

Episode XII: Loss and Sacrifice

Chance Mulgrew sat quietly in the corner of the “Cold Stop Cantina” trying to decide on whom he would kill.

Nestled in a large swefe, a cavern burrowed into the glacier by Garnibs indigenous residents the Balinaka, the Cold Stop bustled with activity. Shaped in an ovoid, several nooks and cubbyholes sprung from the main chamber, providing its customers with varying degrees of privacy.

Despite the swefes being crafted from the thousands of glaciers dotting Garnibs surface, they were surprisingly warm, thanks to a series of heated springs linked together throughout the underground communal area and the various private homes and businesses.

In almost every home and business a warm humid mist hung in the air. For newcomers to Garnib, the atmosphere took some getting used to, and some species used to extremely warm dry climates never acclimated to its environment. Other species, such as the Mon Calamarians and Quarren, enjoyed the moisture and warmth, to the point where they even set up small communities amongst the Balinaka and Vernols.

“Who dies today? Who dies today?” he mumbled to himself. From his single nook he gently caressed the red satchel sitting before him on the sculpted ice table. Inside, hidden from the rest of the planet, his dark secret taunted him with silence.

From his cubbyhole he watched the Cold Stops clientele laughing and drinking, enjoying the wailing tunes of a particularly talented Zeltron female, clad in little more than a strip of orange cloth that wrapped around her supple frame.

Dominating the crowd, a group of Balinaka swooned and sang along, occasionally drowning out the singer as they pointed their black noses skyward. The tall white furred bipeds were enjoying themselves, and Chance felt a momentary pang of guilt strike home in his chest.

“Kill them weakling, kill them all,” a harsh whisper echoed in his mind. Master Royyod Coba could speak to him whenever he wanted now, he didn’t even need to be in the same room as the key to hear the Dark Lords thoughts.

“I can’t. They are just having a good time, not hurting anyone,” Chance replied, slowly drawing his hand away from the bag. The bloodlust he felt a moment ago seemed to be waning, and the thought of randomly killing someone seemed wrong.

“You’re weak. Just like your precious Jedi Masters. Unable to test your full potential and unwilling to make sacrifices when the time comes,” Cobra taunted, “That is why you will always be nothing more than an underling, a servant, never a Master.”

“Shut up!” Chance growled. “I’m not like them! They...they can’t make decisions, they don’t even know how to train me.” For the past several weeks the Jedi had all but ignored him. After the skirmish with A’sok on Fazhul that put the hacker in bacta for several days, Raptor Squad had all but disowned Chance. Again, he found himself unwanted and ignored. Meals were taken alone, with his only company coming in the form of his private teachings with Master Cobra.

Several times the Sith Master had manifested himself into a red spectral older man in robes who instructed and taught Chance in the dark arts. For days on end they would train, in secret, in a heated cave not far from JIE, with the Sith Master appearing visually for only a few hours at a time.

Chance continued watching the Balinaka and began scanning the rest of the crowd.

Directly across from him, nestled in a shallow nook, a pair of Vernols enjoyed a meal of Garnib seafood. In stark contrast to the tall thick frames of the Balinaka, Vernols were short, green skinned amphibians with comically full lips and a pair of intelligent eyes set upon a wide head.

Clutched against the female’s bosom, a baby Vernol watched the Zeltron singer, eyes wide with wonder.

“Do it.”

Chance tried to shut out the command. “No, someone else,” he pleaded.

“You are weak and a waste of potential,” Cobas voiced dripped contempt, “If you will not obey me then I will not teach you. Go back to your ineffectual Jedi and your lonely nights of silence.”

Cobas word shit home and Chance reeled at the thought of losing the rush of power he gained whenever Cobra taught him. Hands trembling, he focused on the family across from him. The male, a rotund Vernol with a goofy grin and bright green eyes laughed heartily, dripping sauce on his magenta waistcoat. The female wore a dress similar in color, speckled with a light coating of Garnib crystal dust. The child, still mesmerized by the gyrations of the Balinaka and several human artisans, wore a jumper that matched his parent garish ensemble.

Senses heightened, Chance could feel their emotions; happiness, elation and comfort roll across him as he tapped into the Force.

Reaching out with what his Dark Master had taught him, he felt every breath they took, could subtly feel the beating of their hearts...focusing, he imagined slowly squeezing the mass of muscle nestled in the fathers chest cavity.

“No. The Mother. And Child. Leave the male alive.”

Chance froze, “I can’t do that!” Across the way the Father Vernol rubbed his chest lightly, concern clouding his jolly features.

“They die, and he suffers a pain greater than death, it is the way of the Darkside.” Concealing his hand behind the bag, Chance focused, tears emerging from his eyelids and rolling onto his flushed cheeks. Redirecting his energy, he focused on the slightly stronger heartbeat of the woman and the faint triphammer of the child.

In one violent motion he clenched his fist shut, as a rush of power surged through his body. Trembling, he leaned back, breath escaping in a powerful gasp.

A scream pierced the Cold Stop and the music abruptly halted, with the mass of patrons turning in one motion towards the commotion. Trembling violently, Chance forced himself to calm down, hazarding a glance across the room.

Kneeling on the ground, the large Vernol crouched over the body of his wife and child, jabbered incoherently to the assembling crowd while he gently shook both limp bodies. The female lay on her stomach, with the child lying just out of her reach face down. Her face was turned towards chance, her eyes, shocked open by the violent grip of death, stared accusingly at the trembling swoop racer.

Forcing himself to move, Chance gathered up his satchel, and hurriedly pulled on his parka. Cutting through the confusion towards the entrance, Chance dipped his head and wiped the tears from his face without looking back.

Royyod Coba silently laughed to himself. Trapped within the flawless black and purple marbled walls of his prison, a Sith Master in his position would normally have little to be jovial about, but just minutes before, his charge, a simpleton by the name of Chance Mulgrew had taken the life of two beings at his beckoning, and surprisingly, it took little effort on Coba’s part.

And that was key, because while Coba had power, and could use and manifest the dark side of the Force, it drained him. Shutting out the external stimuli he normally tapped into from his prison, Coba lost himself in the cold darkness, allowing the dark side to warm him and rejuvenate him. Mulgrew was running now, back to the cold hidden cavern they’d been using as their training ground. Shortly, Coba would use some of his darkside energy, not much, but just enough to warm Mulgrew with the fiery burn of power. And, like a narcotic, the young man would drink it in, bask in its warmth, and then thirst for more, and find in himself that he is willing to do things for more-things like killing a wife and child, or, when the time is right, killing his pathetic Jedi Masters.

Snickering, Coba allowed himself to reminisce, to think back several thousand years, before his imprisonment, before his banishment, to a time when he ruled armies of dark warriors that marched across the planet Farzhul, willing to do his bidding at a whisper. Armored dark Sith warriors, tested in the fires of many battles with the minions of other

sith lords, who, ultimately, all fell to Cobra's feet. Upon his throne of darkness and blood he took their souls, drinking in their power and casting off their vessels like so much trash. He possessed power, raw, pure and black as night. It coursed through his veins, wrapping his body in a euphoric cocoon of energy that allowed him to end lives with a glimmer of a thought and drive his minions like an unstoppable wave of death across the planet and the galaxy.

But, Cobra mused to himself in his dark cold prison, that kind of power has a price. It wasn't long before the Jedi felt him, felt his power and came looking to snuff him out like a flame. Arriving in their fine perfect ships with their bright robes and flawless souls, the Jedi Knights arrived on Farzhul, expecting Cobra to roll over and cower at their magnificence, as other sin the galaxy had

But Cobra knew charlatans and posers when he saw them, and these light-side protectors were nothing more than diluted versions of his Sith counterparts, afraid to use their full potential and scared to call upon the real power in the galaxy-the Dark Side.

The battle raged for months, with both sides taking heavy casualties and mountains of corpses covering the Farzhul landscape. Finally, the Jedi Dogs managed to infiltrate Cobra's palace, eliminating his minions and destroying his body. But the Jedi had done their homework, and, knowing that Cobra was powerful enough to skip from his body into a host, used one of their most powerful Jedi to trap his soul into this forsaken prison, where he lay in wait for millennia.

But, Cobra was patient. He knew that someday the Jedi would fall, and it would be only a matter of time before a weak-minded Jedi or force user would find him, and fall into his trap. The timing had to be right, the prospective vessel had to be just powerful enough in the Force that he could manipulate, but not so strong that his will would destroy Cobra. And when the bumbling Jedi released him on Farzhul just a few months before, he had his opportunity.

An opportunity that was short lived, for the only vessels available to him were all too powerful, and he was weakened by his release. And when the Jedi Klux Martin struck at his crypt, it forced him back into what was once his prison. Lying low, the absent minded Jedi simply tossed what he thought was a useless artifact into his cabin and forgot about it.

The absurdity of that one action still amused Cobra, who simply had to lay in wait as an angry, vulnerable and easily manipulated Force User found him. And in no time the darkside offered him Chance Mulgrew, and the opportunity to begin plotting his course for revenge.

Nighttime on Garnib was generally quiet. With the exception of a yearly festival, there was little to do on the planet, especially once the populace turned in for what passed as

evening. Far above the village, snow gently fell through a massive crease in the glacier, gently drifting into the communal area and coating everything in a fine white blanket. Balthazar Cochroth watched the snow with indifference. Sitting in the Petit' Vernol, a tapcafe he'd frequented ever since sitting down on the planet, he reminisced about the days when a Garnib snowfall instilled in him a sense of wonder.

The galaxy changed that. Raptor Squad changed that. After bouncing from planet to planet and seeing things other beings could only imagine, the sight of a gentle snowfall was old hat; simply a reason to wear warmer clothes and find a spot to sit where you couldn't get wet.

"Would be nice if they could just seal up this entire planet," he grouched to himself. At this time of night the Petit' Vernol was practically empty, the candlelit interior occupied by only two others- a mildly intoxicated Quarren and a bleary-eyed Balinaka bartender named "Junroo".

Before him two large leather-bound tomes lay open, exposing Jedi lore and knowledge scribbled on the fine parchment in some long forgotten language. Sipping from his mug, Baal let the warm spicy concoction trace a line of heat into his stomach. Through the large picture window his booth was situated against he continued to watch the snowfall.

Across the circular commune he could glimpse the top of Jaded Ivory Enterprises, his teammate Vic's shipping company.

The building was several stories tall and it's glass semi-circle exterior was set into the side of the glacier, while it's interior ran throughout the glacier itself. JIE was practically a fully functioning community unto itself, with a cafeteria, gymnasium and other manner of accoutrements available to its employees, and of course Raptor Squad.

Puling his attention back to the books, Baal tried to focus on the foreign scrawl, hoping he could identify some, any, of the archaic glyphs that marched across the pages.

While futile, he hoped to find some wisdom on how to handle the recent situation that had developed between he and Klux.

Just over a month back both had fought a pair of Darksiders on the planet Farzhul. Amidst the sand and blood of that horrific battle, they obtained the most prized possession a Jedi could possess- a holocron.

Within the small ivory cube's intricate framework lay a vast storehouse of Jedi knowledge; teachings, lessons, observations, everything a Jedi had learned throughout his life, condensed into one small vessel, so that future generations could share and benefit from the knowledge.

But that wasn't happening.

Instead of the elation and joy that they should be experiencing, Klux seemed to be devouring the holocron, absorbing the teachings in a ravenous rush for more knowledge and mastery over the Force. Baal had confronted him about it, but Klux showed little interest in discussing the matter.

So Baal hid it.

At first it seemed to work. Baal would take the holocron away from JIE and spend a few days in intense training, returning the holocron and tuning out Klux's protests.

Unfortunately, Klux was able to track down the holocron through the Force, and once that happened they were back to square one.

Despite the difficulties with Klux, Baal felt the holocron issue was the least of their worries. Their Padwan, Chance, was growing stronger in the Force, and would soon need

the knowledge and guidance of the holocron as well. But would he understand the teachings? Was he ready for the power the holocron could impart? The issue of training Chance was another hurdle that he and Klux never seemed to be able to clear, and as a result Chance's training had ground to a standstill.

Ever since the events on Farzhul, including the violent exchange between Chance and A'sok, the young swoop racer had grown reclusive, taking frequent trips away from the team's base of operations at JIE and disappearing for days on end. With his training stagnated, and he and Klux never able to get along long enough to establish a routine for teaching the younger man, the young swoop racer had degenerated into a sullen curiosity that was spied occasionally creeping around the headquarters. It was only in the last few days that Baal realized he hadn't seen Chance in over a week.

"Maybe that's for the best," he murmured, staring deep into the flickering candlelight of his table's iron centerpiece.

"Perhaps it is."

The voice startled him and he glanced around, expecting to see Junroo hovering nearby with a refill for his drink. Still parked behind the bar, the Balinaka paid him no mind, his white furred head bobbing in tune with a song only he could hear. The Quarren was gone, leaving Baal the only customer remaining in the tapcafe'.

"Must be the drink," he smiled to himself and took another sip. As the liquid washed down his throat, he thought back to how hiding the holocron never worked; Klux was always able to track it down.

"I wish I could hide it so he couldn't find it. Just, put it somewhere safe for a while, just long enough so this unrest between us could cool down," he mumbled. Dropping his head in a large hand he returned his stare to the book open before him. Surprisingly, he realized he was able to read the first line of the black script that marched across the weathered page. Blinking his eyes repeatedly, he stared at the once foreign text, now easily decipherable. Quickly scanning the page, he realized entire series of passages were legible, some describing an ancient Jedi skill of memory manipulation. The Garnib snowfall and the Petit' Vernol forgotten, Baal absorbed the passages vigorously, until a dreary gray light began to filter through the glacial fissure.

"She's a beauty 'Sok, you got quite a deal," Vic Palisades observed, gazing up at the underside of the mammoth freighter.

Following his friends admiring stare, A'sok Thurgood nodded. The majority of his life savings was sunk into the ZH-25 Questor in hopes that by adding it to Vic's business he would soon be turning a profit. Stretching for over twenty meters, "The Baldin Star's" flawless hull glistened with a fine sheen of new white paint. Direct from the factory, the

vessel had less than fifty flight hours logged and flew like a dream. “Thanks. How soon can we get it into the rotation?”

Both were standing on the vast landing pad situated behind the glacial outcropping that housed Jaded Ivory Enterprises. High above, snow gently fell through an eight-kilometer wide gap in the glacier they used for habitation. Occasionally a speck of a ship would drop through the opening, hovering for a moment and then disappearing from view, destined for another landing pad in another colony.

“Less than a week. Just need to get a crew for it and we’ll put her up in the air,” Vic said, gathering his green JIE jacket about him. Between the purple tattoo arcing over his right eye, his auburn hair and the jacket he was the most colorful thing on the white barren landing pad.

“Great. The sooner I can start making an honest living the better,” A’sok replied. “I noticed the other JIE ships are gone, that’s good, right?”

Nodding, Vic turned back towards JIEs two-story office building. “Yep, empty pads means business is good. Although,” he glanced curiously at a smaller pad across the expanse, “Baal took the new Z-25 out yesterday to hit Celanon, I figured he would be back by now.” Both turned and began walking slowly towards the recessed double doors set into the carved ice.

“You and Chance patched things up yet?” Vic asked.

Heart speeding up slightly, A’sok shook his head. “Nope. We avoid each other at all costs. After what happened on Farzhul,” he stopped. “I don’t think I can forgive him Vic. He almost killed me for that stupid cube,” he said, absently rubbing at a healed scar on his jaw line.

“I don’t blame you. Being on a team can really strain a relationship sometimes. Still, if you both happen to be on a job and are on the same fire team, you may need to put your life in his hands. I know that’s a disturbing thought, but still...”

“Yeah, the ‘team’,” A’sok hesitated, then decided to jump in with both feet. “We’ve talked about this in the past Vic, but, I think I’m ready to retire from Raptor Squad.”

Stopping, Vic turned, crossing his arms over the JIE logo on the front of his parka. “Retirement, huh?” he chewed his lower lip for a moment. “You’ve been an invaluable asset to Raptor Squad ‘Sok, been on lots of missions and were damn important in the Alliance’s victory on Endor. You have a group here that you can count on and that says a lot in this galaxy. You sure this is what you want to do?”

“I’m afraid so. I haven’t seen Deuce since we left Aquanuric IV, and if I have any chance of getting her back into my life I need to prove I’m serious about our relationship,”

he gestured at the Questor, "I'm hoping this will show her I'm done hacking and ready to start a new life together. One that doesn't involve killing and dark Jedi."

"Sounds nice," Vic replied, smiling. "I hope you the very best...you both deserve it."

Turning back to the building he entered a key code and passed through the double doors into a brightly lit hallway. Various paintings of Garnib and its citizens dotted the corridor's forest green walls; A'sok admired Vic for investing the money to contract the works from several of Garnib's more prolific painters.

"Just make sure you are careful out there 'Sok. Raptor Squad has made its share of enemies, and none of them are very forgiving."

