, the end of his sentence disappearing in the whine and roar of repeating blaster fire.

Gently, Baal cradled the black key in his large hand and lined up its protruding orb with the matching hole in the base of the pyramid. Hesitating only briefly he shoved the key flush with the surface, as an audible “crack!” echoed about the chamber.

Beneath his feet, the ground began to tremble. Growing to a steady and powerful rumble, it caused a waterfall of sand to float from the ceiling and pillars. Amid the dust and commotion, laughter filled the chamber.

“Nicely Done! You just took one step towards the darkside and you didn’t even know it!” a woman’s voice reverberated throughout the chamber.

Spinning, Baal spotted Nomi, standing defiantly atop the second level, staring down at both Jedi.

“We were worried we would have to destroy you to get the key, but you brought it right to us and even unlocked the prison!” she laughed, eyes dancing with dark delight.

“Yes. Perhaps Master Coba will allow you to serve him rather than destroy you,” another voice chimed in...this one from Anjhai. The large golden cat stood on the opposite catwalk from Nomi, perched like a predator on its ledge.

“Baal!” Klux shouted.

Spinning the Trianni caught his breath as the four sides of the pyramids tip fell away, sending a web of red electricity arcing upwards into the darkened chamber apex. Sitting amid the brilliant crimson chaos, a small black pyramid hovered, pulsing waves of dread and anguish into the room and throughout Baal’s body. Along its face, ancient text from a long forgotten religion marched in glimmering red lines, enticing any who dared look upon it.

Revulsion racked Baal’s body and he felt as if he would pass out. Concentrating and focusing, he pulled from the Force and was able to keep himself upright, but just barely.

“Master Coba...” Nomi whispered from above.

“VENGEANCE!!!!!!!!!!!!!!” A voice erupted from the small shimmering pyramid. Energy rolled across the room in waves as the released dark master pulsed within the glowing walls of his holocron.

Klux was already moving; out of the corner of his eye Baal glimpsed the Jedi’s blue cobalt blade spring to life in his hands and, in the bat of an eyelash, slash down, cleaving into the tip of the darksider holocron.

Piercing the air, a scream that seemed to last for an eternity echoed throughout the room as red electricity arced from the artifact, traveling up Klux’s blue blade and striking him square in the chest; jumping to Baal, the red arcs racked him with pain and forced him to his knees.

Almost as quickly as it began it stopped, and silence filled the temple. Baal, shaking his head clear, pulled himself from the floor, and dropped back, eyes pulled to the source of the darksider lightning.

Still sitting atop the pyramid, the holocron lay smoldering, its uneven black chunks posing no further threat.

Klux was beside him then, dropping against the pyramid for support and sliding down until he sat, awkwardly clutching at the smoking scorch mark on his chest. Absently, the Jedi reached down and jerked the black key from its base.

“This damn thing has been more trouble than it’s worth,” he snarled, turning the key over in his hand.

“Yes,” Baal agreed, shaking the cobwebs clear. Smoke and dust mingled with the smell of burning flesh and charged ions, filling the chamber with an acrid stench.

Amid the thick haze, two lightsaber blades, one red, one gold, erupted into existence several meters apart. Springing to his feet, Baal ignited Honor, circling away from Klux and never letting his gaze move from the gold blade that now hovered just scant meters away.

Slowly, he ascended the stairs.

“Jedi Fools! You could have joined master Coba and brought this galaxy to it’s knees!” Nomi snarled somewhere in the haze. “All of the power of the darkside, it was your for the taking!”

Adrenaline battered away the pain and nausea and Baal felt power surge through his rippling muscles.

Striking quickly, Anjhai’s gold blade arced down towards the Trianni’s body, the golden furred face looming in the haze, almost like a dream. Easily knocking the blade away with “Honor” Baal brought “Strength” up in a sweeping arc towards Anjhai’s head. Sidestepping, the Srros’tk batted away the incoming blade and deftly skipped back out of Baal’s reach, shutting down his weapons and twirling his black cloak around him. Smoke and dust whirled about the darkness, obscuring the darksiders form into a unidentifiable mass.

“Too scared to fight?” Baal taunted, advancing.

The swirling dark mass of cloak and dust pirouetted away from him. “I fear no Jedi,” Anjhai’s voice hissed, and in a blur the darksider, spinning like a dervish into the haze, disappearing from sight.

Blaster bolts the size of small tree trunks peppered the corridor, slamming into walls and disintegrating whatever they hit. Much of the sandstone had already been blasted slick and smoke hung thick in the air.

Crouching in a small alcove he ducked into when the firing started, A’sok tried to make himself as small a target as possible.

“This is getting bad bossman!” he screamed above the roar of the destroyer droid weapons.

Across the hall, in a similar alcove, Terminus and Chance stood flush with the wall, making no movements.

“Yeah...I know,” Terminus replied.

“So what we gonna do?” A’sok screamed. The bolts were growing larger and A’sok hazarded a brief glimpse around the corner to confirm his fears: The destroyers were advancing.

“A’sok! How many Frag grenades you got?”

Shoving his Thunderer into its holster, A’sok produced two of the fist sized black orbs. The bolts screaming past his alcove were growing larger...the droids were continuing to close in. “TWO!” he shouted, holding up the matching spheres.

Nodding, terminus quickly ducked his head from the cover of his alcove and back. Just as quickly, two bolts slammed into the wall, just a meter away from where his head was.

“Toss them both when I give you the signal. Try to throw them at least ten meters away,” Terminus shouted over the roar of repeating blasters.

Straining to hear, A’sok nodded an affirmation and punched a code into the face of each of the explosives. Now, when the tiny red button on the grenades was pushed, they would detonate four seconds after he released them.

A moment later, the barrage of blaster fire subsided as an audible clicking came from the hall. Terminus quickly flicked his finger in A’soks direction.

Exposing himself for just a moment, the hacker slung the two grenades down the hall. Both destroyers were cycling through their weaponry, a shimmering white forcefield bubble covering their insectoid frames.

Spotting movement , they pivoted towards A’sok and sent another flurry of deadly, though less potent, blaster fire towards him.

For what seemed like an eternity nothing happened and A’sok, fearing the explosives were duds-drew his Thunderer.

At once, a tremendous explosion rocked the hall, blasting fire and debris past A’sok’s tiny redoubt. In a flash, Terminus was in the hall, LRB answering the explosion with its own roar.

Minutes later, with no sign of resistance, the bounty hunter stopped, the barrel of his weapon glowing an unnatural white.

Without hesitation Terminus ejected the weapons dual clips and slapped two more home. Stepping into the corridor, A’sok adjusted the frequency on his helmet, filtering out the smoke and haze. Among a charred mound of smoking rubble, two black husks stood immobile, weapons annihilated and no longer able to dispense death.

“That...” Terminus gestured towards the wreckage, “ is how to effectively use explosives in a small corridor.”

He looked at Chance impassively and moved on down the hall.

Snickering with relief, A’sok passed the swoop racer, who stood staring into the flame.

“How does it feel brother?!?” Nomi screamed, hammering at Klux’s blue blade with her own deadly crimson saber.

Stumbling back, he parried the violent flurry, barely keeping his feet under him. Smoke and dust stung his eyes and tears streamed down the sides of his face. Pulsing with energy, the dark key, nestled snugly amid his robes, sent small out vibrations of nausea and pain that mixed with his already aching chest wound. Forcing himself to remain calm, a bit of the pain subsided.

“You’re aren’t my sister, you can’t be!” He screamed back, batting away her strikes. Movement from his right caught his attention and he was just able to stop the golden lightsaber blade before it cleaved him in half. Snickering, Nomi skipped away and into the darkness.

“Jedi...hope you are ready to lose your life!” Anjhai roared, spinning in a graceful arc and knocking Klux’s weapon out of guard. Exposed, the Jedi only had enough time to open his hand towards Anjhai before the creatures shimmering blade struck home. The strike froze in midair, blade hovering just centimeters from Klux’s outstretched hand.

“Get...back!” he shouted, and the golden felinoid, struck by a ball of unseen force, sailed through the air and hit the ground, ducking into a roll.

Stumbling back, Klux realized the move took too much out of him. He would need to rely on skill and finesse to beat Anjhai, brute force wouldn’t be an option.

“Nice moves Jedi. But pushing me around will just postpone your destruction!” The felinoid growled.

Nodding, Klux regained his composure, opening himself up to the Force. Rejuvenating energy and calm fell down across his body. Wounds were forgotten and his awareness encompassed everything in the room: Nomi and Baal squaring off, the waning power draining from the monolith in the center of the temple, and the waves of darkness rolling from his foe.

Leveling the blue glowing blade at Anjhai, Klux took a deep cleansing breath. “Let’s finish this.”

A smile creased her face as Nomi stalked Baal like a predator. Both circled each other, the Trianni twirling his dual blades in large lazy circles, eyes taking in her every movement.

The Jedi, stopping the release of the dark master, drove him back into the safety of his dark key. She could hear him murmuring from the orb even now, his voice fraught with anger and rage. With a single lightsaber strike, Klux sidetracked their plan momentarily, but this battle was far from over.

By switching off, she and Anjhai were forcing both Jedi to fight two distinctly different opponents, opponents neither one expected to be fighting. One thing Master Tremayne

had taught her was the predictability of Jedi. “The Trianni will thirst for revenge against Anjhai, and Klux needs to know the truth, neither will expect you to refocus your attack,” he’d told them, and, as always, was proven correct.

“I see they reattached your hand,” she taunted, “I’m glad. I didn’t want this battle to be one sided.”

Smirking, the Trianni nodded towards her saber, “Yes. I see that the Empire has a surplus in appendages as well.”

“Anjhai underestimated you Baal, you are powerful...you ripple with energy,” she said, her voice just loud enough for him to hear. “You would be an invaluable asset to the dark side...with your abilities, your skills, you could do anything you wanted, commanded whoever you wanted...” she playfully slapped at him with the tip of her weapon, the jab quickly swatted away by “Strength’s” red blur.

“Keep that venomous tongue in your mouth before I cut it out Nomi. I won’t be reduced to a pathetic lapdog like your comrade over there,” Baal said, nodding disgustedly towards the Klux and Anjhai battle that was raging in the center of the room.

Smiling, Nomi continued circling. “You can’t be serious,” she hissed, “look at yourself. Holding onto a religion steeped in lies, living on a raggedy freighter with quarters barely able to contain you. Training,” she threw her head towards the battle going on across the temple, “with a incompetent Jedi who you despise...in a filthy cargo bay? Is that the rewards of hanging onto your precious light side? Poverty and dysfunction?”

“At least it’s MY cargo bay and not some sanitized Imperial playground.”

The words were barely out of his mouth when she attacked. Letting him focus on the conversation opened up a weakness in his defense and she struck, bringing her weapon in an uppercut that he narrowly blocked by bringing both of his blades down and together in a cross.

Allowing herself to be forced back, she pivoted, unleashing a furious barrage of strikes and jabs- moves Tremayne taught her, designed to exploit the weakness of a two-weapon offense.

Tightening the two handed grip on her saber, she let the force flow into her arms, enhancing her strength and forcing the Trianni to expend more energy keeping her strikes at bay.

For what seemed like an eternity they danced a deadly ballet of energy and heat, twirling and matching one another, blow for blow. Once she thought she had the upper hand, he would reverse her offense, driving her back and forcing her to shift into a defensive form. Slowly, almost imperceptibly, the fear that she too had underestimated the Trianni began to creep into her mind.

Manned by no fewer than five Ventral Warriors, the E-Web heavy blaster roared. Its long black barrel, swiveling left and right, quickly converted the narrow corridor into a killing alley, filled with smoke and flying chunks of debris. Blue columns of energy, too long to be bolts and too short to be a stream, crackled down the tight corridor, incinerating whatever they touched.

Directly behind the massive weapon, the corridor ended in an open entryway, through which, the E-Web's corded power cable disappeared. The weapons mounting column, warped from several LRB hits, locked up the firing arc, restricting the weapon to a fixed forward position.

Terminus, seizing the advantage, advanced and was now lying flush with the ground, steadying his weapon and waiting for the volley to subside. Energy passed above him by a mere meter, singing his poncho and heating the plating of his armor.

Somewhere behind him A'sok was positioned behind an outcropping of stone, avoiding the deadly rain of fire.

Realizing the firing arc on the weapon prevented them from annihilating him, the Ventral's, drew their lethal vibro-swords and let loose with inhuman battle screams.

Consumed by rage and the fervor of battle, they made the deadly mistake of stepping out from behind cover.

Squeezing the trigger, two bolts of energy pierced the armor of the advancing troops at point blank range, sending bright green clouds blossoming from their backs and cutting their battle roar short.

A'sok, using Terminus' attack as a distraction, let go with his Thunderer and capped the creature manning the E-Web's trigger.

Climbing to his feet, Terminus nearly buckled when a spiked glove connected with his exposed lower back. Stumbling, he blocked an overhand swing from the Ventral's blade, answering with a balled right fist that caught the warrior in the throat, momentarily stunning him.