"Tell me about it, speaking of which, you heard from Perfo yet about the Jax search?" A'sok asked. Just a few short months before the team had gotten a disk showing Jax being apprehended by Imperial Stromtroopers, thanks to the former Raptor Squad member Ket Adkins. The move had confused and worried everyone on the team, but events involving High Inquisitor Tremayne's dark Jedi henchmen had prevented them from following up on any leads.

Shaking his head, Vic stopped and lowered his voice. "No. Perfo said things were nuts right now with Jax gone. Creeila was gone the second she found out what happened and no one has heard from her since, folks are expecting the worst though," he shook his head. "I don't blame her, her husband gets nabbed by Imps and given who Jax is, they certainly won't be gentle with him. Once I get things squared away here we're heading out to find Ket- he's the only one who has an idea where Jax is and I have to find out why he's done this." The outlaw's comm beeped and he withdrew the small silver cylinder. "This is Rodbo, go," Vic said, using his JIE Alias. Early on he'd explained to A'sok the importance of keeping Vic Palisades separate from Garnib and JIE. As far as anyone outside the team knew, Rodbo and Vic were two separate people, and always would be.

A slight buzzing crackled across the comm, eventually turning into a droning, crackling droid voice. "Thisss izzzzzz Cylon. There is a package in recievvvvvvvvving for you," JIE's resident business administrator relayed across the comm.

"We're heading that way," Vic replied, taking a side hall towards a large wide durasteel door marked "Storage".

A'sok followed, chuckling at Cylons speech impediment. "Why don't you get that fixed?"

Shrugging, Vic unsnapped his parka and pulled it off, revealing a bright yellow JIE jumpsuit. "Gives him character." Opening the door, both stepped into JIE's main receiving bay. The room was large, with various green and yellow cargo crates and pallets occupying the majority of the space. Overhead fluorescent lights cast everything in an unnatural white light while two Vernol loaders checked cargo manifests against the newest shipment of crates marked GCC.

“Everything matching up?” Vic asked the duo.

The larger Vernol, his girth seemingly poured into the yellow jumpsuit he wore, turned and nodded, tapping his datapad with a stubby finger. “Yebs Boss. Garnib Crystal Corp jubs delibered dees,” the Vernol mumbled.

“Sounds good Maxal, let’s make sure they don’t short us like they did last time,” Vic said, shaking his head.

“Will doob. Right abter lunch!” Maxal smiled.

Images of Deuce fought for space in A’soks mind as Vic walked over to a group of new deliveries. Cargo crates of all shapes and sizes stacked three high and four deep occupied a small section of the large room. “I’m not too worried about any of our old friends coming looking for Deuce and me,” A’sok continued as Vic/Robo shooed the Vernols off to lunch break.

“Just saying, might be smart to watch out for a while, you know, keep a low profile. Maybe even set up an alternate...hey! Looks like our shipment of holoflicks came in,” Vic said inspecting several small blue crates. “Boy, they really butcher the name Rodbo Valance. If it was my real name I might be pissed,” Vic’s voice trailed off as he made his way to other larger crates. “Look! Rubba Bychance! Nice...”

Deuce’s soft aquamarine skin and supple body gyrated in A’soks mind. Their parting was bittersweet, and once he awoke in bacta from his injuries sustained on Farzhul, she’d already left, tapped once again by the New Republic to secure yet another planet in yet another sector. The hurt and longing still sat in his gut like a partially digested wedge of Celonian grafcheese.

“Klux, get down here,” he heard Vic snap into his comm.

Pulling his mind free of Deuce’s grasp he noticed the outlaw staring intently at a black cargo crate pulled free from the rest. “What’s wrong?”

“This crate,” Vic said, color drained from his face. “It’s addressed to Vic Palisades.”

Apprehension gnawed at Vic’s gut like a ravenous womprat as he waited for Klux to finish inspecting the mysterious cargo container. He had worked hard...diligently...to keep the name Vic Palisades and Jaded Ivory Enterprises separate. Disguises, falsified documents and business records, everything he could do to separate the two he had done. But he’d missed something.

“Sorry Vic,” the Jedi said, crouching over the container. “All I can tell you is that this box spent the last week in the belly of a very old freighter.” Running his hand along the smooth contours, he appeared to almost be trying to coerce the secrets from the reflective plasteel.

“Great, can’t you wave your hands or something and find out who sent this thing?” A’sok called from behind a loader parked near the rear of the bay. Upon hearing the container was addressed to Vic and not one of his aliases the hacker had taken refuge behind the large green and yellow vehicle. Sighing, Klux stepped over and dropped onto another container.

“The Force doesn’t work that way A’sok. The best I can do is sense where it’s been...at the most maybe who has handled it...but this...” he gestured at the box, “is a complete mystery.”

“Alright, let me double check it,” Vic said, dropping to one knee beside a thin black case Klux had brought with him. Sliding the top open, Vic produced a thin probe, one of many devices he would be using to detect any internal or external explosive devices. Gently moving and probing the container, he diligently inspected the various seams and molding for any sign of a trip or motion sensor. Thirty minutes later he was satisfied the container wouldn’t explode if opened. “I’m going to open it,” he announced, producing a vibroblade and slitting the bright orange cargo sticker stretched over the containers lid.

“I’ll be over here behind the loader,” A’sok called from ten meters away.

“Uh, yeah, me too,” Klux murmured, trotting over to where A’sok crouched.

“I thought you Jedi could throw up Force Shields and all that noise,” Vic asked over his shoulder.

“Yeah, well, three-ton loaders work too.”

Drawing a deep breath, Vic positioned himself behind the container and popped four metal clasps on the front and sides of the upper lid. A sudden hiss caused Vic to freeze in his spot, until the cool air of the containers interior touched his skin. Lifting the lid completely, Vic stepped around to the front and almost lost his lunch. The smell of rotting flesh tightened his throat and forced his stomach into a knot. Lurching back he fought free of the nausea, snatching his scarf and shoving it tightly across his mouth and nose. “Son of a motherless Wampa!” he snarled into the bundle.

“What the hell is that smell?!?” Klux shouted from behind the loader.

Scarf still bundled up to his face, Vic stepped forward and peered into the container. Amidst the white swirling mists of vapor, glassy black eyes materialized, staring intently at the outlaw.

Taken aback, Vic's hand dropped to where his blaster usually hung from his hip. Fingers gripping fabric, he stopped, watching entranced as the vapors swirled and drifted away. Gradually, the container cleared, revealing a severed Rodian head nestled atop a brown and black bed of fur.

“What the hell...” Klux said from beside him. The revolting smell forgotten, the Jedi's words seemed to echo in the unusually quiet loading area.

“I think I recognize him,” Vic said, pulling on a pair of black leather gloves. Gently, he reached in the container and wrapped his fingers around several of the green head spurs. Slipping his other hand beneath its protruding snout he gently pulled the nightmare free, trailing several strands of the congealed green blood collected beneath it.

“Who is...was it?” A'sok asked, wiping his eyes clear.

“Last time I saw him was on the deck of the Reliant,” Vic said gently turning the rigid skull in his hands. A thin white film covered the bulbous black eyes while the sever mark around the neck pointed to a vibroweapon of some sort. Perhaps even a laser-hone or scalpel. “His name was Croto the Crusher- a bounty hunter...trailed Ket, the Wook and I to Graymoore.”

An audible gasp from Klux drug Vic back to the present and as bad as the severed head was it didn't prepare him for what the Jedi had half drug from the container. Easily two and a half meters long, the fur hung from the container's lip, gripped in Klux's trembling white knuckles. Beyond the greenish-black circular stain left by Croto's severed head, Vic recognized the shape and pattern immediately. “Sithspit...its Socatoas pelt.”

“What the frell!?!” Backing away A'sok's eyes were threatening to burst from their sockets. “What sort of freaking savage SKINS a...”

“Not a savage. A madman,” Vic corrected, all of the pieces falling into place. The holovid Araf handed them on Fibuli showing Jax's capture, the cryptic note left almost a year back when Vic first set up shop on Garnib, and now a container full of a psycho's handywork- the skin of a Wookiee who caused him to get captured and the head of the being who did it.

“Ket Adkins did this. He's tying up loose ends,” Vic said.

Dropping the skin to the ground, the heavy pelt landed with a sickening wet slap. “We’ve got to stop him Vic,” Klux said, staring in horror at the fur of his former teammate.

“What the...what did he do with the bodies?” A’sok asked, still staring open mouthed between the head and the pelt.

Stepping forward and picking the skin up, Vic began to gently fold it back into the container along with Croto’s head. “Probably gave them to Akelish...that sick freak gets off on skinning people,” he said, anger creeping into his voice. “Akelish wants payback for what we did to her, and it looks like Ket has switched sides. This is a message he’s sending, plain and simple.”

“We’ve got to get the team together, we’ve got to stop him Vic,” Klux repeated, staring at the smear of blood that rubbed off from the pelt onto his hands.

“We’re going to take him down Klux, don’t worry,” Vic replied sealing the container. In one motion he stripped the bright orange shipping label from the lid. “But first, we need to make plans to leave. We’re going to,” he peered at the label, “Ord Mantell.”

Baal sat in the cockpit of the Z-95 headhunter staring at Garnib and wondering what had happened. Confusion and fear momentarily gripped the Trianni and he shook his blue furred head clear, trying to calm himself and piece together what had happened. He had no idea why he was in the ship and had no idea where he had come from. Try as he might to orient himself to his surroundings, he could produce nothing; it was as if a hole existed in the center of his memory. “Slider, report. Where were we just now? Recount the last known coordinates,” Baal ordered the silver and purple R2 Unit nestled behind his cockpit.

Momentarily, the droids answer scrolled across the small screen nestled before Baal in the console panel. Leaning forward was a chore, as the Z-95 wasn’t designed for the comfort of seven-foot tall felinoids, but he wanted to make sure he wasn’t misreading the droids reply.

“No previous location found,” was the short reply.

Aggravated, Baal rolled his eyes. Had he blacked out during the hyperspace trip? Perhaps took an unplanned trip through an ion cloud that disrupted his memory? He’d heard of such things happening to spacers before, but he always handled hyperspace pretty well. Of course there is a first time for everything. “We had to come from somewhere you hunk of scrap,” Ball snarled in irritation. “Did we just leave Garnib? Did we just arrive in

system? Give me a report of the last several hyperspace jumps and accompanying planetary locations.”

“I was instructed to erase that data from my memory core-permanently,” the reply read.

“By who?!?” Baal snapped.

“You.”

The word sat on the screen awaiting Baal’s challenge. Behind it a cursor rhythmically flashed, reminding him that as much as time seemed to slow, he was doing nothing more than burning it sitting in the dead of space with a ship full of unanswered questions. Calming himself, he slowly tried to recreate the last few hours of his life. Momentarily, pieces began falling into place...he’d obviously disembarked Garnib...to go where? Celanon? He couldn’t even remember the reason he left. No, he was going somewhere to drop off something. Something someone needed out of the way. Was it Vic? A task for JIE?

For some reason his mind went back to a cold night in the Petit’ Vernol and the memory of a passage he’d found in one of the Jedi tomes. Scrambling furiously he jerked his travel bag from in front of the Z-95’s pilot chair. Pulling the thick book free of the bag, he flipped through the fragile pages as quickly as he could without damaging them. He happened upon the passage he’d struggled with a few days before in the Petit’ Vernol. A piece of clear blue flimplast covered the books aged parchment, obscuring the passage scribbled in alien script on the weathered page.

Gently he picked the flimplast up and compared the translation to what was scrolled across the books pages.

Word for word was translated in Baal’s handwriting. Looking closer in the brilliant light cast by Garnib’s harsh white surface, he realized a line appearing above the passage in the tome wasn’t translated onto the flimplast.

Gripping a lightwriter from the bag, he furiously translated the mysterious line scribbled above the entry.

“Often used by minions of the darkside, this passage details the use of a power that erases the memory of its victim, leaving them disoriented and confused, forgetting where they have been and what they have done. The stronger the Jedi, the easier it is to erase a memory.”

A flash of vision, a tidbit of knowledge swirling in the maelstrom stuck to his conscious mind and his body froze, his mind locking onto the memory like a tractor bean.

He saw himself, hours earlier, sitting in the ship and reading the passage aloud, feeling the darkside hammer his body like a cold downpour.

Tossing the book aside, Baal clutched the bag, shoving his hand deep, and grasping nothing but a few meal pouches and a medpack.

“No...no...NO!” he screamed, voice roaring in the ships tiny cockpit. Staring into space fear clamped down on him like a Rancor and try as he might he couldn’t shake it

from his mind. There was no proof, no memory, nothing he could hang onto, but that didn't mean it wasn't true:

Somewhere, lost among hundreds of planets, billions of miles of terrain and countless cities, the holocron lay hidden by his own hand, and he had erased any idea where it may be.

“Socatoa may not have been the most well liked of us, but, I would like to believe his heart was in the right place,” Vic said, standing behind the black cargo container. The group was situated in a semi circle around the container in JIE's arboretum, with Baal, Klux and A'sok standing in the center of small clearing. Somewhere above, an avian chirped briefly as if to add its own thoughts to the proceedings. Chance leaned against one of the taller trees, a sapling that stretched for over four meters towards the rooms glassed in ceiling. High above, light poured down into the glacier, multicolored shafts emerging from millions of ice prisms formed directly on the surface of the crevice. He was bored and wanted to leave. He didn't know this 'Socatoa' and could have cared less about his death. The dark master taught him that close relationships were a weakness, one that you either exploited or others would exploit to hurt you. Master Coba was wise, and his teachings seemed to make more sense than any tidbit of knowledge the Jedi had imparted.

“...on your way to the final jump Socatoa. May your journey be peaceful and may you finally find rest,” Vic finished, leaning down and pulling a shovel from the ground. In unison, A'sok, Klux and Baal all leaned down and picked up similar tools lying at their feet. Stepping over to where Vic stood, they all began digging into the rich soil that made up the arboretums ground.

“That's a waste of time, why don't you just get a droid to dig...or better yet just space his remains,” Chance asked, suppressing a yawn.

“We bury our own,” Vic answered, still digging.

“Your own?’ Sounds like you fellas didn't like him too much to begin with. Why bother pretending to give a womprats ass now?” Stopping, Vic planted his arm on the handle of his shovel. “It's about respect Chance. You might want to think about that. What we do in life greatly impacts how we are regarded in death. Something to think about.” Snickering, Chance rolled his eyes. Palisades was always coming off with his nonsense and crappy rhetoric...if he didn't run this shipping deal he would probably be writing romance holovids.

“Whatever Mr. Bleeding Heart. You geniuses want to waste your time digging holes go ahead, I’ve got better things to do.”

Vic watched him for a moment, then, shaking his head, returned to digging. By this point Klux had also stopped, and was turning to face him. “What is it Kluxy? Want me to dig some?” Chance smirked, “Is that going to be another of your ‘Grand Jedi Training Lessons? You going to make me dig then maybe Baal can have me clean out some more crappers...what will that teach me? Huh?”

Both Jedi stared in silence as he pushed off from the tree and sauntered towards them. “Or maybe, hey! Maybe this time I’ll get to turn my lightsaber on and off for a whole two minutes! Woo! Wouldn’t that be fun?!?”

“You’re out of line,” Klux snapped, dropping his shovel.

“Out of line? And what if I am? What are you going to do about it? Kill me? Hell, you had a Darksider bitch-slapping you around that temple on Farzhul and you still didn’t have that guts to kill him!” Chance goaded. It felt good telling the Jedi off, every crack was another point he scored against them, and he did so like to make them look the fools.

“That’s enough!” Baal began. “The Padwan...”

Stepping up to the Trianni, Chance pointed a finger in his face. “The Padwan wants to know what YOU did with the holocron!” he snapped. The comment surprised him as much as it did the Jedi. Master Coba’s words coming from his mouth sent a shiver along his spinal column and caused Baal’s eyes to grow as wide as Gallda fruit.

Silence enveloped the group and Klux, before focusing his intent stare on Chance, now redirected his attention onto Baal.

“What is he talking about Baal?” the Jedi asked.

Dropping his head, the Trianni went back to digging. “I don’t know what he’s talking about.”

“It’s not on Garnib anymore is it Baal? Where did you take it? Where did you HIDE it?” Chance heard himself asking. Fear began creeping along his body, sending tiny bumps along his cold skin. Distrust and anger, pouring from Klux in a wave, struck Chance and caused him to step back.

Reaching over, Klux grabbed the handle of the Trianni’s shovel, forcing it to remain in the ground.

“I asked you a question Baal. What is he saying? Where IS the holocron?”

A’sok and Vic exchanged concerned glances, and Chance noticed the subtle shift as Vic slid his hand along the shovels grip, turning the simple gardening tool into a lethal

weapon-if necessary. Satisfaction quickly replaced fear and Chance felt giddy elation bubble within him.

“I don’t know where it’s at,” Baal growled, bringing his bright green eyes to bear on Klux.

“What do you mean you don’t...”

“I MEAN I LOST IT AND I DON’T REMEMBER HOW!” the Trianni roared, forcing the entire team to retreat several steps.

Baal and Klux stood locked in place, eyes never wavering from the other.