"Damn! Don't these things ever just...die?!?" A'sok screamed, struggling with the hulking form of the second Ventral who'd charged the smaller man.

His LRB lying useless on the ground, Terminus assumed a Coynite fighting stance and waited for the Ventral to attack. Behind the black deathskull helmet he watched as the creature uncoiled a sickly yellow tongue and lapped away a stream of blood running from it's mouth.

"Come on ugly, you're cutting into my killing time," Terminus challenged.

The creature closed, and Terminus dropped to one knee, thrusting a powerful fist up into its jaw and causing its head to snap at an unnatural angle. Slowly, the creature fell to the ground, body still twitching in the throes of death.

"Now stay dead," Terminus snarled, kicking at the crumpled form.

'Get...off...'" A'sok stammered from behind him.

Terminus turned just in time to see the hacker work his Thunderer from the Ventral's grasp and shove it up under the spiked helmet. A blaster report filled the corridor and the red eyehole coverings of the Ventrals helmet exploded outward, spraying A'sok with gore and chips of glass.

"Gah!" He spat, pushing the corpse off into the hallway and dropping the heavy blaster to the ground. Terminus noticed A'sok leaving a grisly blood trail from a stab wound in his left shoulder as he slid along the wall and dropped onto the ground.

"You're hurt bad 'Sok, lay still." Reaching around on his belt pouch, he detached a slim narrow box. With the touch of a button the lid slid away and a tiny internal light flickered to life, revealing an assortment of syringes and dermal patches.

"I'm...ok. Just shoot me up and slap a derm patch on my shoulder...I'll be fine," the hacker said between clenched teeth. His right hand was pressed over the wound, but blood still poured from between trembling fingers.

"Is it safe?"

Glancing towards the end of the hall, Terminus watched as Chance unfolded himself from a tiny cubbyhole and stood erect, surveying the damage. "Is it safe, are they all dead?" he repeated.

"No, we're far from safe," Terminus muttered, pulling A'soks hand away and spraying the wound with a topical anesthetic.

Cringing, A'sok said nothing, allowing Terminus to apply a dermal patch and fastflesh sealant over the wound.

"At least it's a clean cut," Terminus said, sealing the medkit. "It will hurt like a bastard but you'll be fine."

"Right Bossman. How about shooting me up with some of the good stuff?" A'sok said, throwing him a wink.

"Nope. Need you clear, at least for a bit partner. Even if it hurts, it's better than having you doped up when reinforcements arrive."

"Yeah, I'm not going to be responsible for carting a junkie around," Chance snapped from across the hall. Slowly, Terminus turned. He said nothing for a moment, and the swoop racer began to fidget.

"Help him up. We don't have much time and we need to find out what is so damn important in that room back there that these freaks would set up an E-web to protect it."

Holding the monstrous felinoid at bay, Klux allowed the Force to flow through his body, washing away his fatigue like a cool damp rag. Renewed energy increased his strikes and power, keeping Anjhai off guard.

Focusing, he shut out the other battle raging less than thirty meters away and concentrated on his opponents every movement. Both weapons danced about each other, clashing and occasionally slipping through...not enough to kill, but the smell of burnt tunic and singed flesh was unmistakable.

“How long do you think you can keep this up?” He asked, batting away another lunge at his midsection.

Anjhai didn't respond. The moment he thought the felinoid might speak, he powered in with such ferocity and rage that Klux was caught off guard. Only through the Force was he able to keep the creature at bay, but he was losing ground, the temple floor moving rapidly under his retreating steps.

A raised flagstone, almost imperceptible in the low torchlight, caught the heel of the Jedi's boot and sent him spiraling back into the recessed pit. Landing hard, his head smacked against the pyramid rising from its center. A white burst of pain exploded from the back of his mind, overriding reason and causing the world to waver unsteadily in his vision.

Pulling on his reserves to keep himself awake, Klux looked up from the floor, astonished to see Anjhai merely standing atop the pit, his muzzle curled into a smirk. In his hand dangled a bag. Immediately, Klux grabbed for the bag that was at his waist...and found it gone.

“You may have destroyed the Master Coba, but no matter,” Anjhai said, hefting the bag in his clenched fist. “When I deliver your precious Jedi holocron into Tremayne's hands, its knowledge will be corrupted...perverse...and there's not a thing you can do to stop it!”

Reaching out with the Force, Klux made one last grab for the bag, but Anjhai, anticipating the move, spun and vanished in a whirl of smoke and dust. Cursing, Klux hammered the ground and pulled himself upright.

“I've got the key!” Anjhai screamed from across the room.

Nomi, struggling to keep the Trianni's dancing blades at bay, barely heard him. “Go! Go retrieve the Jedi holocron from the other temple and deliver it to the Master!” she screamed, dodging a shimmering red blade as it incinerated a lock of her raven hair. In the blink of an eye she was alone. Abandoned. And trapped in deadly combat with an opponent who was quickly gaining the advantage.

Backing up, she began cycling through various defensive maneuvers, hoping one would offer up an opening she could exploit; but the Trianni kept coming, matching her every move and driving her further towards the stairs of the temple.

In desperation, she triggered the internal repulsor generator housed in her right hand and forced her palm towards the Trianni. Waves of energy knocked the Trianni back, but he turned the imbalance into a flip and swung around, his weapon severing the repulsor pod housed in her artificial hand.

Surprised, Nomi stumbled backwards as sparks erupted from the damaged hand.

“You’ve tried that trick once before. Does Tremayne not permit you to learn new maneuvers?”

Snarling, she struggled to keep his blades at bay with her one good hand. Her damaged hand still worked, but it’s usefulness as an offensive weapon was gone.

“Shut up!” she hissed.

He was toying with her. Now, it was clear, that his damnable Force was energizing him and allowing him to match her every movement. Anger, hate and fury fueled her, and the darkside offered itself to her. Like a black tide, it washed over her, and suddenly, the Trianni’s movements slowed, his agility equaling that of a normal sentient.

Seizing the moment, she launched a full out assault, her ruby blade knocking his weapons aside and offering her an opportunity. His chest, exposed, beckoned to be cleaved in half.

She made her move, grasping her sabers hilt with both hands and throwing her entire weight behind the killing blow.

Someone had been there before them, more than likely the Ventrals, and had set up a perimeter of glow-lanterns around the spacious room. Stumbling over the e-web powerline, A’sok felt his lunch lurch into his mouth. The medications Vic had allowed numbed a bit of the pain, but their side effects had him on the ropes.

“Geezle... feels like I ate double helpings of Baal’s cooking,” he mumbled, fighting back another surge of bile.

“Yeah, that’s a hoot, here,” Chance said, shoving the Thunderer back into the hackers hand.

In his wavering vision, A’sok stopped short, eyes locking onto the centerpiece of the spacious room.

A white pyramid, its smooth sides etched with deep beautiful scrolling script, dominated the temple. Towering over them, the ten-meter tall monument, partially bathed in shadow, sat quietly amid the low laying layer of smoke drifting in from the corridor.

“Well, that’s hard to miss. What do you think it is?” Chance asked no one in particular. Double-timing it past the two, Terminus made a quick perimeter check of the object. “Got some sort of port back here...looks like a perfect fit for one of those funky keys the Jedi have been carrying around.

“Does a whole lot of good with no key though, right?” Chance barked.

Dropping against the Pyramid, A’sok let his cheek rest against the cool surface. Almost immediately, he felt better. Some of the nausea seemed to subside and the stabbing pain in his shoulder faded slightly. “Bossman, help me get around, there...” With some assistance, Terminus propped him against the back of the pyramid, pulling his laptop free of his gear.

“Let me see if I can jack into this thing, maybe I can find a combination or...something.”

“Better make it quick,” Terminus said, adjusting the audio pickup in his helmet. “We’ve got company.”

He was exposed and had no lightsaber in guard to protect himself. In his minds eye, Baal witnessed his own death as Nomi’s blade sliced downward through him, violently ending his young life.

Without thought or comprehension, he dropped. Not quickly enough to avoid the tip of her saber completely, but enough so that it merely passed along the epidermal layer of his flesh, laying open his chest protector and drawing a line of scorch from his neck to his navel.

Landing hard on his back, he rolled to the side, the stinging along his stomach merely irritating rather than lethal. Completing the roll, he brought “Honor” up and down, severing Nomi’s hand from her wrist in a fine red spray.

Both stopped, and for a moment, simply staring in amazement. The severed appendage hung from the hilt of her weapon, falling to the ground and landing on the flagstones with a sick wet sound.

Dropping her saber, Nomi clutched the cauterized stump, eyes bulging from their sockets.

“My...ha-hand...” she stammered, hitting her knees and cradling the smoldering flesh to her abdomen. Rocking quietly back and forth, her lightsaber lay beside her, burning char into the temples floor before it shut down, blade disappearing into the hilt.

“Klux!” he called over his shoulder, never taking his eyes from the darksider.

“Yeah, right here.” the Jedi was behind him, assisting him to his feet. Shutting down his weapons, he turned his attention to his partner. “I’m going to catch up with Anjhai...if he gets his hands on the Jedi holocron he spoke of, Tremayne will destroy it-or worse.”

Nodding, Klux clipped his weapon to his belt. “Good idea, I’ll...”

“...Going to destroy me. I failed, failed him for the last time.”

Both turned back to Nomi at the sound of her trembling voice. Standing, she retreated from the two, huddling against an outer pillar, lightsaber back in her remaining hand.

“Nomi, this is over. Drop your weapon and come with me, it’s the only way” Klux said, advancing slowly with an outstretched hand.

“No brother. It’s not,” she said quietly, brandishing her lightsaber hilt. Sweat ran from her brow in streams, her raven hair pasted to a face drained of all color. Her eyes, large and frightened, darted between the two Jedi.

“We won’t hurt you, you’re no longer a threat,” Baal offered, trying to keep his tone even.

“You? You think I’m worried about YOU?!?” she screamed. A smile cracked her face and an eerie calm came over her. The trembling stopped, and, propping against the pillar, she straightened to her full height.

“No. Tremayne will kill me for this failure. But he won’t ever get the chance, no one will,” she said, and calmly turned her lightsaber around and ignited it into her stomach.

Slapping new energy cells into his LRB, Terminus hunkered down behind the far edge of the Pyramid and lined the weapon up with the doorway. From somewhere down the corridor, the sound of clinking armor echoed back into the room. The ventrals were coming, and from the sound, lots of them.

“Why don’t we use the E-Web, mow them all down?” Chance asked from his left. The swoop racer was on the opposite corner of the pyramid, the only real cover in the entire room. A’sok, hunkered over his laptop, continued typing away furiously.

“No good, they severed the power line before their suicide run,” Terminus said, his visor trained on the smoke filled hallway. “Nope. We do this the hard way, one spike head at a time.”

In the haze a dark form appeared. Lining up his LRB, Terminus waited for the creature to come into full view. Slowly, he braced the weapon against his shoulder targeting the Ventrals helmet.

The LRB bucked in his hands, the discharge of gas sending two brilliant red bolts of energy from the muzzle of the weapon and into the advancing warrior. Where a head once was, a stump remained, and it's body, jerked violently from the ground, twisted in the air and crashed amid the corpses of the E-Web operators. Silence filled the hall.

Then hell erupted.

A flood of the creatures poured into the narrow corridor all at once, firing volley after volley of energy into the room. Bolts sprayed in every direction, slamming harmlessly into the pyramid or flaring bright as they bored divots into the stone wall.

Chance, letting go with a primal scream, hefted his heavy blaster and took out one of the advancing warriors with a precision shot. The creature dropped, grasping at it's throat, and was just as quickly replaced with another.

Leaning into the pyramid, Terminus unloaded with the LRB, spraying fire back and forth across the narrow opening. Return fire ricocheted off of the pyramid, causing him to duck, but he kept his finger jammed against the LRB's trigger.

Bodies began to fill the opening and the less lucky Ventrals began to be used as steppingstones for the reinforcements still pouring from the corridor. Ever so slowly, they began to make their way into the room.

"S'ok! Any luck yet!?" Terminus shouted, lining up a headshot and vaporizing the helmet of one warrior.

"Fraid' not Bossman. I found an old unused data port in the back of the kayhole, but...no luck in opening this thing....hell for all I know NONE of my translation programs..."

"Keep trying! Although," terminus glanced down at the blinking red light on his energy cell indicator, "in five more minutes it ain't gonna matter."

Baal, having taken off after Anjhai, finally left them alone. Gathering Nomi against his chest, Klux eased his hand over the warm scorch mark on her abdomen. Weakened from his battle with Anjhai, he mustered his energy and let the Force flow into her wound. Slowly, it wove into her body, easing her suffering and slowly mending her damaged organs. After a moment he realized, while she was still severely wounded, it wasn't nearly as bad as he thought.

“The Force has a way of protecting us, even from ourselves,” Da’Jony once told him. Perhaps, subconsciously, Nomi’s body put up some sort of defense mechanism before...

“Let me die.”

The words startled him. Her eyes were opened slightly, black strands of hair matted against her cold pale face.

“I won’t do that. You’re my sister, I won’t let you die,” Klux whispered. He could feel her skin growing warm under his touch, blood vessels healing and mending deep within her.