“Hey!” Vic snapped. All eyes turned towards the man who was now fishing a cigarro from his back pocket. “We leave for Ord Mantell in twelve hours,” he flicked a lighter and ignited the end of the tabacc stick. “So, you can kill each other, or get your asses ready for the trip, I don’t care which,” Vic snarled, jamming his shovel back into the imported soil. “But right now we have a grave to dig. So get to it.”

Quietly, slowly, the others followed suit with the Jedi moving to opposite sides of the grave.

Manifesting himself as an apparition took work and effort, but Master Coba realized that sometimes he needed to make the sacrifice so he could connect with his future host. Mulgrew sat cross-legged on a shelf of carved ice in the small cavern while Coba, appearing as a tall man with a long black moustache and slanted eyes, head shaved back into a long flowing topknot, paced back and forth in front of him. Off to the side lay Chance’s duffel and the Sith artifact.

“You did well today Chance, the Jedi almost turned on each other, did you feel it?” Coba asked, allowing a smile to pull at his thin lips. He didn’t have far to walk, or else he would be passing through on of the smooth ornately chiseled ice walls that made up the nondescript alcove. So he stood in place and turned back towards Chance, his long leather robes silently draping the ground as a bright red aura of energy shimmered about his body.

“Yeah, I thought they were going to go right there! Especially when I told Baal that I knew that he hid the holocron-but, wasn’t that you saying that?” the young red haired man asked.

“Of course not. You are growing powerful in the Force my young apprentice, you will earn the Force has a way of empowering us with knowledge and insight we previously lacked,” he lied. It was his voice coming through Chance, but he couldn’t let the

simpleton know that. If the future host for his spirit had any idea he could manipulate or control his actions, he might become scared, and run off to tell his Jedi Masters about Coba. This, he could not allow. Coba could perhaps eliminate Chance, but his spectral form lacked the power necessary to take down the Jedi.

“Yeah, I guess. You know I did feel like I had more power when they were arguing,” Chance said, picking at a small can of Garnib seafood. Coba almost recommended that Chance eat something with more substance, but that sort of request might seem a bit misplaced and would potentially get the young mans guard up.

“Of course you did, that is a benefit of the Darkside, anger, fear, hatred...it fuels us, makes us more powerful.”

“So, when are you going to train me to use my lightsaber? The Jedi haven’t really taught me anything and you never know, I might need to use it,” Chance asked, slinging the can into a corner where the contents splashed out onto the ground. He pulled free his training saber and ignited the blade, casting a faint blue light on the crystalline walls.

Snickering, Coba shook his head. “A lightsaber is a weapon of a weakling. When I was at the height of my power I could end the life of a minion a half a planet away simply by thinking him dead.”

“Yeah, that sounds cool and all, but lightsabers are totally wiz,” Chance said.

“Wiz?” Master Coba repeated.

“Yeah, Wiz, you know, cool, extreme, WIZ,” Chance replied. “You need to get with the times grandpa. I know it’s been a while since you were popped from your tomb, but seriously...”

Biting back his reply, Master Coba reminded himself that soon, once he had whittled Mulgrews free will down to a nub and the time was right, he would occupy Mulgrews body and banish the young swoop racers soul into an abyss of darkness. “Now THAT will be ‘Wiz’ the Sith Master silently chuckled to himself.

“We don’t have any available landing pads in Circle City proper, but we do have a few available on the periphery,” the female voice crackled across the Skull’s comm. Not for the first time A’sok felt like hammering his fist into the console and cursed his decision to accompany the team...one last time...in an effort to find Ket.

“Fine! Whatever! Just clear us for landing! We’ve been circling this crappy planet for forty five minutes!” he screamed.

Directly, the coordinates and clearance to land on the remote pad came through and the tension in the cockpit lessened slightly. “They claim this dump is a great place to cut loose and find some fun. I guess selling your damn soul for a landing pad is someone’s idea of fun,” he said, leaning back in his comm station. Beside him Vic and Baal flew in silence, both staring impassively at the pink clouds that filled their viewport. A former Old Republic ordinance and munitions depot, Ord Mantell was considered the “heart” of the Bright Jewel Cluster, and due to lack of Imperial influence, a safe haven for criminals and smugglers.

Skimming over the planet, A’sok could see why. Casinos and hotels stretched into the sky practically built atop one another. Entire cities were crafted from the monoliths of excess, bustling with millions of tourists hoping to find their appetite for one vice or another fulfilled.

In stark contrast to the bustling cluster of bright lights and swarm of speeders and low flying starships, the land surrounding them went from bustling metropolis to barren wasteland. The planets ugly yellow surface reminded visitors why the Empire never had much interest in the planet and had pretty much left it, and it’s inhabitants, alone.

Skimming over various factories that belched smoke and pollution into the colorful sky, Baal angled the Skullduggery, their Ghtroc freighter, in towards a ring of walled landing pads. Circling once, he hovered above the farthest pad at the end of the ring and gently set the freighter down.

As the engines cut out and Baal went through his post flight ritual of double-checking the controls, A’sok noticed Vic staring intently through the viewport.

“Problem Bossman?” he asked, following Vic’s gaze. They were on the periphery of the main city, their landing pad a lonely forgotten slab of duracrete.

The outlaw didn’t answer for a moment. Finally, shaking his head, he stood. “Just get the feeling we are being watched is all, no biggie,” turning the outlaw slipped on a pair of mirrored glasses and smiled. “You sure you want to be here ‘Sok?”

“Not really, but I also don’t want to spend the rest of my life looking over my shoulder,” he said, reaching down and checking the charge on his Thunderer Heavy Blaster Pistol. “With Ket out there targeting us, I’ll be jumping at shadows that aren’t even there.”

He had considered bowing out of the run, but when he saw Socatoa’s pelt and the Rodians severed head, he knew Ket wouldn’t stop until he was dead too. They had to stop the madman if he and Deuce were to have any chance at peace and happiness.

“Fair enough,” Vic said. “Ket is dangerous, but if we keep our heads about us, we should get through this with only a few of us getting killed,” he smiled.

“Funny. I’m going to grab a bite before we head out,” A’sok said, heading for the lounge.

“Here, I’m competing while you clowns go tracking down your leads,” Chance announced, tossing a sheet of flimplast onto the tiny table occupying the ships lounge. Seated in a circle, Baal, Klux Vic and A’sok stopped eating, first casting a curious glance at the swoop racer, then at the transparent orange sheet. Gently, Baal reached into the center of the table and withdrew the flimplast from a bowl of goulash.

“We got bigger problems, boy. Someone just mailed a former teammate back to us minus his insides. You go racing while we are tracking down leads and there won’t be anyone around to baby sit you,” Vic said around a mouthful of hash.

“Not my problem, I’ll take my chances,” Chance said smiling.

“...illegal swoop race sponsored by Locti Industries,” Baal read aloud. Looking up the Trianni’s eyes narrowed. “What do you know of this Locti Industries?”

“Only that they are paying fifty large to whoever wins,” Chance smiled, plucking the flimplast out the Jedi’s furry fingers.

“I don’t think it’s a good idea,” Klux said, crossing his arms.

“Too bad. Racing is what I do for a living, you both,” he gestured at the Jedi with the folded race notice, “stick to what you do best. Arguing and losing holocrons.” Without another word he turned from the group and walked back to his cabin, sealing the door behind him. Satisfaction and pride almost made him burst. He showed them again, told them exactly how things were going to go and refused to be swayed by their ridiculous arguments and backtalk.

Ever since he stole the Master Coba’s dark key from Klux’s cabin he’d been more confident, more capable than he’d ever been before.

Grabbing a red leather jacket from beneath his bunk he bounded back into the hallway and down the Skull’s extended cargo ramp. The landing pad they secured was deserted, with only a few maintenance droids piddling around in the corner running diagnostics on their equipment. At the rear, near the entrance to the bay, a PATC, a Public Access Telecommunication Computer sat snuggled against the ferrocrete wall.

Approaching the kiosk, Chance stepped through several holo-ads projected from its pink sloped roof. On either side of the kiosk was a cubbyhole where human sized beings could sit and access the PATC’s features. For larger users unable to squeeze into the nooks, an external keyboard and display screen were available, set into face of its remaining two sides.

Leaning against its stained surface, he accessed the vidphone, entering in the number found on the bottom of the flimplast flier he'd tossed at Baal. After several minutes of buzzing, the face of an aging dug appeared on the screen. Pulling at the thin moustache-like extensions that hung from his elongated muzzle, he surveyed Chance with skepticism.

“What?” he finally asked.

“Need to sign up for the competition,” Chance smiled.

“Competition? No idea what you're talking' about.”

“Got the entry fee right here, we going to do business or not?” Chance asked, twirling a silver credstick between his fingers. The Dug seemed to reconsider, then took a double take when he focused on Chance's face.

“Hey, you look like...”

“The name is Crimmer Slash,” Chance interjected sliding the credstick into the PATC's jack. “That's all you need to know.”

Nodding, the Dug smiled, revealing a holochess board pattern of teeth and tapped at an off-screen keyboard. A moment later the credstick beeped and showed the balance reduced by a thousand credits. Chance could care less; the money was stolen anyway and Ploovo Two For One had plenty to spare.

“Alright. Meeting is tomorrow night in Circle City, Hourglass Casino Ballroom, twenty-one hundred hours. Don't be late... 'Crimmer',” the dug rattled off and the screen went blank.

Smiling, Chance unfolded himself from the PATC and walked back to the ship. Fifty thousand, in addition to what he took from Ploovo back on Etti IV would be just enough to set himself up somewhere nice and quiet, where he and Master Coba could train all the time, at least until he'd learned enough and didn't need the cumbersome Sith Master any more. And finally, after what seemed like an eternity, he could get out from under the thumb of those useless Jedi.

Border Freize enjoyed the flesh. The way it felt under his hand, the smooth contours and slight bumps that rose when it got cold. Sometimes, when he concentrated,

he could even feel the blood pulse beneath its surface, rushing to fill the miles of arteries and veins that wove their way throughout the body.

He especially liked the flesh in times like these, when it was pressed against his. Rubbing his hands along the dancers smooth ebony back, he enjoyed the weight he felt when she lay atop him. Letting his thin wiry fingers roam, he massaged her firm shoulder blades with his right hand. Three fingers and thumb moved along the soft skin; he gently traced the nub of his missing finger around her neckline. If she still had her head attached, he would have kissed her.

Relationships can be funny things, he mused. Often, after money exchanged hands, he would do as he wished, leaving the flesh, for the most part, unmarked. But sometimes, sometimes he just HAD to cut into it.

More curiosity than anger or revenge, he could never pin down what drove his hand to quietly plunge the vibroblade into the victims. Many never screamed, that's what people didn't realize. Holograms had done a good job to convince the entire galaxy that so much drama went along with stabbing and killing someone. In truth, most were shocked it happened in the first place, as most of his work was done quickly, and with little preamble. There was even one dancer on Nar Shadda who spent the last remaining moments of her life trying to stuff her intestines back inside her body.

A pounding on his apartment door brought him fully awake. Without pulling himself from the wet pillow-strewn bed, he lazily gestured to no one in particular.

“Open.”

A hiss accompanied the doors disappearance into the wall as one of Chevin Locti's flunkies stumbled into the dim circular room, nearly losing his footing and falling to the floor. Light from the hallway briefly illuminated the bedrooms sparse accoutrements, before sliding shut and returning the room to near darkness.

“Master Border,” the flunkie began, triggering the two floating blue orbs that bathed the room in an unnatural azure hue. “I didn't mean to...Oh...OH SITH!” he screeched, his eyes drawn to the dancers body strewn across Border. No more than a meter and a half tall and shaped like a keg of lum, the underling was covered in matted black fur that comically stuck out from a bright purple tunic. Border waived one of the dancer's lifeless hands at the Chadra-Fans wide eyes.

“You... are much too excitable.”

“You've...you've killed Serepa!” the flunkie sputtered, nervously backing away from the bed.

Border appreciated Locti allowing him to bunk in his palace, didn't even mind the garish decorating job the crimelord insisted the guest apartments displayed, but what he couldn't abide was mouthy underlings. “State your business and, do me a favor, find her head while you're at it,” he gestured towards the floor, “I misplaced it earlier.”

“You’ve killed her. Why? She was one of Locti’s most beautiful dancers...”

Slipping a stained vibroblade from beneath the dancers pale body, Border gestured at the flunkie. “I won’t ask again. Why are you bothering us?”

Forcing himself to calm down, Locti’s underling pinched his eyes shut. “Master Locti has an incoming holonet transmission for you. He...” opening his eyes he quickly shut them again, “he requests your presence in his fourth story office.”

“Ah, of course,” Border replaced the blade and groped beneath the bed, retrieving a pair of black circular goggles he fitted around his eyes. “He just wants a reason to get me out of bed,” shoving the corpse aside, he rolled and dropped onto the ground, landing in a puddle of blood.

Without missing a beat he pulled a gore-stained white satin sheet from beneath a nearby pillow, and, wrapping it around his body, strolled past the trembling flunkie and into the hallway, leaving dark red footprints as he started up a white polished-stone staircase. During his ascendance, he passed several of Locti’s concubines, all casting fearful glances in his direction without actually making eye contact. Was his hair amiss? Dragging his wounded hand through the thick black mane he shook it out.

The door to Chevin Locti’s office was open and Border let himself in. Seated behind a hovering silver desk, Locti, his huge frame wrapped in a purple and green tunic and his Twi’lek Major Domo, Elak stared at him with a mixture of disgust and apprehension. In opposite corners of the grand office incense pots smoked, filling the room with the scent of smoldering spice and obscuring the high ceiling with a low hanging haze.

“I hear you’ve killed another of my dancers, I expect you have a good reason?!?” Locti bellowed, his large double chin shaking violently. Border didn’t speak, merely crossed the pristine white carpet trailing the sheet and leaving a bloody streak in his wake. “Dammit! Elak! Get the droids to clean that mess!” Locti roared, rising out of his seat and slamming two thick fists against the desktop. It dipped for a moment, spilling caffeine and quickly rebounded, its repulsor compensators making an audible hum as it realigned itself. “DAMMIT!” Locti screamed again at the spilled drink. Snickering, Border dropped into an ornate wooden chair. Its cushion conformed to his body, pressing the cool blood-soaked sheet against his skin. In some places it held, the red patches clinging to his frame while the white satin flowed about him and onto the floor.

Elak, his ivory lekku twitching nervously, hustled his rotund body from around the desk and hazarded a glance at the lounging killer before he disappeared back through the door. Locti’s thick eyebrows, as white as his halo of hair, wrinkled together and locked onto the chair Frieze was now sticking to. The man’s left eye was missing, replaced with a black gem that glittered with an unnatural light, and if Border squinted, he could just make out his own reflection in the polished facet.

Staring vibroblades at Border, Locti's voice dipped, "If it weren't for Ploovo sponsoring you, I would have...."

"You would do nothing fat man," Border crossed one bloody foot over his knee, "I do as much network for you as I do for 'Two-For-One'."

Scowling, Locti dropped back into his seat, producing a small towel from a lower desk drawer. Focusing on the spill, he gently mopped at the coffee. "You're wretched."

"I am. So, there is a message for me?"

Without looking up, Locti thumbed a switch on the desk. To the right, set into a recessed display nook, the bluish image of Ploovo Two-For-One jittered to life. A thick black moustache fought for supremacy beneath his hooked nose and Border noticed the crimelord had put on weight since he talked to him last. The image, ending just below his chest, showed off a multicolored vest adorned with comically oversized epaulettes and ovoid buttons etched with Ploovo's initials. As the image focused, Ploovo's eyes widened and a smile cracked his face.

"Border my boy! It's been too long!"

"Ploovo! It's simply been ages!" Border threw his hands wide as if inviting a hug.

"Always good to see you, and thanks for dressing for the occasion!" Ploovo smiled.

"Hel...hello Ploovo! Good to see you! How are things on Etti IV?" Locti interjected, his scorn replaced with a sickeningly cheery disposition. The stain was all but forgotten, his attention locked on the current conversation as if it were a pastry. The man disgusted Border, but he wouldn't have to tolerate the man much longer. Ploovo was trimming the fat from his organization and was sending Border throughout the galaxy as his own personal meat cleaver. And there was plenty of fat in the Locti organization to trim off.

"Yes, hello..." Ploovo's eyes glanced off screen for a moment quickly returning, "Chevin! Nice to see you are running things smoothly there on Ord Mantell. I trust Elak is coming along?"

"Oh splendidly! We are one big happy family here at the estate!" Locti lied, throwing a wink Friezes way.

"What can I do for you Ploovo?" Border asked. In the back of his mind the flesh was calling for him and he wanted to wrap this up quickly.

“Of course my boy, straight to business. I’m sure you have other things to be tending to,” Ploovos smile revealed that Border’s stained feet and makeshift body wrap hadn’t gone unnoticed, “So to business. What does the name Crimmer Slash mean to you?”

Suddenly, the flesh was forgotten. Everything- the palace, Locti, even Ploovo for a moment deteriorated into a red blinding rage that caused Border’s body to shake and the nub on his right hand to throb maddeningly.