Gripping his shoulder, her eyes opened fully, and for a long moment she stared at him, saying nothing.

“You must kill me Klux. I’m...” she coughed. A gout of blood splattering against the black leather of her bodysuit. “...tainted. The Dark Side has me, I...”

“Shhh, quiet.” Klux ran his fingers along her brow and pulled some of her hair free from her face. “Just rest Nomi, we’re family. No matter what, we...”

“Family. You don’t know...half of it...” she sputtered. Wiping her mouth clean with his robe, Klux felt uneasiness creep over him.

“What do you mean?”

Eyes glazing over, she spoke slowly, seemingly searching for each word.

“Tremayne...wanted you because of who you were. Our family. The Jedi tradition...”

“What? The Martins? The Martins have no history of Jedi tradition...”

She was already shaking her head back forth. “No...not Martin...Sunrider.”

Pressing the warm flesh of his hand against the pyramid helped. Its cool surface calmed him and his mind seemed to clear for the first time in what seemed like hours. Sure, it was harder to type with just one hand, but if he was to have any success cracking the odd alien script rolling across his screen, he would need to be lucid.

“A’sok!” Terminus screamed from somewhere to his right.

Instinctively, he snatched up his Thunderer and scanned both sides of the pyramid.

Far to his right, obscured by a noxious haze of smoke, Terminus was locked in hand to hand combat with a Ventral; repeatedly, the creature head-butted the bounty hunter, pounding dents into the transparasteel helmet with his own helmets lethal spikes. To his far left, Chance, illuminated by the red blaster fire striking around him, unloaded with a retrieved Ventral LRB, using it to mow down...something. A'sok couldn't tell from his seated spot against the pyramid. Resounding snarls and screams filled the room, some loud enough to equal the powerful blaster fire that filled the temple with a constant roar.

Without hesitation, A'sok leaned back, turning the Thunderer towards Terminus and fired. The thick bolt blasted into the Ventrals' ribcage, directly below the armored chest plate. Gasping, the Ventral clutched at the smoldering hole in his bodysuit, screaming in agony.

Seizing the opportunity, Terminus moved with lightning speed and snapped its neck, dropping the lifeless corpse to the ground.

"Thanks partner," Terminus called from the end of the pyramid. Snatching his LRB from the ground where he discarded it, he checked the charge and slowly advanced out of A'soks line of sight.

The firing had stopped, and silence crept into the temple. No more blaster bolts whistled into the room, and A'sok was finally able to turn his attention back to his laptop. "No, prob, not like I had anything else going on, you know, besides trying to save the galaxy."

Bundling his robes about him, Baal charged into the stinging sandstorm that raged across the shifting dunes of Farzhul. Far ahead, the ghostly mirage of the main pyramid faded in and out of view, its base totally obscured by the cascading waves of sand.

Muscles pulling and straining against the powerful winds, his breath came in short hot gasps and his lungs felt as if they were on fire. Slowly, albeit noticeably, Farzhul was proving to be as formidable a foe as the Sith. The planet was wearing him down, the fine sand, when not shredding his robes and slicing into his fur, pulled at his powerful legs. The more he tried to move, the slower the going.

Somewhere ahead, Baal sensed Anjhai struggling along as well. Focusing on the Darksiders general direction, Baal shut everything from his mind but the pursuit. Letting the Force guide him, he leaned forward into the storm, his legs pumping like great hydraulic pistons.

After what seemed like an eternity, the largest pyramid loomed before him. Gripping the lowest foundation block, he pulled himself up, boots scrambling along its grainy surface. Glancing up, he threw himself flush to the side as a great chunk of the pyramid smashed into where he was hanging just a second before.

Above, Anjhai's lightsaber glowed bright amid the blowing world of sand and glass, letting loose with another chunk of masonry; this he easily avoided and, ducking his head, charged up the side of the pyramid, igniting "Strength" along the way.

The Terminus helmet pulled free and Vic drew in a smoky, acrid breath of air. "Damn! It smells like a scorched Gundark in here!" he said, choking back his revulsion. Before him, the carnage of the battle laid itself out like an autopsy subject.

Strewn across the temple floor lay dozens of smoldering corpses piled atop each other. Here and there a body moved; a stunned Ventral trying to pull himself from under the weight of his comrade's body, or a wounded warrior losing his fight with death. The perimeter glow-lanterns, once a soothing blue, now sat spattered with deep green Ventral blood.

Advancing over the mounds of Ventral bodies, Chance nodded. "Yeah, these guys stink when they burn." Stopping, the swoop racer fired several bolts into a writhing body. A small fire caught on the corpse and Chance, transfixed by the flame, smiled as he watched it burn.

Uneasiness settled in Vic's stomach. "Uh, would you mind saving your 'crazy time' for after the mission?"

"These guys deserve whatever they get." He fired another round into the body and took a moment to wipe the blood from his boots onto the back of another prone Ventral. "It's like walking through a blood stream."

"Right." Vic shouldered his LRB. "On that happy note, I'm going to recon and see if we have any more heading this way." Wiping his brow dry, Vic was stunned to see blood smeared across his palm.

"What the hell..." looking down, he noticed a small puncture hole in the Terminus helmet, directly above the visor.

Anger surged through him and he dropped the helmet, leveling his LRB at the nearest writhing Ventral. A pull of the trigger later the corpse, minus a head and shoulders, pumped a flow of green blood onto the ground.

Methodically, he visually searched the room and eliminated every moving Ventral warrior. Several minutes later, he stood, hands trembling and adrenaline pumping madly through his veins.

Reaching into the mounds of flesh and gore he pulled several bloodied, unused energy cells from the utility belts of dead warriors. Slapping several into his LRB, he turned to see Chance and A'sok watching him.

"Have you cracked that code yet?" He snarled at A'sok.

The hacker, taken aback, shook his head. "Uh, not yet. Heard the firing, thought you might need help."

“I don’t. You get that cracked, you,” he jabbed a finger at Chance, “are on clean up duty.” Stepping across the backs of the dead warriors, he stopped, glancing back for the Terminus helmet.

“Chance! Where is my helmet!?!” he shouted, kicking over several corpses. If he had lost it...if he had to pick through this muck to find it...

“You’re wearing it.”

Terminus stopped. Pulling the durasteel from his head, the world lost its red tint and took on its normal, dreary, unremarkable hues.

“Yeah...of course I am.” Hands trembling, Vic took a moment to catch his breath and latch the helmet onto his belt. He hadn’t remembered putting it on, didn’t realize he was even wearing it...