Fighting back the rage, he took a deep breath and as his vision cleared he found he was leaning forward, gripping the arms of Loctis chair so tightly that his knuckles were bone white.

“It’s...it’s an alias,” he managed.

Nodding, the crimelord’s head was void of any expression, taking in Borders every movement with interest. “It is. For a young man named...”

“Chance Mulgrew,” Border finished. Both stared at each other in silence for a moment.

Locti, shuffling uneasily, leaned forward in his seat. “Uhm, I’ve heard of him, lost a few creds on him during his last race...heh,” Locti joked. Both Border and Ploovo turned icy stares on the man. Shrinking into his oversized chair, Locti glanced nervously back to his caffe stain.

“Mulgrew was supposed to throw a race for me several months back. Instead he decided to double-cross me and take the victory and my money,” Ploovo was all business now, which suited Border just fine. “He not only cost me the bribe, he cost me the two hundred thousand I put down on the race, not to mention the black eye he gave me with some very important friends.”

“Where is he?” Border asked. Mulgrews’ stupid freckled face danced in his mind. When he was younger, his future as a swoop racer was smashed when that idiot Mulgrew crushed him in every race they competed in. Race after race went to the young “prodigy” on the amateur circuit and Border was all but forgotten. In his last race, just over five years ago, he made a bet with some very unforgiving souls. Once again, Mulgrew took the win and Border wound up not only loosing the race but his right middle finger as well.

“He’s signed up for the Chevin’s Invitational Swoop Race there on Ord Mantell in two days,” Ploovo said reading from a scrap of flimplast, “it’s an illegal invitational, which is what probably drew Mulgrew in the first place. A corporate race would bring him too much unwanted attention,” Ploovo crumpled the flimplast into a ball and tossed it over his shoulder. Leaning forward, his girth filled the viewing nook.

“Chevin is having a meet and greet at the Hourglass Casino ballroom tomorrow night. Border,” Ploovo grit his teeth and forced the words through, “I want my credits

back. Once you get my money..." he leaned back, smoothing his moustache, "You can do what you want with Mulgrew."

Clenching his right hand, Border allowed a thin smile to crease his face. "Oh, I'll get your money for you Ploovo...after the invitational. And then? Then I'm going to do things to Chance Mulgrew I've been dreaming about doing for five years."

The Intergalactic Shipping and Parcel Delivery Service building occupied four square city blocks near the outskirts of Circle City. Stretching ninety-nine stories into the pink Ord Mantell sky, its black ferrocrete surface slanted, creating a pyramid that evened out at the thirtieth floor and began again, ending with a lit peak that stabbed a shaft of brilliant white light up into the planets early evening sky.

"Hard to miss, huh?" Vic asked, staring skyward. Behind him A'sok paid the repulsor cab fare and stepped up beside him.

"Nice. Guess they need a place this big to keep track of all the packages."

Nodding, Vic scratched at the scruff of stubble on his chin. "Yeah, when I was setting up JIE I studied up on shipping companies. ISPDS is the third largest shipping company in the galaxy. There are twenty underground levels in addition to thirty above ground where they actually store the packages. Everything else is admin offices and routing departments."

"That's a lot to remember," A'sok said with a cocked eyebrow.

Strolling towards a row of black glass doors that matched the buildings gleaming exterior, Vic nodded. "Yeah, it's a hobby."

A'ok nodded, glancing around at the hustle and bustle that surrounded them. "I don't get it. The Empire has no use for this place; it's self-regulated by a loose government made up of planetary business owners. But, what keeps Ord Mantell from falling into lawlessness? What's to keep the scum from running everything?"

"The scum DOES run everything, 'Sok" Vic answered, heading across the wide ISPDS Plaza. "But they all get along because total anarchy turns people away-anarchy, despite what you might have heard, makes for poor tourism, and, beyond the spice and vice this place markets, the tourism dollar is still king on Ord Mantell."

"Which explains why legit businesses can flourish here," A'sok said as they passed a two-headed delivery driver, who returned the smile with one of her heads.

“Exactly. Tourists, while they enjoy the exotic, also enjoy the familiar. Which is why this ISPDS looks exactly like every other ISPDS you will visit.” They reached a pair of double doors that slid open soundlessly, revealing a brightly lit atrium easily a hundred meters wide and over fifty high. Floating discs hovered throughout the expanse, adorned with colorful flowers and vines that hung above numerous reflecting pools spouting crystalline water several meters into the sky.

Situated off to their far right, a receiving desk occupied with dozens of ISPDS customer service reps buzzed with activity. Beings of all species tugged, pulled and pushed packages to and from the gleaming glass counter. While the atrium was full of customers, the buzz of activity was relatively quiet, much quieter than Vic expected.

“Woah. Nice place,” A’sok observed.

“Yeah. Those floating nursery discs have sound dampeners...you can see em’ sticking out from the bottom. Those aren’t cheap,” Vic said, pointing to a disc that hovered near them loaded with red and orange Selonian Verha flowers. A moment later a sweet, intoxicating aroma fell over them. “Mmm nice,” A’sok breathed deep. “You go ahead, I’ll stay here.”

“Come on boy, we got better things to do than sit around and smell the roses,” Vic said heading off to the customer service area.

Stepping into the shortest line, both only had to wait a moment before a shapely, pale-blue female waved them to the counter. As Vic approached he realized she had deep brown eyes, directly in contrast to her pastel colored skin. Jet black hair was pulled back in a extreme bun and she displayed a sly smile as the two approached.

“Welcome to ISPDS, how may I help you?” she rattled off with little emotion.

“Well hello,” Vic stared at the nametag pinned to her drab green ISPDS tunic, “Thera. You...pardon me for asking, but you wouldn’t happen to be Wroonian would you?”

A momentary flash of irritation told him she had fielded the question a million times before.

“No...sir. I’m not Wroonian-not entirely. Now, how may I help you?”

“Hmmm. Too bad,” smiling Vic produced the ISPDS sticker he pulled from the crate containing his former teammate. “I received a package with this sticker and I would like to backtrack to find out who sent it.” Picking the orange sticker from his hand with her thumb and forefinger as if it were diseased, she ran a lightpen across its black identi-strip. Turning she tapped away at her computer for a moment, ignoring the duo.

“Anyone ever tell you, you have a knack for angering people?” A’sok asked out of the corner of his mouth.

Ignoring him Vic smiled widely as she turned back. “Any luck?” he asked.

“The individual who sent this is listed as a “Norber Husk,” she said handing the sticker back. “I’m afraid that’s all I can tell you.”

“Oh, come on,” Vic said grasping the sticker and her hand in the process. “I know you guys at least have to log the species of the sender for Imperial purposes, can’t you just give me a hint?” he held her hand for a moment, allowing his eyes to soften and dipping his head just enough to be both flirtatious and conspiratorial at the same time.

“Sir, I can’t...” she began to protest.

“Please, look, I know you aren’t supposed to, but come on, it’s just the species. Right? My boss wanted me to track this down and I’m new. The last thing I want to have to do is go back and tell him I couldn’t find out which of his drinking buddies sent this practical joke bottle of fizz.”

“Sir I understand your dilemma but...”

Vic could tell she was softening and pushed further. “Please. Look, I’m only on planet for a few days and this would really put me in good with him. Tell you what, you help me out and I’ll treat you to a nice meal and bottle of Frostberry Brandy.”

Exiting the ISPDS megaplex, Vic took off his jacket and tossed it over one shoulder. The Ord Mantell evening had gone from breezy to humid, with the sky growing a dark fuchsia.

“She said he was a Herglic but I’m guessing the name is one hundred percent bogus.”

“Yeah, and now you got a date with a package handler,” A’sok snickered.

“It’s my package, might as well get a pro to handle it,” Vic said smiling.

“That’s pretty lame Palisades. What our next move?” A’sok asked as he waved down a repulsor taxi. Bright blue lights pulled alongside the curb and the vehicle hovered a meter above the gutter while its rear door slid open. The smell of spice and hard liquor drifted from within.

“We go back to the ship and catch some sleep. Tomorrow night, we hit the streets and start asking around about our herglic friend and his alias, and hope something turns up,” Vic said, wrinkling his nose and climbing into the sleek vehicle.

He found Klux meditating in the Skull's cargo hold. Amid several empty cargo containers and the smell of hyperdrive coolant the Jedi sat cross-legged and naked, save for a pair of loose fitting black trousers. Watching him with interest, Baal remained silent as the Jedi levitated a meter into the air, and began slowly spinning in place, first on a horizontal axis but quickly twisting and turning in every direction.

"I can't find Chance, he left early this morning and hasn't been back since," Baal said to the gyrating Jedi.

The exercise went on for another five minutes with the Jedi showing no sign of stopping or responding. Finally Baal's patience ran out and he planted his hands on his hips. "Are you not going to speak to me?" he asked.

Slowly, the spinning stopped and Klux hovered upright in mid air, quietly unfolding his legs and stepping onto the hold's floor.

"I apologize Baal, since the holocron magically 'disappeared', I've had to rely on my own ability and skill to train and advance." He made no effort to conceal his sarcasm and it ate through Baal like acid.

"That isn't fair."

"I'm done worrying about what you consider 'fair'. You were entrusted with the holocron and you...lost it," the Jedi shook his head and picked his tunic from the floor. "I still can't figure out how you did that but it really doesn't matter, does it?"

"I simply came down here to discuss what we are going to do with Chance. I sense much anger in him and he seems to be getting worse," Baal said, trying to get the topic pointed in some sort of direction-any direction-not related to the loss of the holocron. "He mentioned yesterday having to attend a party tonight but didn't say where. I thought we might have a meeting with him before he left." Dropping the blue garment over his head, Klux rolled his eyes and stormed past the Trianni, stepping out into the corridor and heading for the lounge. Baal quietly padded silently along with him.

"Do what you want! It's obvious we aren't equipped to train him! He's too angry, too cynical..." Klux stopped, turning, "We were fools to think we could train him. Pooda, we couldn't potty train a Voorpak."

“I don’t believe that,” Baal argued, “we have the ability, between us Chance could be...”

Jabbing his finger in the air, Klux entered the small ovoid dining area and dropped onto the grav couch. “Wait! We disagree! Lets consult the holocron for the answer!” looking around Klux feigned confusion, “Wait! We can’t! Why is that Baal? Any big answers rattling around in that Trianni brain of yours?”

Rage surged through Baal and before he realized what was happening he was in Klux’s face, towering above the human as he sat impassively on the grav couch with his eyes locked on the felinoid. In one large hand Baal gripped the thin tunic Klux slipped on while the other hand was curled into a giant fist.

“I TOLD YOU TO DROP IT!” he screamed, froth flying from his mouth and spattering the Jedi’s face.

Slowly, Klux stared at him and then at the hand gripping the tunic, “I’m not the misguided red-haired Padwan Baal. Now let go of my tunic before you loose your hand-again.”

Both stared in silence for a moment and Baal, realizing a fight between he and Klux would more than likely destroy the ship and result in one or both of their deaths, let go of the tunic.

“Neither you nor I have any solid proof I lost the holocron, and I’m quite sure I don’t know what exactly happened involving it’s disappearance,” Baal said evenly.

Shrugging, Klux leaned back and punched in a code on the ships autochef. “And I find that bothersome Baal. If I wasn’t trying to figure out my connection to the Sunrider line, I would have more time to pursue this,” the autochef dinged and Klux pulled a steaming mug from the appliance, taking a small sip and sitting the mug on the table..

“Lies,” Baal snorted, leaning back against the bulkhead. “You are so quick to believe Nomi was telling the truth...about that, about her being your sister; she was tainted Klux, and yet you run along, grasping to delusions and deceit.”

The Jedi rose slowly, forgetting his beverage and leveling his eyes at Baal. “You’re out of line. I didn’t raise a stink when we wasted that time screwing about on Fibuli trying to revive your dead religion...”

“DEAD RELIGION!?!” Baal shouted, jabbing his nose down into Klux’s face.

“HEY!”

Turning, both watched as Vic appeared in the doorway of the lounge. He was clad in his Terminus armor and was strapping a Sentinel IV blaster to his hip. Looking up he jabbed a black-gloved finger towards Baal.

“You.”

“Me?” Baal asked.

Nodding Vic jerked the finger back towards the front of the Skull, “Yeah, You. You and me are going to hit the streets and find some info on Ket’s whereabouts.” The deep red visor of the Terminus helmet stared at Baal impassively.

“I don’t think I would be of much help, and weren’t you going to go with A’sok anyway?” Baal asked. He knew little about Ket and even less about Ord Mantell, to follow Vic while he chased after some silly lead was pointless. He and Klux had things to sort out-Jedi things.

“He’s got an appointment at a travel agent or some such nonsense. Anyway, it doesn’t matter what you think, what matters is that I’m asking. Nicely. Plus, you need to get off the ship, at least for a while,” Vic said, his voice a scratchy metallic sound void of any emotion. Baal followed the bounty hunters gaze back to Klux who was back to staring vibroblades in Baal’s direction.

“I’ll get my cloak,” Baal said, exiting the lounge.

Rising into the evening sky, the Hourglass Casino was easily one of the largest and most garish structures Chance had ever seen. Being that he had visited and raced swoops from one side of the galaxy to the other, that was saying quite a bit.

Shaped like its namesake, the casino stretched over a hundred stories into the air, its rounded base covering several blocks in the center of Circle City’s entertainment district.

Crafted from high-impact tempered crystal, the Hourglass was transparent, allowing tourists and onlookers to ogle at its brightly lit interior and continuous festivities.

The lower levels were occupied by floor upon floor of gaming rooms while it’s “neck” housed dozens of nightclubs and restaurants that served everything from fine gourmet meals to fast food. Finally, the upper levels were mostly dark, occupied by private suites, admin offices and over three hundred hotel rooms.

Weaving his way through the flood of people going into and out of the Hourglass, Chance gathered his red-leather racing jacket about him and made a beeline for an information kiosk seated in the center of the lobby. After waiting in line and dealing with an overly courteous attendant droid, he entered a lift tube, one of three that made up the buildings outer support pillars, and headed for the seventy-seventh floor.

As the bell dinged he stepped out into pandemonium. The foyer, a large expanse decorated in a gaudy shade of yellow and illuminated by floating chandeliers, was packed with all manner of racers and onlookers. Over three hundred beings stood in a clustered circle, watching a fight between a Gammorean and a Barabel. Snorting, the Gammorean lunged for the Barabel, clamping a thick green hand around his opponents black armored tail. Rearing back, the Barabel responded by leaping high and landing on the Gammorean's wide chest and sinking his razor-sharp teeth into the thick horned forehead.

Not waiting around to watch the rest of the carnage, Chance elbowed his way through the crowd and towards a pair of large glass double-doors opposite of the lift tube. A thick boxy red attendant droid, positioned just to the right of the entrance, shoved two prongs that passed for its hand in his chest as he went for the door handle.

“Name.”

“Crimmer Slash,” Chance replied, crossing his arms and leaning against the door. The two narrow slits that passed for the droid's eyes went from a gold color to red momentarily, then back.

“You're on the list. Here,” the droid extended its hand and a small data disc, no bigger than Chance's thumb, ejected upright from its center. “All of the race information, time, location, what's allowed, what's not, is on the disc,” the droid rattled off. Plucking the small red circle from the droids palm and sliding it into his jacket, Chance winked. “Thanks chief, I'll be sure to give it the look see.” Behind him the door slid open and the sounds of voices, clinking glasses and the wail of a techno band drifted out. Several of the spectators watching the Gammorean and Barabel pulled their attention from the fight to where he stood.

Peeling from the fringe a buxom young female, with hair as red as his jacket and a mini-dress made of a sparkling translucent fiery mesh, raced to his side.

“Hey! Nice jacket!” She squealed, running her hand along his lower back, “Want a date?”

Returning the favor, Chances hand massaged the warm flesh beneath her dress. “Sure, call me Crimmer, and you are?”

“Nubine! Nubine what are you doing?!?” a disgruntled but well dressed Gran whined as he raced up to the two. “Who are you? What is going on?” three eyestalks swiveled, trying to take in everything at once.

“Sorry Grumbur, but I've found another date,” Nubine smiled, pulling herself close to Chance. The smell of flowers assaulted his nose and he had to clamp a hand over his mouth to stop himself from sneezing. The Gran, already flustered, misinterpreted the gesture and stepped back.

“You think this is funny? You think I’m some sort of soft-belly? I’ll kill you!” he challenged, jerking his yellow dinner jacket free and slinging it away. Before the garment hit the ground the red sentry droid Chance received the disc from was between them, leveling a stun baton at the Gran.

“It would be in your best interest to walk away,” it ordered, its domed head locked on the shaking Gran.

“Yeah, walk away Grumbur!” Nubine goaded.

Advancing, the Gran took no more than a step before the red droid was on top of him, hammering him to the ground with lightning fast blows from the baton.

“OW, OW! Someone get this thing offa me!” Grumbur screamed from the floor.