Snorting, Chance went back to inspecting the Ventral bodies. As Vic headed into the hallway, he heard the swoop racer mumble something about “crazy time.” Forcing himself to let it go, he shouldered his weapon and focused on the dark corridor before him.

Following the scent of battle, Baal navigated the corridors easily. Someone had ignited torches along their path and after vaulting over the scorched wreckage of several droid sentries, he had no doubt he was headed in the right direction.

Speeding full tilt, he had no time to react when Anjhai’s heel caught him hard across the chin.

Reeling, he slammed violently into the masonry, one of his front fangs shattering as his maw struck the ground; something cracked in his shoulder and bones that shouldn’t have been moving were. “Strength” skittered from his grasp down the corridor and out of view. Pain battled its way through his senses and his vision blurred, the torch lit hallway wavering before him.

“That was much too easy, Jedi,” the golden Srros’Tok taunted, igniting his weapon with a “snap-hiss”. Towering above him, Baal had one last chance to stop the killing blow.

Struggling through his pain, he jerked “Honor” from his belt, but the pain and fatigue of traversing Farzhul’s brutal landscape prevented him from bringing it into guard. The world swam before him and Anjhai, sneering, kicked his only remaining weapon out of his grasp.

Twirled the hilt in his hand, the darksider prepared to plant the blade into Baal’s chest. Through his pain and fatigue, Baal felt Anjhai dripping with revenge and pride, consumed by the thought of being able to run through the Jedi.

“You never thought it would end this way, did you?” Anjhai asked in broken basic.

“Had a pretty good idea, yeah,” a voice echoed in the corridor.

Suddenly filling the corridor, a roar of blaster energy was followed a millisecond later by an explosion of light and fire that exited Anjhais chest, spraying a rain of red mist into the air.

Dropping his saber, the darksider fell to his knees; bulging eyes stared at the charred hole encompassing much of his upper torso, his mouth moving wordlessly in pain and surprise.

Staring in disbelief, Baal released the breath he'd been holding as Vic emerged from the darkness, planting a boot into the creatures back and kicking him off to the side.

“You Jedi aren't ever going to kick ass by just laying around ya know,” Vic said, shouldering his LRB and extending a gloved hand towards him.

The last line of code complete, A'sok jabbed a finger into the laptop and waited for the fruits of his labor.

Since entering the temple he'd been relentlessly taxing every hacking trick he knew. Looking for secret codes, back doors, anything that would give him information on what the towering obelisk was meant for or it's purpose was.

Now, watching the blinking cursor on his datascreen, his heart jumped with it's every flash.

A moment later, red script, matching that which was carved into the monolith, scrolled across the screen. Beneath him, the floor began to tremble, the sound of grating rock and sand gradually filling the small room.

“Not good!” Chance shouted from somewhere in the room.

Glancing between his comp and the structure, a sense of dread washed over the young hacker. A sharp hiss jerked his attention to the top of the pyramid; there, amidst the crumbled remains of its tip, hovered a small cube glowing with an unnatural white light.

“I've got it! I've got it!” Chance screamed from somewhere on the far side of the room.

Shaking violently, the room began to disintegrate; sandstone blocks and stonework collapsed in on part of the room, revealing open sky beyond. Light and dust gusted into the dim room, nearly blinding the hacker while small bits of glass rained against his helmet.

Dread grasped A'soks chest and a momentary flash filled his mind: The Red-Haired swoop racer, clad in black, gripping the wondrous object hovering ten meters above him with evil fervor.

Pulling himself from the ground, A'sok forced his weary body to climb. Every muscle in his body screamed refusal but he fought through it; finding handholds among the pyramids etched Jedi script, he slowly ascended the structures still cool face.

The world fell out from under Vic. Hitting the ground, he watched in horror as the floor and portion of the corridor tilted wildly, then disappeared to reveal Farzhul and a steep drop beyond. Leaving a trail of red, Anjhai's corpse slid to the edge, hanging for a moment before it and the canvas bag hanging from it's hip dropped away into the blinding light.

"Lets go!" Baal screamed from somewhere and jerked the outlaw to his feet. Both scrambled back down the remainder of the corridor, as great blocks of sandstone crumbled and fell around them.

"Where's Klux?" Vic screamed from behind the swiftly moving Trianni. He had to force his legs to pump madly just to try to keep up.

"Back in the other temple with his sister, she ran herself through," Baal answered, never turning around.

"Sister...Damn," he muttered as both scrambled from the dark crumbling corridor into the upper temple, now filled with brilliant Farzhul sunlight and gusting sandstorm. In the center of the room, amid the crumbling floor and disintegrating walls, Chance stood atop the pyramid. Ten meters in the air, a glowing cube hovered just centimeters above his outstretched hand.

"The holocron!" Baal screamed. "Chance, don't..."

"I've got it! It's mine now!" Chance screamed above the chaos of the rushing wind and sand. Eyes transfixed, he grasped the small treasure.

Topping the opposite side of the monolith, A'sok appeared. The hacker, on unsteady legs, lunged for the swoop racer, knocking him to the floor of the summit. In a wide arc the holocron fell, rebounding off of the side of the pyramid, and into Baals outstretched hands.

Atop the pyramid, the hacker and swoop racer struggled. Ejecting a harpoon from his line slinger, Vic pulled himself quickly to the top.

Pinned under Chance, A'sok was fighting a losing battle. His face was a raw bleeding mess, and the swoop racer, hands drenched in the hackers blood was drawing back for

another solid punch. Tackling him to the ground, Vic's head smacked hard against the pyramid's cool surface.

As consciousness left him, the whine of a ship's engine approaching followed him into darkness.

EPILOGUE

The chemical stink of antiseptic brought him back to consciousness, but he hesitated in opening his eyes. A dull throb pumped blood through his temples, and he spent minutes simply waiting to make sure it was all staying inside of his body.

Cracking one eye open, Vic let his vision adjust and stared impassively at a rough adobe ceiling, crisscrossed with various wiring and conduit. Following the path of a twisted batch of cable with his eyes, his gaze lazily rolled about the room.

It was as unremarkable as the ceiling. Carved into the walls, small nooks and cubbyholes held various bottles and bundles of cloth. He recognized med packs and jars of commercial disinfectant among some of the items stored in the storage nooks. Lying horizontally on what felt like a padded gurney, he noticed a meter tall glow spear to his right casting the room in a dim blue light.

Raising his head, pain exploded from his scalp, distorting the room and sending tendrils of nausea wrapping his organs in a tight knot.

"It's best not to move your head...at least for a while," someone said from behind. Closing his eyes, he let the waves of pain pass, reopening them to find Perfo at his side.