This time Chance did let loose with a genuine laugh, and backed slowly into the ballroom, Nubine nestled tightly by his side. “You know,” he said, looking down into her bright green eyes, “You’re trouble. I like that.” As the glass doors closed they turned to find themselves in an opulent ballroom divided at its center by a buffet table that stretched for over twenty meters, set on both sides by dozens of dinner tables.

A delicious aroma of roast meat and freshly stewed vegetables wafted across them and Chance realized he hadn’t eaten in almost a day.

Less than two hundred people filled the room, with droid waiters and servants hovering around pockets of guests, catering to their every need. The light was much more subdued than in the corridor and the techno band seemed to be knocking out some power ballads from the previous decade.

“Oooh! Open bar!” Nubine exclaimed and pulled Chance towards the room’s perimeter. Stretched off to the left a large sleek black bar hovered above the room’s maroon and gold carpet, manned by a Verpine waiter. Wiping the bartop, the waiter, dressed in a black formal jacket that pulled at various odd angles due to his physiology, regarded them with unblinking gold eyes. Stepping up to the hovering bar, Chance rapped his knuckles against the smooth lacquered counter.

“Hey partner, how about a...” he looked to Nubine who stretched her red lips into a massive grin.

“Twi’lek Lapdance!” she exclaimed.

“Yeah, one of those and a I’ll take a Bospin Royale,” Chance said, sliding a five cred chip towards the tall green alien.

Mandibles clicking together, the bartender stared at the duo for a moment, eventually looking down at the cred chip. “Ondarocks?”

“Verpinesaywhat?” Chance asked, leaning forward.

“He...he wants to know if you want your drink on the rocks,” Nubine said from beside him.

“Oh, yeah, sure,” Chance smiled. The Verpine shook its long narrow head and began making the drinks, the cred chip left untouched.

Turning and leaning back against the bar, Chance took in the crowd. As he expected, the room was a mish mash of different species and personalities; those who weren't racers were partners or friends of racers, and everyone was eating, drinking and having a good time. Near the buffet he recognized no fewer than six semi-pro swoop racers who worked the circuit in the Corporate and Elrood Sectors.

Among them, Deke Crytal, a Devornian, gestured madly to a group of three Twi'lek females, while Mili-Shen Jon, a female Human who raced near the Inner Rim, attacked a plate of vegetables with as much gusto as she attacked the swoop tracks.

“Here you are,” the bartender said from behind him. Retrieving their drinks, Chance slinked an arm around Nubine and gestured to the room. “Looks like a great party! Let's go mingle.”

The contact's name was Trevis Lorne and he unfolded himself from the shadows of the alley like a phantom, his silhouette distorted by a cloud of bright blue steam that filled the narrow corridor from some underground release valve. High above, the neon lights of Circle City's casinos bathed the alley in a continuous multicolored strobe. An ordinary sentient might have been impressed or even intimidated by the stocky man, but Terminus the Hunter was far from ordinary.

Upon entering the alleyway with Baal in tow, he used his helmet's lowlight setting to illuminate the nooks, crannies and mounds of rubbish, casting everything in a reddish tint and spotting the man several moments before he revealed himself.

“Hang back, I don't want to scare this guy off,” He told the Trianni. Nodding, Baal folded his arms and leaned against a derelict speeder chassis someone had scavenged for parts and left abandoned.

For almost six hours the duo tracked down leads and asked questions, until finally a repulsorcab driver tipped them off to the man who now stood no more than fifteen meters away.

Moving with an unusual grace Terminus attributed to former military training, Lorne had probably served in a spec forces unit or even worked for the Empire. His face was lined with various scars that disappeared into a short black beard flecked with gray; Terminus

noticed as he approached that the man had a nervous tick pulling at the corner of his mouth. Beneath a thin cloth poncho the slight hump of a blaster pistol grip sticking from his belt was causing a familiar rise in the fabric. In the back of Terminus' mind, alarms were going off.

“Chuz said you needed to talk to me. Who're you and what do you want?” Lorne was short on conversation. Terminus appreciated that.

“The name's Terminus the Hunter.”

Lorne's eyes narrowed and he stepped back, sizing the bounty hunter up from head to toe. “Izzat right? I hearda you, you a Weequay or sumtin'.”

“Yes. Or 'sumtin'. Right now however I'm a customer looking for information on Ket Adkins,” Terminus said, flipping a hundred credit coin into the air.

Snatching it on its descent, Lorne eyeballed it before slipping it beneath his poncho.

“Yeah, Chuz mentioned that name. I don't know him. Whats he look like?”

As Lorne talked, Terminus discreetly scanned the alley for any backup. More and more this was feeling like an ambush. If Ket was on planet and following them, then he would know they were looking for him. He might have someone paid off at starport authority, would have gotten the nod that the 'Skull had landed. He had the time to set up this meeting, distract them with Lorne and then when they weren't looking...

“...I said, WHAT DOES HE LOOK LIKE?”

Terminus shifted his attention back to Lorne and noticed the man was impatiently leaning forward. “Hello? Earth to Terminix, you listening?” Lorne asked.

“He wears a mask, carries a pair of blaster pistols, he's insane,” Terminus answered.

“Congrats, you just described half of Ord Mantell's population,” Lorne snickered, shaking his head. “Gonna need more...”

“The mask is midnight blue and crossed with a red lightning pattern.”

Lorne stopped smiling and seemed to go into deep thought for a moment. Flickering neon tubes caused shadows to dance in the alley. “Ok, yeah, yeah, okay, I gotcha. I seen him around...maybe a week ago...”

It didn't feel right. Terminus began searching the alleyway again, trying to spot the ambush. Perhaps Ket knew Baal was a Force user, maybe he found a way around the

Jedi's defenses. Or Lorne might be meeting Ket afterwards, divulging any information he'd gathered on Raptor Squad.

Possibilities tumbled through his head and all he could do was nod while Lorne pretended he knew little about Ket Adkins. Terminus almost believed him, but Lorne smiled too much. He was too flippant, too relaxed. He knew Ket, he knew him all too well.

"...don't know much else. Saw him in a bar asking some questions to the barkeep about the Locti Invitational and then he was gone. I only really remember him cause of the mask, ya know? Oh and he was sporting a pair of those Sentinel IV's...hey just like yours!" Lorne said, stepping back and admiring Terminus's gunbelt.

"Yes. Fine guns they are. You said he was asking about the Locti Invitational?"

"Yeah, asking about the security detail and who to talk to," Lorne shrugged.

"Right, ok, thanks," Terminus said dismissively, turning away as if to leave. "Thanks for your help."

"Right. Well, good luck," Lorne said, turning to leave in the opposite direction.

Spinning on his heel, Terminus drew his Sentinel IV and brought it up in line with the back of Lorne's scalp. Gently squeezing the trigger, the weapon discharged a dark crimson bolt that screamed as it slammed into the man's head, discharging a burst of sparks and freezing Lorne in place. Slowly, the man dropped to his knees, falling face first onto the stained permacrete.

"VIC!" Baal screamed, sprinting down the alley. Terminus, paying no attention, simply turned and strolled past the Trianni. At the end of the alley he turned back, not surprised to see the large felinoid crouched over Lorne's still twitching body.

"I would suggest you come along before you get wrapped into answering a list of unpleasant questions by sector rangers that you don't have the answers for," he called.

Baal glanced up and then back at the corpse. Slowly, he rose to his feet and jogged back to keep up with Terminus.

"What did you do that for?" Baal began. Terminus could sense the confusion and irritation from the Trianni...Nothing new there.

"Shut up. Wait a moment," Terminus ordered. They continued walking, passing several abandoned buildings and a few dance clubs catering to the lonelier tourists of Ord

Mantell. Crossing the street, several run down speeders slowed to let them pass, their drivers shouting a vocabulary of profanities at the two.

As luck would have it, Lorne had chosen the perfect spot to have their meeting. No one would likely even notice his body amid the mounds of trash until the next day and the flash of the Sentinel would have blended seamlessly with Circle City's flickering ambiance.

They walked in silence for several blocks, until finally, when he was certain they weren't being followed or watched, he turned to the brooding Trianni.

"He was working with Ket, we probably just made it out of there before the ambush."

"What? How do you know that? I sensed no danger in the alley- it was clean!" Baal protested.

"They must have some sort of Force dampening equipment. Or, if it wasn't an ambush, I'm sure he would have told Ket we were here. He was a loose end, I took care of him," Terminus scanned the abandoned streets, watching for any sign of movement. Pieces of flimplast and bits of debris blew around in the humid Ord Mantell night, but there was no sign of life. They'd moved into an industrial district and were surrounded by abandoned warehouses and factories.

"You, you don't KNOW THAT!" Baal said, his voice approaching a roar. Turning on him, Terminus jammed a finger into his partner's chest.

"BACK OFF! I do NOT need a lecture on life preservation from YOU of all people!" Terminus shouted, his voice sounding like two pieces of durasteel grinding together. Both circled each other with Baal's fists flexing at his sides. "Take a trip down memory lane Baal, you didn't have a problem with me popping that Ventral back on Pleestab when you couldn't figure out how to handle him. You kill when it's convenient and simply explain it off as 'you had no other choice'...well tonight, I didn't have any other choice!"

Both stopped and stared at each other for a moment. Baal closed his eyes and stood rock still for a moment. They needed to get out of here, even if no one found the body, he didn't want to risk a passing security detail or...

"Vic."

Terminus stopped. "What did you just say?"

"Vic," Baal repeated, eyes narrowing.

“Vic who? What are you saying?” Terminus was confused. Was there someone in the alley he hadn’t seen? Did Baal pick up on a random thought from Lorne? Did they need to track down someone named “Vic” to get to Ket?

“YOU. You are VIC PALISADES,” Baal said approaching.

“And you’re nuts,” Terminus snarled, backing up. His hands, previously hanging at his sides were now inching towards the matching Sentinels.

“Look, Vic, you’ve been under a lot of stress, I know Klux and I…” Baal began, and as Terminus listened he could feel a slight tingle along the rear of his scalp.

“Get out of my head cat man,” Terminus ordered, letting both hands drop to the grips of his sidearms. Both stared in silence for a moment and the tingle subsided.

“You wouldn’t draw those,” Baal said.

“Really? Are you so sure?”

“I just want to help,” Baal proclaimed.

Nodding, Terminus snickered, “Then help yourself Jedi. The day I need your help is the day I use these,” he slapped his gunbelt, “on myself.” Without another word, Terminus turned and walked into the dark Ord Mantell night.

Leaning easily against the hovering bar, Border Freize watched Chance Mulgrew across the ballroom and imagined a million different ways to kill him. Decapitation, dismemberment, an acid bath...nothing seemed to be quite painful enough. The red haired swoop racer was surrounded by at least a dozen other swoop racers, gesturing erratically and regaling them with some tale or another. A short red haired groupie seemed to be attached to his hip, with a smile that stretched far too wide for her face.

“Another?”

Half turning to the barkeep, Border smiled at the long green face and nodded. “Sure. Set me up, I’m going to need it in about,” he looked at the chrono on his wrist, “two minutes.”

Replacing his drink, Border turned his attention to the glass podium that occupied the center of the Ballroom’s stage. The lights momentarily dimmed and the crowd grew silent, all eyes turning towards the maroon curtain. A moment later the lights went down completely, a shaft of light pinpointing a spot in the center of the stage. Slowly, the

curtain parted and Locti, resplendent in a purple suit and slicked back hair, stepped into the spotlight, directly behind the podium.

“Ah, I see a room filled with scum, swoop racers and vagaries, MY kind of people!” he shouted into the podiums microphone. The crowd erupted in a cheer and Locti’s plump lips curled into a smile as he waved to a few of the onlookers, winking to some others. Border thought he was going to be sick. Glancing at his watch, Locti had been on stage for about two minutes. Turning, Border found his drink waiting.

“Welcome to the Locti Invitational Swoop Challenge!” he continued, “as you all know, or should know, I am Chevin Locti, and tomorrow, one of you will walk away with fifty-thousand of my own personal credits, while the others,” he paused, dipping his head conspiratorially, “will die trying.” Nervous laughter rolled about the audience, with a few swoop racers cracking jokes at the dramatic crimelord.

Rolling his eyes, Border downed his drink- a spicy red concoction he forgot the name of, hoping it would wash away the nausea he felt at the obese performer on stage.

As Locti rambled on, Border moved through the dim ballroom, easily avoiding the tables and overturned chairs blocking his way. The revelers were in full party mode, with some already passed out in chairs and a few others making obscene noises, hidden beneath the buffet table.

Mulgrew was less than ten meters away, his attention fixed on Locti at the front of the room. In one hand he held a drink, in the other his new girlfriend; Border could care less, he wanted to look Mulgrew in the eye at least once before he killed him. Tomorrow he might not get the opportunity.

“So! Enjoy yourselves and enjoy the refreshments,” Locti gestured at the buffet table, which was now moving back and forth, “As I can see some of you already have.” Laughter filled the banquet hall as Locti continued. “As they say in some circles, ‘Eat, Drink and Race! For tomorrow you die!’” Locti finished, and after another round of waving and winking, disappeared back behind the curtain.

The lights came up and Border stopped-directly behind Chance. His girlfriend was the first to notice, and as she turned, she flashed that ridiculous smile in his direction.

“Hey! Crimmer, honey, one of your friends just showed up,” She said, turning the red haired racer around while taking another hit from her drink. Border watched as Mulgrew turned, and stared directly into his eyes.

“Hello...Crimmer,” Border spat the words at the man. The nub of finger he lost began to throb and Border fought to keep his rage in check. He would be killing Mulgrew soon enough, right now he just wanted to drink in the moment

Regarding him with a blank stare, Chance took a sip from a ridiculously large mug. “You look familiar. Didn’t we race together...a long time ago?”

Speechless, Border simply smiled at the man’s ignorance. “Yes, we did.”

“Cool. Well, you know, good luck and all that,” Chance said, focusing his attention back on his girlfriend.

“You too,” Border smiled, also turning to the girl. Taking her hand he dipped low, planting a small kiss along her smooth flesh. “Allow me to introduce myself, my name is Border.”

Blushing, she refocused her attention fully to Border. “Hi! I’m Nubine,” she said. He continued holding onto her hand, enjoying the warmth of her flesh.

“Uh, yeah, hey,” Chance pulled her hand away from Border and back to his chest, “it was good seeing you Bor-Bor-” Chance stammered, trying to remember his name.

“It’s Border. Watch out for those Needleworms in the marshlands tomorrow, it’s mating season and you know how angry they can get.”

“Needle what?” Nubine asked.

“Needle worms,” Border turned to her, smiling wide, “yellow and red striped worms indigenous to Ord Mantell. They bore into your flesh and release a toxin that kills you instantly, then, when the venom is exhausted they lay eggs” Border explained.

“Yuck,” Nubine spat.

“They are unpleasant,” Border nodded, “Hey, Crimmer, remember when you planted your boot into my stabilizer back on Elrood and sent me spiraling into a nest of Cranda Snakes? That was painful, but these? These are even nastier.”

Silence hung between the trio and recognition sparked in Chances eyes. “Oh, Holy Sith, BORDER...Border-freaking-Freize,” he said, backing up several steps.

“I see you remember me. I must have looked a lot different in your rearview scanner,” Border smiled.

“Oh, so you both DO know each other!” Nubine smiled, retrieving another drink from a nearby table.

“Hey, look man, that was a long time ago. I heard you went nuts and started killing people,” Chance said, “I heard you’re wanted in like, ten systems or something.”

“I don’t keep count,” Border said smiling. “Enjoy the rest of the party Chance. Tomorrow you and I are going to settle some old debts.”

“Who’s Chance?” Nubine asked, but was ignored by both men.

“Yeah, well, you bring it on then man, I’ll have no problem kicking your lame swoop wannabe ass just like I did back on Elrood!” Chance blustered. Border could have killed him then, but it wasn’t the time or place. He would relish this moment and then tomorrow, would enjoy watching him die.

“Just watch out for those Needle Worms,” Border said, turning away and heading for the exit.

“Nice looking breakfast,” A’sok said, pulling up a chair and seating himself across from Vic. The outlaw was occupying a table in a run down restaurant parked near the rear of the spaceport. Few beings seemed to waste time making the journey through the catwalks and crowded corridors, opting instead to simply leave the ‘port and hit one of the dozens of eateries located right outside on the strip. As a result, the “Red Gundark Fryer” was nearly empty, with only a few patrons scattered around the large circular dining room beneath a dingy glassed ceiling tinted brown with dirt and age.

“Yeah, it’s today’s lunch special, I talked the cook into whipping it up since their breakfast menu looked like crap,” Vic said without looking up. “I’ve already had to kill a few bits that wanted to scramble from beneath the bread and off of the plate.” Grabbing a used napkin from a nearby table, A’sok dusted his side of the table off, so he could rest his arms without having to worry about dirtying his new suit. “Sounds lovely. My mother used to make something similar, fortunately everything was already dead by the time the plate was put in front of me,” he offered a lopsided smile. “I heard about last night.”