"Thought..." Vic tried but his lips were dry and cracked, the words struggling up his throat like a sand crusted dewback. "Thought I was in Imperial hands till I saw this place."

"Yeah, it's not much to look at," Perfo said, feeding a thin straw into Vic's mouth. Cool delicious water raced into his throat, easing everything on the way down. "But," his former medic continued, glancing around, "it's available and stocked, so we use it."

Vic let his eyes search for windows but found none. "Where are we?"

“BL320. The planet doesn’t have a real name. It’s more or less a way station for spacers who need to fuel and move on. No real Imp presence and not much of a town to speak of either.”

“How long have I been out? How is everyone? We lose anybody? What, where did you...” Vic had to stop, the questions caused his head to throb harder.

“Whoa, LT, just take it easy,” Perfo smiled and ran a med scanner across his forehead. “You’ve still got some irregular brain activity, but I think you had that before the concussion.” He crossed his arms and leaned against the gurney. “We showed up when you guys were about to take a nose dive from the top of that pyramid. It took some fancy flying, but we managed to avoid an Imperial Star Destroyer on our way planet-side. Thanks to our sensor mask, they never even knew we were there.” He shook his head as if replaying the scene in his mind.

“There were zero casualties...but your hacker and that red haired kid were in a pretty bad way. In fact,” he nodded towards a door set into the wall on Vic’s left side, “they are all taking a nice bacta soak for a few days.”

“Klux?” Vic asked, taking another hit of water.

“Fine. Araf picked him up and directed us to get you guys. He had some dark haired woman with him...they are both in bacta as well. He had some cuts and scrapes and she,” his voiced trailed off. “She was in pretty bad shape.”

Lying there, Vic let his eyes shut. The information tumbled around in his head and he felt tired, wanting to go to sleep, but he had more questions. He fought to stay conscious. “How did you find us?”

Pulling a blanket up to the outlaw’s chin Perfo grinned. “Change of orders. When we bugged out of there we made a direct beeline here, that was a few days ago.” Perfo turned and headed for the door. “When you wake up I’ll tell you all about a big victory the Rebellion just won. It was at a little moon called Endor.”

Nodding, Vic felt darkness envelop him and fell into it willingly.

Rubbing her hand along the cool smooth glass, Deuce gently pressed her cheek against the bacta tank, closing her eyes.

“I know you can’t hear me. I know you re just floating there, lost in a dream,” she whispered, turning her head and looking into the clear blue liquid.

Amid streams of bubbles A'sok floated above her, limp body bobbing up and down in a gentle weightless rhythm. Scars crisscrossed his chest, and his face, what could be seen above the tanks breath mask, was a distorted purple mess of bruises and cuts. Even if he were awake, she doubted he would be able to see out of his swollen black eyes.

"I want you to know I forgive you. I mean..." she pulled away from the glass and gathered her crew jacket around her. The room was kept frigid and dark to protect the delicate medical equipment and to conserve energy from the buildings already taxed power generators. "I forgive you but that doesn't mean I can forget what has happened. You said some cruel thing, things I know you didn't mean."

She pulled an empty cargo crate up to the tank and stared at his pale body floating amid the bluish bacta. Tubes snaked from the top of the vertical tank into the breathing apparatus and a pair of white insulated trunks, wrapped about his waist that monitored his condition.

Stroking her lekku, she stared blankly at the adobe walls and floor. The room, cold and small, was just big enough for the tank, its monitoring station and a few supply crates. After checking on his condition, the attending 21-B medical droid moved off into another part of the rebellion safehouse, more than likely to check on another of A'sok teammates.

"I was hoping the next time we met up we could talk, but I didn't think it would be like this."

She watched him turn slightly in the tank. "You thought it was a big joke. You thought I was being silly to worry about you," the words caught in her throat and a tear threatened to race from the corner of her eye.

"And now you're floating there, almost dead. For what? Some stupid piece of rock or...something." She wiped at her eyes and sniffled quietly. Anger and sadness beat away at her heart and she slowed her breathing and focused her eyes on his face. Beyond the slight distortions in the sub-par bacta tank his skin seemed to wrinkle and move on its own.

"I love you A'sok. More than your hacker mind can even fathom...but I want a life. A real life, free from this hate, death and violence. You showed me that I could have that, but if you aren't going to be the one to give it to me," she stopped. His bruised eyes, still shut, fluttered slightly.

"I'll have that life A'sok, with or without you."

Behind her the door creaked open. Spinning, she instinctively drew the back of her hand across her cheek, eliminating any physical trace of emotion.

Light flooded the room and Perfo stepped in, leaning causally against the doorframe.

"How you doing?"

She allowed an icy chill to creep into her voice letting him know she was ready to talk business. "Fine. He should be conscious in another day or so. I was just checking his vitals."

Nodding, he stared at the bacta tank for a moment then back. "We got orders from up on high. They're dispatching us to Endor. They want us to check out some of the deserts and mountain ranges to make sure there aren't any left over Imperial surprises for our little furry friends," he watched her for a reaction. As always, she gave none.

"When do we bug out?" her voice remained even.

"Twelve hours. Vic is awake and lucid, so he can handle things here," he stepped into the room, letting the door swing shut and returning them to semi-darkness. Dropping onto a crate adjacent to hers, he leaned forward, elbows on knees. "You can always call off from this one. Hob, Rontack and I could handle it."

"Why would I want to do that?"

He shrugged, tossing a nod towards the tank. "To watch over him. He won't be awake by the time we leave and it might be a month or two we are out of touch." The arching purple tattoo over his right eye seemed to glow in the blue light; small triangles mixed with half circles followed the curve from the bottom corner of his eye to the middle of his forehead.

"I'm fine. I've never dropped a mission before and I'm not going to start now. While I'm on this team you can count on me," she said.

Perfo nodded and leaned back. "I don't doubt that for a second. I just wanted you to know the team wouldn't think any less of you if you wanted to take time to handle any...personal issues."

"The team might not, but I would."

They locked eyes and after a moment Perfo nodded. "I guess you would." Standing, he glanced one last time at the bacta tank and headed for the door. Stopping, he turned back as the door creaked open, flooding the room once again with bright white light. "We're out in 12 standard, make sure your gear is stowed on the ship in eleven." Without another word he was gone, the door shutting all the way returned her to the darkness and pale blue glow that coated everything in the room.

"You're a good fighter and calm under pressure, we could sure use you," Vic said, watching the twin mauve suns of BL320 chase each other towards the horizon. Atop the safe house, he was able to see several dozen similar rooftops and buildings arranged in a loose half circle that made up the town known as "Crescent City".

Beside him Araf stood straight and tall, eyes locked on some distant point beyond the horizon.

"I appreciate the offer Vic, and don't take this personally, but," he looked back towards the roof's access hatch, "I don't think I could crew for long with your Jedi."

“Heh, yeah, I kinda figured you would say that.” Popping open a can of fizz, Vic enjoyed BL320’s cool evening breeze as it drifted across the two. Somewhere nearby someone had an evening meal cooking, the rich aroma of stew and grilled meat sending his stomach into a flip-flop.

“I’ll tell ya what Araf, I don’t get it. They seem intelligent...but the minute any of this ‘Force Stuff’ comes up, the second they get a lead on it, everything goes to hell,” he shook his head and jammed his hand into his khaki trousers. “It never seems to work out. I just don’t understand, I guess.”

“I don’t think they do either. They abuse the power and ability they have and have no comprehension of their importance. They waste their potential...that, I cannot respect.”

Shrugging Vic watched an avian in the distance make lazy circles in the sky. “Can’t argue with you there pal. But I respect your decision...we can drop you off wherever you need on the way back to Garnib,” he snickered. “Not like we don’t have to cross the entire freaking galaxy to get home anyway.”

“I would appreciate that Vic,” turning, Araf extended a massive hand towards him. “You are a brave warrior, I will look upon the time we have fought together with great fondness.”

Staring open mouthed at the gesture, Vic nodded and clasped the Coynites’ hand in his own. “We wouldn’t have made it out alive without you. You ever need me, all you need to do is call.”

“Nomi’s gone.”

Klux new what Baal was going to say even before the words left the Trianni’s mouth. Nodding, he continued to let his legs dangle from the empty cargo crate in the hold of the Skullduggery.

“I know. I felt her absence a bit ago,” he ran a hand through his tangled hair. “I’d taken a nap and when I awoke I sensed an emptiness, as if I had lost something and couldn’t remember what.”

Leaping effortlessly onto another crate, Baal fixed the Jedi with an intent stare.

“We should go after her.”

“No, I’ve already thought about that. She’s got a lot of things to work out for herself and the last thing she needs is a pair of babysitters watching her every move. Plus...” he crossed his arms, “I don’t think we should expose Chance to her, I don’t think he’s over his sister’s death and I wouldn’t want to risk the fireworks.”

Baal didn’t waver. “Still, she could be trouble down the road. Darksiders don’t change as easily as you might think,” he said, pulling the tiny white holocron from his robes. The smooth cube shimmered with incandescent light, catching and reflecting it back out in thin streams that struck the far walls of the cargo bay.

Klux watched him turn the item over in his hand, running a furry blue finger along its contours.

“It will be good to have an actual Jedi Master train us together.”

Silently, Baal palmed the holocron back into his robes. “Yes. Well, we’ll discuss specifics at a later date, this item is too powerful to be handled by just anyone.”

“Specifics?” Klux dropped from the crate and turned to the large Trianni who remained perched. “We both fought for that. It’s a tool to teach with, it should be available to all of us.”

“I’m not sure Chance is ready. A lightsaber is one thing, but a holocron...”

Anger picked at Klux’s mind. “That’s a load of drek! Maybe we should let the holocron decide what’s best for Chance.”

“Perhaps later. Too much was sacrificed and too many died to foolishly abuse this artifact.”

“Exactly! Lot’s of people died because of this ridiculous prophecy. In the end, what the hell did we really accomplish?” Klux stared at Baal waiting for an answer.

“We fulfilled the prophecy. We saved the Galaxy by stopping the release of Master Cobra. We...”

“That’s garbage! The prophecy spoke of light and darkness, events that would take place on two opposite ends of the galaxy. Vic told me the Rebellion destroyed the Emperor and Darth Vader...that hardly sounds like the “dark” end of the prophecy stick to me!”

Baal stared at the holocron and back to Klux. “But we took the holocron! The Darksiders were destroyed! Good won out over Evil! What more do you need?!?” the Trianni shouted, voice reverberating throughout the hold.

“Da’Jony is dead, so is Jospi. A’sok and Chance almost killed each other and Vic almost had a premature lobotomy,” Klux said, shaking his head, “No, ‘Good’ didn’t claim the day on Farzhul Balthazar, ‘Good’ just got lucky.”

“Then what? What is going to happen? When is the Darkside going to emerge and exact its revenge?” Baal asked.

“I don’t know. But something bad is going to come out of this. Things never go like we plan.”

“Of course, whatever you say Master Jedi,” Baal snapped, dropping to the floor and making as if to leave. Dropping from his own crate, Klux immediately blocked his way.

“I would like to see it,” he said extending his hand.

The Trianni’s maw curled into a smirk. “I’m sure you would.”

“Now.”

Both stared at one another for an eternity. Resentment and distrust flowed from the Trianni, but Klux held his ground. Grudgingly, Baal removed the holocron and dropped it into Klux’s hand.

“Thanks,” the Jedi offered.

Still staring, Baal nodded slowly. “Don’t get too comfortable with it,” he snarled, and brushing past Klux, exited the hold.

For the third night in a row, nightmares visited him. Stirring from a deep sleep, evil murmurs followed him into the waking world.

“Quiet! Get out of my head! Let me sleep!” Chance hissed into the darkness of his cabin. No sound returned back to him except for the hydraulic hiss of machinery as the Skullduggery chugged through space towards Garnib.

He knew what caused the dreams.

Turning over, he shoved his hand deep into the padding of his pillow. There, amidst the coarse foam insulation, his hand touched the smooth cold of the black Sith Key Klux brought back from Farzhul.

Tossed haphazardly into his cabin the Jedi hadn’t even noticed it missing, instead focusing all of his energy on his sister and arguing with Baal.

“Are you still there?” he whispered to it.

No response came. Sometimes it did, and sometimes it didn't. Master Coba was wise and patient, and, amid his whispered promises and instructions had already shown more trust and faith in Chance than the Jedi ever had.

Sure, Coba was a Sith, but Chance was smart and he knew once he had what he wanted, once he was good enough with a lightsaber, he would space the key, sending Coba to float through the darkness of space for eternity.

Chance was smart...smarter than the Jedi realized. Once he was done he would not only be the smartest but the most powerful Jedi on the ship. Then they would see things HIS way.

But it would take time. That was fine, he was patient. Burrowing his face into the pillow, he let his fingers creep along the smooth surface. Through the Force he could feel its cold dark energy, gliding along its exterior like tiny tendrils of lightning.

“Yes, just a little time, a little training, and you will be the most powerful of all Jedi...” the dark voice seductively whispered in his mind. Slowly, Chance fell to sleep, no longer plagued by dark dreams or the uncertainty of his future.

The End

The End