“Yeah, figured Baal wouldn’t waste any time making it public,” Vic replied, shoving a sandwich in his mouth and washing it down with a large plastic mug of something green. Mid-morning light filtered through the grime overhead, reflecting off of the small squares of ice that floated in the unnatural colored concoction. “It kills me. They hand out lightsabers like party favors to crackpots like Mulgrew and act like it’s no big deal. I have a bad night and all of a sudden I’m an outcast.” He shook his head and dove back into the sandwich.

“You okay? I mean, he said you kinda freaked last night, capped some guy in an alley,” leaning back, A’sok watched his friend with interest. Since he’d been partnered with the outlaw Vic had been the most stable member of the team. He had taught him a lot and had saved his life on more than one occasion; freaking out was not something he expected from Vic.

When he'd returned the following evening, Baal was already waiting for him in the lounge, and, after hearing the story, debated on whether to wake Vic up and confront him about it or let him sleep. Baal described the events as chaotic and irrational, with Vic/Terminus letting his paranoia and fear override all of his decisions- something Vic would have never let happen. After much debate he decided to let Vic rest, figuring that if the night was as rough as Baal had described, the outlaw would need his sleep.

Waving off the question, Vic took another pull of the bright green beverage. "I'm fine. I just...it was just an error in judgment I guess," Vic leaned back, pushing away the meal; the smell of cold cuts assaulted A'sok's nose and he felt his stomach flip flop.

Focusing on a pair of Grans seated in the far corner, Vic's stare glossed over and he went silent for a moment, "I mean, from what I remember anyway..."

Silence hung between them for a moment with Vic deliberately avoiding A'soks stare.

"From what you can remember?" A'sok pressed. "Vic, maybe it's time you took a few steps back from the Terminus persona. A bit of a break."

The outlaw remained silent for a moment, shrugging and downing some more of the drink, "Yeah, maybe. What have you been doing? Planning a vacation? Planting some more viruses?"

"Not entirely. I did some digging this morning in the local security detail database, found this," A'sok produced a folded piece of flimplast from his jacket and slid it across the table. Vic, licking sauce from his fingers, picked up the thin blue sheet and began to read.

"Trevis Lorne, head of Locti's security team, huh?"

"Yep," A'sok confirmed. "It says he was brought in to handle the extra crowds and security risks due to the Invitational. Also said they had no leads as to his killer, just that he had a few enemies and to look out for anyone suspicious. There was a nice pic of Locti looking all distressed about the murder, real sincere. "

"Lorne said Ket was snooping around asking about the security at Locti's. Lorne never mentioned he was in charge of Locti's security," Vic said, eyes narrowing.

"Maybe he didn't want to reveal too much."

"Yeah. Or maybe he knew more than he led on. When word got out that someone was asking around about Ket, maybe Lorne wanted to find out who it was. Hell, maybe he was reporting back to Ket for all we know." The outlaw shook his head.

"Yeah, well you know our Herglic friend? The one who sent you the package at JIE? I was able to hit the streets and turn this up..." he pulled out his datapad and inserted a disc. Info began scrolling across the screen and he showed it to Vic.

“Looks like shipping records, and bank transactions. What exactly is this?”

“This is the monetary track of someone not very careful. I threw the name around a little and was able to find out that Norber Husk had a local bank account, not much money but there were several transactions between that account and a Uuric Tuumb. Turns out Uuric Tuumb is a low level scumbag who does illegal work for credits, and it just so happens he was on planet around the time that our furry friend was shipped to us minus his insides.”

“Good job ‘Sok! Now all we need to do is find out whee-”

“Elrood Sector. Tuumb purchased a pair of tickets just a week ago to Elrood...he’s already gone,” A’sok smiled and popped the disk out handing it to Vic. All of the travel info is on there.”

“See? That’s why I keep you around-you’re the best damn hacker this side of Coruscant. We’ll hit Locti’s place tonight. Maybe with the race going on the place will be quiet and we can do some digging and see if Ket’s around or if he’s been there. Maybe the extra ticket Tuumb purchased was for his pal Ket,” Vic was staring at the thin blue sheet again, committing it to memory.

“Look, Vic,” A’sok gently pulled the flimplast away from the outlaw, “why not take some time off till all of this blows over? I mean, it’s not my place to say anything, but you’re my friend and I think maybe the stress of the few months,” he shrugged and jammed the flimplast back into his jacket, “maybe it’s just taken a heavy toll on you.”

“What? Ya think I’m losing my mind ‘Sok?” Vic asked smirking.

“What? No! Okay, yeah maybe a little. Look,” A’sok leaned forward, “You’ve been dealing with this Jedi crap for months. Ket has mailed you the remains of a freaking team member, you’ve been juggling running a thriving business back on Garnib, and the whole thing with you and Lauren, well, that seemed to take the big jump...”

“We’re just taking some time off for a bit,” Vic interjected.

“Yeah, right, until when Vic? Until some Darksider gets the drop on you and your LRB finally runs out of blaster bolts? Or until Ket pops up and instead of deciding to turn you over to the Imperials decides he’s gonna skin YOU next time? It’s like Deuce told me, we’ve been drawing the wrong kind of attention and it’s starting to catch up with us.”

Rolling his eyes, the outlaw rattled the ice cubes around in his nearly empty mug. “Great, advice from your girlfriend, if I ever let some chick start calling the shots for this team

remind me to shoot myself. Look, partner,” he gave a condescending smile, “I appreciate the concern, but it’s not as easy as just stepping away from my life.”

“Sure it is!” A’sok exclaimed throwing his hands in the air, “It’s exactly that easy! Get yourself some false ID’s, sell your business off to Bazal and head for the Outer Rim! You can live comfortably out there! With, I might add, the added benefit of someone not looking to run you through with a freaking lightsaber!”

“Great, that sounds like a lot of fun, I’ll just pack up and move away. Maybe if I’m lucky I can hire myself out as a Hutt’s henchman again when the creds run dry! And then I’ll be right back where I started, alone, with nothing to live for, wandering around with the taste of blaster barrel in my mouth. Screw that,” the outlaw shook his head and stood, dropping a cred chip on the dusty tabletop. “I’ll take my chances with the Force-retards.” A’sok stood and followed him towards the door. “It doesn’t have to be like that Vic. Look, I’ve been thinking...when I’m gone it’s just going to be you and three Jedi Ya-Hoos. If you thought you were hip deep in Jedi nonsense before, it’s going to be ten times worse when I’m gone,” A’sok stopped and grabbed Vic’s arm, turning him around.

“At least bail out of there man, get away from those guys and just find another crew to run with. If not, you are going to be at their mercy and with the kind of attention they attract...”

“I can’t do that,” Vic said, still staring towards the starports bustling crowd.

Confusion clouded A’sok face. “Vic, why the hell do you stay with them? What could you possibly hope to gain?”

The outlaw didn’t respond at first, finally shrugging his shoulders. “I can’t just quit Raptor Squad ‘Sok. For the longest time I was on the run, and this is the first stability I’ve been able to find. Hopefully someday I’m going to be able to go home and make things right, but for right now I gotta take the good with the bad.”

He turned and A’sok could see that Vic had made up his mind, and that no amount of discussion or coercion would turn him away from his path.

“A life on the run isn’t a life worth living.”

Without another word, the outlaw walked away, disappearing into the glut of foot traffic that filled the spaceports corridor.

The warmth of Ord Mantell’s afternoon sunlight poured through the hotel window, causing Chance to crack his eyes and roll over. The smell of perfume and alcohol filled his nostrils and he buried his face in his pillow as he slowly drug himself into semi-consciousness.

Bits and pieces of the previous evening began to fall into place and he smiled, remembering that he and Nubine had left the party late, continuing the good times back in his complimentary hotel room on the eighty-third floor of the Hourglass.

“Man that was some night, it’s been a while since I grappled with someone as fine as you,” he said to Nubine who lay beneath the blankets to his left. Rolling over, he nuzzled the back of her neck, breathing in the sweet scent of her fiery red hair. “After I win the race tonight, we should get some dinner and come back here, I like nothing better than winning on and off the track,” he chuckled, sliding his hand around her waist and massaging the soft flesh of her abdomen.

Turning her over, he pulled her hair away from her face and smiled. Still asleep, she looked like an angel, and found her full red lips too inviting to ignore. Leaning down, he gently pressed his mouth against hers, playfully sliding his tongue across her lips; Her tongue met his, and he playfully flicked at it.

Without warning her tongue clamped onto his and he jerked away, dragging a writhing red and yellow needleworm from her open mouth.

“Gah!” Chance screamed, grasping the insects’ slick wet body, trying to pull it off. Planting his bare foot against Nubine’s corpse, Chance pushed off of the bed, landing squarely on the hotel room floor. On the opposite side of the bed, Nubine’s lifeless body thudded to the floor in a heap.

The creature’s hind legs, clamped tightly onto his tongue, refused to yield, while the remainder of its body viciously attempted to double back on itself and lance the young swoop racer with a lethal set of mandibles.

Running out of options, Chance, gripping onto the slick half meter long body, opened wide and clamped his teeth down like a vice, severing the Needleworms twisting rear segment from the rest of its body in a gout of viscous yellow blood and entrails that sprayed across his bare flesh and the busy confetti pattern of the room’s carpet.

Slinging the still twitching body across the room, Chance hit his knees and began to retch, regurgitating the Needleworms rear segment and all of the drinks and appetizers he consumed the previous evening onto the floor.

He lay there for what seemed like hours, staring at Nubine’s pale dead face and waiting for death. When it didn’t come he pulled himself from the puddle of retch and crawled to her body, gently rubbing her face with his unsteady hand. Pulling a sheet from the bed, he wrapped her body in a makeshift burial shroud and mustered the strength to haul her body back onto the bed’s large mattress. The night before she seemed as light as a feather, but death had replaced a beautiful vibrant girl with a heavy, rigid lump.

On unsteady legs, Chance managed to make it into the refresher, gripping the crystal wash basin with both hands, he forced himself to look up.

The person who looked back at him from the mirror was a sickly, pale freckled mess of anguish and he almost hurled again just looking at himself.

“Border you bastard, when I’m done with you, you’re gonna wish I was the one you killed last night,” he muttered around his swollen tongue.

“We’ll make him suffer before we take his life, young one,” Coba’s voice whispered from behind.

“Why didn’t you wake me? What didn’t you tell me he was in the room!?!” Chance screamed, looking beyond his reflection at the red specter that stood with folded arms behind him. Coba’s artifact was hidden in Chances duffel bag on the floor, just meters from Nubines body.

“I’m not omniscient Chance, I was as unaware of Border’s presence as you were,” Coba explained, with an even, almost gentle voice. “But, now, you must pull from this rage, use it, to destroy him and claim his death as your own.”

“I-I’m not sure if I can race now. Nubine, she’s dead, there will be questions, the authorities will be here. I need to...”

Coba shook his head and his reflection regarded Chance with a narrow angry stare. “No apprentice of mine should worry about such trivial matters. You have a lightsaber do you not?”

A cold ball knotted in the center of Chance’s empty stomach and he felt his bare body go icy cold. “Yuh...yeah.”

“Of course you do. And you’ve been wanting to learn how to use it,” Coba smiled and strolled closer to Chance, now directly behind the young swoop racer. “Lightsabers are wonderful tools Chance. They can cut flesh with absolutely little loss of blood,” he said leaning forward and whispering in the young mans ear. “So, all we need to do, is bring Nubines body into the refresher, place her in the tub...”

Chance almost lost his lunch again. “What!?! You’re insane! I’m not going to cut her up and...”

“Then how does prison sound Chance!?! Freize has pull in this town, pull that will implicate you as a murder and allow him to go free! Do you want to spend the rest of your days languishing in a cold cell as your life drains away? Do you really think you would even last more that a few weeks? The scum in those places would pass you around like an appetizer and then kill you without a second thought. I’m offering you a way out Chance! Now, pull yourself together and show some guts! Or is it true what your partners say? That you are nothing more than a spoiled brat who is incapable of taking care of business when the time requires it?”

“That’s not true! I...” Holding his bile in check, Chance felt an odd surge of strength power through his body, and Coba’s words, that just moments ago sounded like the suggestion of a madman, actually seemed now to make perfect sense. “I know what I need to do, I’ll take care of it.” Moments later he had Nubine’s rigid body propped upright in the fresher. In his right hand he gripped his lightsaber like a live serpent that was ready to strike. This isn’t right, he thought to himself and, for a moment felt his determination waver.

“Master, I’m not sure about this...it just seems...wrong,” he whispered to Coba who stood in the refreshers doorway. Memories of Nubines smile and her warm body raced through Chance’s mind as he stared at her now glazed dead green eyes.

“Sometimes, to retain power and to ensure our existence, we must do things that we find distasteful,” Coba said. “It’s the only way Chance, just be careful and precise.”

Nodding, Chance ignored the hollow feeling in his stomach and triggered the saber to life, casting the refresher in a pale blue glow.

“Yes Master,” he whispered, and, ignoring Nubines dead stare, went to work.

“You really think Ket is on Locti’s payroll?” A’sok asked, tugging at the uncomfortable fabric of his armored suit. The outfit was a handsome ensemble of navy and maroon, finished off with a heavy topcoat capable of stopping a blast bolt at close range. Vic, seated next to him in the cab, wore a matching outfit of a different cut in green and black. Both carried their blaster pistols in the small of their backs and artificial facial hair to conceal the lower half of their face.

“Maybe, Lorne acted like he didn’t know much about him but that really doesn’t mean anything. If Ket is calling the shots for Locti then Lorne was nothing more than a mouthpiece,” Vic stared out the window into Ord Mantell afternoon at the rapidly approaching palace.

Set atop a bluff and overlooking the violent waves of the planets’ main ocean, Locti’s estate was a series of large circular buildings connected by grand staircases and arcing walkways that connected the upper levels of the minor buildings to the main palace. Circling the structure was a large stone wall, obscured by rows of light tan colored trees, their transparent upper branches seemingly carved from crystal and budded with tiny yellow flowers.

“Coryluzha trees, you harvest the sap you got a powerful-and expensive aphrodisiac,” Vic said, nodding at the foliage.

“Really? How do you know that?” A’sok asked, leaning forward beside their droid driver to get a better look through the taxi’s windshield.

Vic shrugged, pulling at his fake beard, “Did you forget what I did part-time? Some of the actors I worked with used to use it to... anyway, it’s not a secret. Locti advertises how he made his money to everyone he talks to. Ask any bartender and they’ll tell ya.”

“So how we play this bossman, cool, collected? Slide in, look around, see if we can finger Ket and take him out quiet like?”

“That’s the plan.”

The taxi pulled through an ornate gate of polished metal and began a long trek up a paved circular drive. As the taxi slowed near a pair of large doors that formed a circular entrance two armored guards in matching white uniforms waved the taxi to a stop.

Flipping a credit into the front seat of the repulsortaxi, A’sok straightened his collar and stepped from the vehicle-and stared directly into the muzzle of a blaster rifle.

“Uh...partner?” A’sok asked, sliding his eyes from the weapon over the top of the taxi to Vic, who was being similarly covered. The driver, his metallic domed head swiveling to take in the action, dropped the hammer and sped off in a high pitched whine of repulsors.

“Easy Chapper,” Vic said using A’sok agreed upon alias, “I’m sure these boys are just mistaken, treating a pair of Locti’s old friends like...”

“Shut up human,” A’soks guard growled. Beyond the faceplate of the white helmet he could just make out the reptilian features of a Trandoshan. “March!” it ordered, waving A’sok towards the front door. Falling in beside Vic, he lowered his voice to a whisper.

“How the hell did they know we were coming?”

Eyes forward, Vic’s brow was wrinkled, a puzzled look on his face. “It’s got to be Ket. He must be waiting for us. Lets ride this out, see what happens.”

The large circle of brushed durasteel parted before them and they marched through a large foyer; resplendent in rich tapestries and statuary the anteroom was hazy with the smoke of hundreds of cigarras and smoldering death sticks. Beings of all species filled the room, milling about on grav couches, sipping cocktails from delicate stemware and watching he and Vic through heavy lidded eyes with bored curiosity.

He had the feeling this kind of thing happened a lot, which didn’t bode well for their situation. Decorated in white and blue, the room’s cool colors gave off an almost arctic appearance and a chill air caused A’sok to think back to his conversation with Vic on Garnib.

If Ket in fact did have the drop on them this might be the last place he would ever lay his eyes on. A dull ache in his chest accompanied memories of Deuce and A’sok thought of the blaster the guards had left untouched still tucked into the rear of his belt. If need be they would just have to blast their way out...no way they would go down without a fight.

Parting the sea of riff raff with snarls and shoves, the guards led them through a thick white curtain behind which a smaller triangular opening slid apart, allowing them onto the landing of a vast banquet hall.

Below, in stark contrast to the cool, blue lethargic scene they'd just drifted through-red and gold assaulted their sight as bodies writhed and mingled among a sea of plush extravagant pillows and knee-high tables littered with food and drink. Instead of the predominant smell of spice, the greasy stench of alcohol, sweat and hormones hit them like a brick, its force matched only by the thumping of an electronic band situated in the back.

A'sok took two steps and froze in place.

Dangling from the clear branches of a Coryluzah tree that jutted from the center of the room's largest table, hung the head of Chevin Locti. His body, a grisly forgotten centerpiece still bound to the tree trunk, stood upright while a nest of female Zeltrons wrestled and tussled with a male customer not more than a meter away. When one turned, he could even make out streaks of dried blood along her bare body.

"Vic...what should we do?" A'sok asked, unable to remove his eyes from the free flowing nightmare before him.

"What should we do? Kill em' all...we'd be doing the galaxy a favor," Vic snarled, eyes darting from one transgression to another.

The guards, also taking a moment to ogle the display, eventually got around to nudging them towards the head of the steep polished stone staircase that led down into the hall. They were no more than halfway down when an obese pale Twi'lek, face twisted in a euphoric grin, pulled away from the embrace of a horned blue female and intercepted them on the staircase.

"Eh, what do we have here? More guest for my inauguration?" he asked, his tongue lapping at a bit of sweat on his upper lip.

"No sir, just some more of Locti's personal 'friends'," one of the guards answered.

"Eh? Personal friends huh?" The Twi'lek eyed the two suspiciously. "Well, as you can see," he gestured to the center of the room and Locti's decapitated body, "your friend Locti is in no condition to entertain guests, however," he turned back, lips parted in a ghastly smile, "let it never be said that Elak Gesslo doesn't take care of good friends of Chevin Locti!"

"Uh, we were really more acquaintances than friends..." A'sok interjected.

"Of course you were," Gesslo nodded, smile never reaching his eyes, "take them to the pit."

Jamming his thumb angrily against the swoops controls, Chance rocketed along the busy streets of Ord Mantell, swerving in and out of traffic with the precision of an ace fighter pilot. Horns blared and a wave of profanities followed in his wake but he paid it all little mind, focusing instead on the face of Border Freize that danced before him in his minds eye. Without warning, a black and silver speeder swerved erratically before him to avoid an abandoned vehicle and Chance, without realizing what he was doing, jerked his controls violently, sending his swoop up onto the sidewalk and around the vehicle, settling back onto the street more smoothly than he could imagine.

“Your reflexes are exceptional,” Master Coba whispered inside his mind.

“Thank you Master,” Chance murmured under his breath. The key was nestled in his right rear swoop saddlebag, wrapped in a silk bedsheet he took from the Hourglass Casino.

“You are well on your way to becoming my most successful apprentice,” the cracked voice continued to whisper. “You handled the situation at the hotel was well as any Sith Master. You recognized what needed to be done and did it. Exceptional.”

Chance nodded as gleaming orange and tan buildings glinted in the early afternoon light. He was rocketing near the edge of Circle City proper, the race course less than five kilometers away past an abandoned starship graveyard and at the beginning of a 300 km long stretch of rocky desert terrain and hardship. “I’m going to make him pay for killing her,” he snarled.

“Of course. Last night you dined on lust, tonight you dine on revenge,” Cobas voiced seethed.

“The last time we raced, I ended his career, tonight I’m going to end his life,” Chance snarled, rocketing past the graveyard. Hundreds of twisted and blasted starship hulls peppered the landscape, creating a dark lethal maze of twisted durasteel. The scent of decay and rust smacked him in the face as he shot by beneath the long shadows cast by the broken dreams of a thousand spacers. Directly ahead, beside several large hovervans loaded with broadcast equipment, a massive canvas tent with open sides stood anchored to the ground.

Swoops and racers buzzed in and out like insects while a swarm of hovering camera droids moved in unison around the tents perimeter.

Bypassing the hive of racers, Chance stopped at a makeshift sign-in station and checked his swoops diagnostic display and saw that everything was still in the green. Even after

punishing his swoop throughout the ride to the race the vehicle hadn't dipped into the orange once. He smiled in pride at the job he and LZ had done to upgrade the hunk of garbage he'd salvaged from the bowels of the Skullduggery.

The same boxy red droid that stood sentry at the previous evenings ball was logging racers info and directing them where to park from a dented durasteel podium. So far, over twenty racers had taken their mark, each one separated by a brightly colored fuel drum.

"You'll need to leave that here," the droid ordered, pointing to the blaster slung from Chances hip. Grudgingly he removed the sidearm and handed it over. He wasn't worried, his lightsaber, disguised as a glowrod, lay beneath his tools in his saddlebag. Chance took the directions and slowly scanned the starting line for Freize, spotting no signs of the madman.

The swoops were as colorful and exotic as their riders. Several color-coded their outfits to mesh with the schemes of their vehicles, while others looked as though they were better suited to be working on the swoops rather than riding them.

"Ho! Crimmer!" A thin yellow alien waved as he cruised his swoop slowly into his designated slot. The aliens' forehead was wide and intelligent black orbs stared from under a low brow. Situated beside his slot, the alien was kneeling and tinkering with the exhaust ports on a brown and yellow swoop with gold trim. A pair of legs poked out from beneath the vehicle, apparently belonging to the racer's mechanic. Chance ignored the alien and turned in his seat, scanning the tent area for Freize. Amid the mass of movement he spotted racers from the party the night before, along with the usual hangers on-groupies, lowlifes and oddsmakers. Still no Freize.

"HO, CRIMMER," the alien shouted again from behind him.

"Look, pal, I'm not interested in making small talk," Chance said turning.

Staring back was the owner of the swoop and the man previously hidden beneath its engines, a Gran by the name of Parrick Lornda.

"Poodoo on a stick," Chance spat, instantly going for his absent blaster pistol. The last he'd seen of Lornda was a glimpse in his rearview scanner back on Etti IV, when he passed the Gran to take a championship race that bagged him a large purse-and even larger price on his head.

"Ho, take it easy there 'Crimmer'," Lornda smiled, knowing full well Chance's real name, "I just came to offer you a whole big batch of good luck." Lornda extended a grimy hand towards the young swoop racer, his mouth stretching back to reveal a row of large square teeth.

Straightening his jacket, Chance stood up straight and tall. He may not have his blaster but he was far from defenseless. "I don't shake with the competition," he said, letting the darkside pulse through his veins like venom.

Shrugging, the Gran dropped his hand. "Doesn't matter, when Ploovo told me you were racing I knew I was going to have to get a piece of you before Border did. You stuck your head out of a hole and it's about to get run over-nerfstick."

Staring intently at the shorter racer, Chance focused on Lornda's three eyestalks, and mentally pierced his brain with the Force.

"You'll do no such thing, in fact, you'll get on your swoop and forget you ever saw me," Chance said quietly.

Puzzlement contorted the Grans face and his head cocked at a curious angle. "I...I'm going to get on my swoop and..." he didn't finish, instead, nodding, he turned from Chance and climbed atop his swoop. Without another word he began occupying himself with the vehicles controls.

"Easy as Dianoga pie," Chance snickered, climbing atop his own swoop. Deep within his saddlebag, Master Coba snickered right along with him.

"Today is the day of Chances swoop race and he's not been back. I've been meditating and I sense Vic and A'sok may be in danger," Baal planted his fists on his hips and stood staring while Klux tinkered with his R2 unit, Two-ee. The Jedi, clothed in a pair of green JIE coveralls, sat nestled in a tiny alcove in the cargo hold with his back to the Trianni.

"Apparently, one of us has had a lot of free time. I'm busy," Klux responded, briefly glancing at the Trianni over his shoulder and turning back to the small black and white R2 unit. The droid, still functional, swiveled its silver dome between the two Jedi and emitted a low whistle.

"This isn't a joke, they may need our help."

Still peering inside the R2's chassis, Klux twisted at something with a hydrospanner, not bothering to look up. "Vic can take care of himself. If he needed our help he would comm."

“What if he can’t? What if Ket has scrambled their transmissions? We can’t be certain he even has the ability to...”

“Frell!” Klux screamed, slinging the hydrospanner across the empty bay. Snapping to his feet in one motion he turned, shaking his head and brushing past Baal. “Can’t you just leave me alone? Do you constantly have to be hovering over me or telling me what to do or running to me with every insignificant thought that clouds that feline brain of yours?”

The sudden aggressiveness caught Baal off guard. “I thought you would want to know! I thought we were all a part of the same team!” he screamed after the Jedi. Nearing the bay door, Klux stopped and spun, eyebrows arched in interest.

“WE? You thought WE were a team?” Klux marched back across the hold until he was less than a meter away, the echo of his footfalls reverberating through the large empty space. “Where was this ‘WE’ when ‘YOU’ ‘lost’ our only form of proper training? Where was this ‘WE’ when it came time to train Chance?”

“You have no proof I even did anything...” Baal began. Internally he began counting down from one hundred, forcing his breathing to come in short controlled waves.

“You’re right Baal. I didn’t specifically see you take the holocron and hide it, no,” Klux crossed his arms, “but I damn sure know I don’t have it. So who would it have been? Vic? A’sok? Neither of them have ANY interest in the Force or its tools, so I don’t see that all of a sudden changing,” he stared at Baal with wide accusing eyes. “I know for a fact you’ve hid the holocron before so neither Chance nor I could access it, I have little doubt you would do it again.”

Shaking his head, Baal waved away the accusation dismissively, “Chance is, he’s not following his training, he’s become bitter...angry...impossible to train any further.”

“And? We just ignore him because he’s bitter and angry? Then why the hell did we decide to train him to begin with? He’s ALWAYS been bitter and angry!” Klux threw his hands up in the air.

Both stared at each other in silence for a beat, their eyes locked onto each other like tractor beams. His lip curling into a smirk, Klux slowly turned away and continued towards the cargo bay doors.

“I’m tired of this. I’m tired of fighting, I’m tired of arguing and I’m tired of going over the same thing time and time again,” Klux said reaching the cargo bay door, “Most importantly Baal, I’m damn tired of you,” and without another word, the Jedi exited the cargo bay, leaving Baal standing alone.

The guards were less than gentle, shoving Vic and A'sok through a trapdoor set into a long broad balcony on the backside of Locti's mansion. Sliding along a steep and unstable slope covered in fine granules of sand, Vic slammed first into the ground, followed closely by A'sok. Rolling into a crouch, he drew the Sentinel IV from the small of his back and aimed towards the trap door, but it was too late. The large durasteel had already been dropped, sealing he and A'sok in a circular arena, dimly illuminated by several blue glowing orbs set deep into the stone walls.

"Seems cozy. Maybe they'll send us some lum and dancing girls to kill time," A'sok cracked, glancing around as he dusted his suit off.

"I tend to doubt that," Vic said, stepping over to the coarse rock wall and pulling a lethal spiked mace from a rusted hook. Turning the weapon over he tapped it lightly with the barrel of the Sentinel. "Dried blood," he squinted, focusing on a far wall, "looks like they've got these party favors hanging all around this dump."

An audible "crack" brought their attention to the opposite end of the arena, over twenty meters away. In the gloom he could just barely make out a vertical crease of blackness stretching from the floor to the durasteel ceiling, slowly creeping wider and wider. Guttural hissing preceded movement, and both watched as two creatures, easily three meters tall and chiseled with corded muscle flexing beneath a dark scaly red hide emerged into the arena. Yellow eyes glinted with ferocity as the reptilians flexed their thick arms that ended in razor sharp claws as long as vibroblades dragging the floor.

"So much for the friendly atmosphere," A'sok said, drawing his blaster from the small of his back.

Vic recognized the creatures almost immediately. "Our guests are called Mantellian Savrips," Vic checked the blast charge on his Sentinel. "They are Big, nasty and..." One of the creatures opened his maw, issuing a bellow that powered up from a thick long neck and past rows of dripping spiked fangs, drowning out every other sound in the arena.

"...loud," Vic finished.

Paler than usual, A'sok gripped his blaster in both hands, bringing the slightly wavering barrel to bear on the advancing nightmares. "Any advice on taking out these creature features Bossman?"

Leveling his own weapon, Vic steadied his breathing and took aim. "Yeah, don't miss."

Watching from what used to be the aft engine section of a Delta Class Zaunturian frigate, Border lounged easily against his swoop and adjusted his macrobinoculars while chewing on a stick of stingum. Over three kilometers away, the tiny figure of Chance Mulgrew

went for his blaster pistol, and, realizing it wasn't there, dropped his hands and began speaking to Parrick Lornda.

Anticipating a brawl, Border leaned forward, tapping the tiny yellow button atop the binoculars to magnify the impending tussle. Wind, coursing through the many ports and crevices of the frigate, caused the metal corpse to clatter and groan. Beneath his feet the deck plating shifted back and forth almost imperceptibly. When no fight erupted and Lornda returned to tinkering with his swoop, Border curled his face in confusion and chewed rapidly at the tangy sweet lump of gum in his mouth.

“Odd. I expected more fireworks,” he mused aloud.

“Thought you wanted Mulgrew all to yourself,” a voice behind him asked. Smiling, he turned and nodded to the Nikto gingerly picking his way around the charred refuse. He was wrapped in a worn, dark knee length canvas cloak and toting a matte black case nearly as long as he was tall. This he set delicately on the ground beside a pair of camouflaged green combat boots.

Vorrage ‘Nazza was old, cantankerous, but entirely professional and very, very lethal. Border had secured his services once he heard Mulgrew was on planet, anticipating and covering all bases.

“Nice to see you could make it. I trust the wife and kids are doing well?” Border smiled.

“Still dead and buried where I left em’,” Vorrage replied humorlessly. Squinting, he dug a fingernail into a spot on his spiked cheek and scratched. A tiny droplet of blood surfaced on his weathered greenish skin but he seemed not to notice. “So you said Mulgrew is the target-right?”

Jerking a thumb over his shoulder towards the racecourse, Border turned all business.

“Right, he’s racing under the name Crimmer, he’s on the red bike in the red racing gear, and has a head of red hair to boot,” Border offered the binocs to Vorrage who waved them away. “But look, I don’t want you to kill him, he’s all mine.”

Vorrage shrugged, black eyes staring beyond Border and towards the distant racetrack.

“Then what are you payin’ me for? To take pics for your holoalbum?”

“Insurance,” Border replied, pulling on a pair of white leather racing gloves and straddling his glacier-white swoop. “Mulgrew may have some company arriving up to stir things up a bit, it’s your job to make sure they aren’t a factor.”

“Uh-huh. Leave the redhead, vape his buddies. Got it. Anyone in particular I should be looking for?”

“Reports vary, but rumor has it he’s running with a big blue felinoid, a couple of humans and possibly Terminus the Hunter.”

The Niktos eyes, previously narrow slits focused on the horizon, grew wide and darted towards Freize.

“Terminus?” Vorrage asked, almost choking on the name.

“Yeah, I’m sure it’s just some goof trying to make a name for himself. Wait- don’t tell me you believe all of those myths,” Border asked, allowing a smirk to pull up the corner of his mouth.

Vorrage stared at him, eyes narrowing again. “Boy, I’ve seen a lot of things in my time...and any of those “myths” could be true. Who am I to judge a legend?”

“Right, right,” Border chuckled. “I especially like the one where he’s a scarred Weequay half-breed who surfaces once every ten years for revenge. I don’t need you to judge him, I just need you to kill him-or whoever it is playing masquerade under that helmet.”

“Don’t matter to me none, but it does bump the price of this job up an additional five thousand creds.”

“That wasn’t the agreement, and you’ve already been paid!” Border snapped, smile disappearing. This wasn’t funny and he wasn’t fond of renegotiations.

“Consider it a myth-killing tax. But if you ain’t willing to pay, I’m sure you can find another shooter in,” Vorrage checked his chrono, “seventeen minutes.” Blood rushed into his face and roared in his ears. Struggling to keep his rage in check, Border reminded himself that he still needed this piece of Nikto trash. “Fine, fine! Just do the job and we’ll settle later!” he snarled through gritted teeth.

“Sure boy,” Vorrage slowly dropped to one knee and opened the flat black case at his feet. Inside, the components of a sniper rifle gleamed in the Ord Mantell afternoon. “Legend, feline, man, woman, child-for the right price old Vorrage will put a hole in the middle of anyone’s head.”

“I hope that’s true Vorrage,” Border drew up the zipper to his white racing leathers below his chest, “because if I have to take time away from killing Crimmer to deal with his friends, you can use your ‘tax’ to buy yourself a headstone.”

Angling his glider so that its wide blue wings caught a hold of a crosswind, Baal glided high above Chevin Locti's palace, reaching out to touch the minds of his teammates with the Force.

While the short distance shouldn't have had any effect, the height, the crashing waves of the ocean far below and the circling of various avian caused just enough distraction that he was unable to establish a connection with either Vic or A'sok.

Gripping the handholds on the gliders wings, he descended slowly in a spiral, aiming for a small grove of trees near the rear of the palace.

While the sun was still visible in the afternoon sky, the wind coming off of the ocean was cool, cutting through Baals gray cloak and tunic and flattening his fur against his face.

Hitting the ground, his landing had every reason to fail, as his speed, angle of trajectory and the unevenness of the terrain all conspired together to cause the large felinoid crash violently head first into the ground. But Baal, at the last instant, detached from the constricting chest harness and dove, using his powerful leg muscles and natural agility to hit the ground and propel himself into a flawless cartwheel.

Immediately scanning the area, he detected no signs of activity surrounding the palace. From various open windows he could hear the caustic beat of some techno-synth music, but little else.

Walking back to his glider, he picked it from the ground and folded the apparatus into a small collapsible bundle, securing it to the rear of a nearby tree until he was ready to depart. He'd argued briefly with Vic about the practicality of the item, glad now that he's used his better judgment and proceeded with the purchase. Otherwise, he would have had to arrive in a repulsorcab-and a seven foot tall Trianni arriving unannounced in a repulsorcab was sure to draw the wrong kind of attention.

Ensuring that his lightsaber was concealed but accessible, Ball drew his claws through his fur, straightened his cloak and advanced towards the shadows of the palace. The afternoon sun was quickly descending, and the front lawn of the estate grew dark with cast shadows. High above, birds and other creatures called out to one another, their singing voices married with the crashing of the distant waves. At any other time Baal might have stopped to take in the serene setting, but not now. He was here to do a job and needed to find a way in that wouldn't raise suspicion.

A paralyzing jolt caught him directly between the shoulder blades and sent him stumbling, face first into the trimmed green lawn. He was just able to turn over when his attacker was on him.

Gears whirred and snapped as a ton of sleek metal and machinery lunged furiously at the Trianni. Its canine maw was filled with the barrel of a massive stun blaster, already dancing with the blue electricity of its next discharge. Red eyes, intent on annihilating the intruder, glowed angry in the shadow of the palace.

Still reeling from the stun blast, Baal let his reflexes take over, grasping at the two massive claws that dug into his chest and pulling them up. Both were locked in a struggle of strength, with the droid's hydraulics pulsating and Baals muscles throbbing. Neither gave

an inch and in the back of his mind the Jedi wondered why the Force had not warned him of the attack. Heaving, he was able to force the droid up farther, but not before it discharged another blast, this one slamming painfully into his shoulder. Pulling on the Force, he managed to remain conscious-but just barely. A whirlwind of options tumbled through his mind, but the guard droid was pressing further, and between the tHrobbing encompassing his back and shoulder it was all he could do just to keep the droid at bay. He realized, too late, that his lightsaber lay pinned beneath him-inaccessible by either of his hands.

Calming himself, his last chance was to use the Force to push the creature from his body, focusing all of his energy, he was about to let loose with a blast of telekinesis when the droid discharged yet another stun blast, this one directly into his chest. Instead of forcing the droid guardian from his body, Baal felt his arms growing weak, and darkness begin to close in on him.

“Racers, scoundrels and cutthroats! Welcome to the Gesslo Invitational!” Elak Gesslo’s face smiled broadly from the round hovering holo display drifting above the racecourse.

Chance looked up, watching the black polished repulsordisk float evenly above the field of racers. Gesslo’s face was easily ten meters tall, allowing the racers and the spectators camped on either side of the opening stretch a superb view of the sweating Twi’lek.

“As you all may know, Chevin Locti has fallen on some...unfortunate...times,” Gesslo smiled even wider, showing lines of sharp teeth. Rumbblings of concern and frustration began growing throughout the swoop racers. Over forty of the galaxies best illegal racers stretched across the barren dirt track, swoops whining with the energy of primed repuslor engines.

“However!” Gesslo continued, “That doesn’t mean that I, your new sponsor, wont be taking care of you, in fact,” he leaned forward, his holo practically headbutting the racing banner stretched across the course, “Today’s winner won’t take home a mere fifty thousand credits, they will take home a hundred!”

The roar of cheers and screams drowned out the whine of engines and the racers, before merely leaning back and watching Gesslos pre-race speech, now furiously checked their vehicles, making any last minute adjustments.

Chance too leaned forward, but he was as ready as he would ever be. His swoop was primed, he had the Force and there was nothing that was going to stand in his way of a hundred grand, Border Freize or no.

“So! As I’m sure you’re engines are primed, lets see how primed you are!” Gesslo challenged, and instantly his pasty face was replaced with a digital countdown starting at ten.

Nerves turned Chance’s stomach inside out, but he calmed himself, letting his breathing even out and allowing the Force to flow from within. The timer ticked down for what seemed like an eternity, each numeral pulsating yellow.

Hitting “0” the display turned a right red and Chance jammed his thumb violently against his accelerator switch, sending his swoop, along with forty-three others, lurching from the start line. Almost immediately two explosions rocked the course, as racers fell victim to the unfortunate law of illegal swoop racing: anything goes. Not bothering to look behind, Chance sandwiched himself between Lornnda on his left and a female Bothan named “Creb’sall” on his right. As the barren track turned quickly into a valley lined on both sides by high canyon walls, a field of crags and boulders sprung to life in the distance, casting abnormal shadows that hid and obscured smaller, yet no less lethal, protrusions. Some racers, those with an already sizeable lead, chose to push their swoops high, sailing unobstructed over the hazards. This only worked for a few, as one racer’s engine cut out, sending him twisting wildly and crashing into a large brown boulder. The explosion spat debris and fire in every direction, obscuring part of the path with a billow of smoke. Chance veered to go around the obstruction, but at the last minute juked, shooting rapidly through the black smoke and untouched through the other side. To his left, Lornnda took the same path, dropping slightly behind Chance’s lead. Behind him he heard another explosion and glanced instinctively to his right.

Exploding like a star gone nova, Creb’sall’s swoop tore into a narrow pillar of stone, peppering the air and ground with flaming bits of vehicle and Bothan. Instantly Chance realized had he not altered his course, he too would have suffered the same fate.

“Pay attention my young apprentice, let the Force guide you,” Coba hissed. Staring intently ahead, Chance cleared his mind and focused on the Ord Mantell horizon. Before him, lay hundreds of kilometers of swampland, savannah and some of the most diabolical traps ever conceived-created for the sole purpose of killing racers. It was going to be a long and arduous race, and Chance would need every advantage he could get to make it through alive.

Hands trembling slightly, A’sok squeezed off a round from his modified hold-out blaster, the yellow shaft of energy heating the air around his hands and illuminating the pit with a momentary flash. The screaming bolt crossed the expanse to the leftmost Savrip, slamming into its chest with a thud, and causing the creature to freeze in place as a fine tendril of smoke drifted from the tiny scorch mark.

Instead of dropping, the creature stared at the scorch, redirecting its eyes, now wide with rage, back on A’sok. In a flash both were scrambling towards he and Vic, voice bellowing and fangs dripping in anticipation of a fresh meal.

“Frag!!!” Vic shouted, unloading on the right Savrip with the Sentinel. Red blaster fire created almost a constant stream as it peppered the creature’s head and shoulders with deadly energy blasts.

A’sok followed suit, forcing himself to stay calm and direct his fire into the burning yellow eyes of his target, and while some hit near, no shot actually found purchase in the creature’s eye sockets. Infuriated, the creature slowed, throwing up a massive arm against the needling shots.

Weapon, growing warm in his hands, A’sok noticed the digital light on the rear of the hold-out go from yellow to red, signifying his blaster was about out of juice. By his estimation he still had at least five more shots.

“We need to move!” Vic screamed, jerking A’sok by the arm and leading him towards the left side of the pit and farther from the advancing pair of nightmares. The Savrips, stunned by the flurry of blaster fire, bellowed loudly, and seemed to devise their own plan of attack. Splitting apart, they circled around either side of A’sok and Vic, keeping a bit of a distance but edging forward slowly.

“This isn’t looking good Bossman,” A’sok said as he and Vic turned, back to back.

“Hold off, let them close in, at about two meters, aim for the eyes.”

“Two meters? Their breath will be able to kill us at two meters!”

“Steady....”

Flesh smoking from the various blaster hits, the Savrips closed in on opposite sides. Ten meters dwindled to eight, then to six. Sweat saturating his hands, A’sok clutched his hold-out and squinted, keeping the Savrips wide yellow orb of eyeball nestled between the sights on his weapon. Given the momentary lapse of firing, the blasters’ plasteel housing had cooled.

Five meters.

He was having success at calming himself when a question, like an uninvited guest, bulldozed its way through a locked back door in his mind and elbowed past his every other concern to stand defiantly before him. Panic surged through his body.

“Vic?”

“Uh...Yeah?” The outlaw shifted behind him.

Four meters.

“On hold out blasters, once the energy designator goes red you still have five shots left, just like with regular blasters, right? Right?”

Three meters.

“Damn it A’sok,” he heard Vic curse. The resignation in his partners voice answered his question-and spelt out his own doom.

Snarling, the Savrip closed within two meters of A’sok, its thick heavily muscled frame towering above him. Its face, normally a deep red, stared down at its prey, now a crusted charred mess of burnt and blackened scales. Black fluid oozed from various wounds, mixing with long streams of drool that fell from glistening fangs to the ground before him. Saying a silent prayer, A’sok drew a bead on the creatures eyeball, squeezing the trigger as the Savrip, arms wide out to its side, lunged forward.

Skirting the Ord Mantell ground at suicidal speed, Border paid little attention to the several black mushroom clouds dotting the unforgiving landscape. Directly ahead, several stragglers tried in vain to catch up with the pack, refusing to acknowledge that their vehicle or lack of skill was preventing them from winning the race. He admired their tenacity, to a degree; it even reminded him of himself in his races against that idiot Mulgrew and the handful of times victory was just a gasp away. But he had no time for sentimentality and even less for dealing with the dead weight clogging up the rapidly approaching narrow canyon pass before them. With a flick of a switch a small narrow blaster dropped from the belly of his swoop, locking into position and giving him a red “armed” signal on his helmets heads up display. Gripping his steering handle, Border slid his thumb to a small black button on it’s tip and brought the “Ice Pick”, his swoop, directly behind the last straggler. With a gentle push against the trigger a steady line of electric blue energy shot from beneath the vehicle, strafing the silver swoop and piercing the rear of both rider and vehicle. Flames erupted and engulfed both as the rider leapt free, crashing into the ground and dying before his body rolled to a stop. Smiling as he zipped by above the death and carnage, Border breathed deep the scent of ionization. Directly ahead a Ishi Tibb, realizing what had happened, tried to push his engine and roar away from Border, but the racers dumpy swoop was no match for the Ice Pick and Border quickly gained ground. Realizing that he was soon to be overtaken, the Ishi Tibb drew a blaster from under his saddlebag and turned in his seat, drawing a bead on Border. Smiling, Freize simply watched as the racer, focused on what was behind him, failed to see the sharp turn in the canyon. Before he could squeeze the trigger his swoop, traveling at speeds over three hundred kilometers an hour, slammed savagely into the deep brown canyon rock. “Idiot,” Border snickered, easily making the sharp turn and rocketing

through the narrow gap. Thumbing a switch on his controls he screamed into his helmet mike to be heard over the scream of his swoop.

“Where’s Mulgrew?!?”

A moment later, as he shot through a gap and back out onto the grassy plains of Ord Mantell, a stern automated voice replied.

“Over fifty kilometers away and heading into the Vagabond Marshlands. You need to move if you are going to catch him.”

Border snickered. “You let me worry about that. I’ve been waiting for this moment for years.”

Amid the rushing of the blood pounding through his brain, the whine of repulsors jerked Baal from the fringe of unconsciousness. Both he and the guard droid turned their heads in time to see a cloaked figure, mounted atop a speederbike, accelerate from around the corner of the palace. Time seemed to stop as the figure rose from the vehicles seat, and floated gently to the ground. Still rocketing along the speeder blasted through several small saplings, eventually exploding against a large tree and illuminating the courtyard. Klux Martin threw back the hood of his cloak and strolled purposefully towards Baal and the droid. Shaking his head, Baal was sure he was hallucinating. With a whine of gears, the guard droid shifted its weight, jamming its powerful hind legs against Baal’s ribs and pushing off, leaping high towards the approaching Jedi. Parting his robes, Klux raised his hand slightly, stopping the droid in mid flight. For a moment, Baal stared, amazed, as the guard droid, hovering in midair, peddled its front legs for purchase. Drawing back as if to punch the creature, Klux swung his hand forward, and the droid, with incredible speed, flew through the air as if struck, erupting against the palace wall in a fireball of sparks and machinery.

“Can you move?” Klux asked as he kneeled beside Baal. The Trianni, steadying his breathing, tapped into the Force and slowly felt his energy return.

“I believe so, give me just a moment. I did not think you would be coming,” Baal said, taking a deep breath and staring into the sky.

“Neither did I. But despite our differences, I couldn’t let anyone die simply because I think they are wrong in their choice of religion. That kind of attitude isn’t Jedi like and is a one way ticket to the darkside.”

“So you still think the Mew Tao is misguided?” Baal, shaking off the remnants of the stun blasts felt a different kind of irritation moving through his body now. He turned his head and stared intently at the Jedi.

Scratching absently at his goatee, Klux shrugged, pulling his eyes from the building back to Baal. “That doesn’t really matter right now. Right now I’m here to find Vic and A’sok and figure out where Chance is, everything else is secondary.”

“So this isn’t over between us?”

Eyes returning to Baal, Klux knelt in silence for a moment. “I don’t think it ever will be Baal. I think the best we can hope for is to just accept our differences and work together without killing each other,” he offered a hand and Baal took it, using the others strength to pull himself to his feet.

“That might take a lot of practice and cooperation on both of our parts,” Baal said, straightening his robes and unclipping the cool metal shaft from his belt.

Doing likewise, Klux ignited his weapon, casting them both in blue radiance. “Then there’s no time like the present to get started.”

The Vagabond Marshlands was over two hundred kilometers of murky wetland, peppered with black earthen mounds that spat fire and black soot a hundred meters into the air. While the caliginous haze and random columns of flame were lethal obstacles unto themselves, Chance was more worried about what lived beneath the black scummy water he briefly glimpsed when dipping too low towards the ground.

According to some of the stories he’d heard the previous night, the Vagabonds were home to numerous vile, nasty creatures such as the Scarafins, a reptilian predator able to eat a sentient whole, while it’s needle teeth punctured the skin in millions of places; this allowed for infection to spawn while the hapless victim lay in the creatures intestines for weeks. Chance blocked out the rest of the stories and tried to focus on the race. Lornnda was nowhere to be found, and Chance silently hoped the Gran had already perished somewhere along the track. Upon entering the stench of the marshlands he’d tried to hold his breath, but less than a minute in gave up. After narrowly missing two volatile columns of blue flame, he forgot completely about the acrid smell assaulting his nostrils and focused intently on the clouds of darkness he found himself rocketing through. Glancing occasionally at his swoops on board compass just to make sure he wasn’t veering off course, his concentration was broken only by the whine of far off swoops and the screams of unfortunate racers who drifted too close to the belching fire mounds. Twice the lethal blue flame erupted into the sky, igniting the clothing of two unfortunate racers far off to his right. Screaming, the victims lost control of their swoops, and were

flung violently into the swampy marsh while their swoops sped on, eventually exploding into muted balls of orange flame far below. Slightly off to his left he spotted the signature white triangular exhaust of Lornnda's swoop. The Gran veered sharply to the right, narrowly avoiding a blue plume of flame and bringing him closer to Chance.

"Wish that slamo would flame out," Chance muttered to himself.

"Why wish when you can take? The strong take what they want," Coba hissed.

"Yeah, I know," Chance dismissed his master, dragging his glove across his helmets visor.

"YOU KNOW NOTHING!" Coba roared inside his mind. The attack made Chance nearly swerve into a column of blue flame that appeared to the right of his swoop. Jerking violently on the controls, he skimmed the flame, passing close enough to char the leg of his racing leathers. Chance swore under his breath and grit his teeth against the pain.

"I tire of this creature. Destroy him. Now."

"No, that's-that's not fair," Chance stammered, shaking his head.

"Fair?" Coba's voice followed after a beat of silence. "Was it 'fair' when your father was gunned down like a feral womprat? Was it 'fair' when your mother, working to support you and your sister, was killed in a shuttle crash? Dying, as flames boiled her body until her flesh exploded? Or how about..."

Tears, burning Chance's eyes and streaming through the grime on his face, burned like lava.

"Shut up," he whispered.

But Coba continued. "...When your dear little sister, who you raised by yourself, was sliced into pieces, and you were just minutes from saving her. Or how about this morning, when Border killed poor innocent Nubine, leaving you to cut her into pieces and flush her down the refresher. 'Fairness' is a concept that, thus far, seems to pay few dividends for you."

"Shut Up!" Chance screamed. Blocking the pain running along his leg, he directed his rage on the faint white glow of Lornnda's engines, slowly pulling ahead of him. Keeping his right hand on the swoops controls, he gestured violently with his left hand, practically feeling the front stabilizers of the swoop in his hand.

With a snap of his wrist, an audible crack echoed over the whine of the engines and the white triangles began to spin in a tight circle, eventually disappearing into the darkness below.

“THERE, ARE YOU HAPPY NOW!?!” Chance screamed into the darkness, body trembling with rage and anger.

“Quite,” Coba said, voice dripping with satisfaction.

“You can go to hell,” Chance said, eyes still stinging with tears and soot. The words were barely out of his mouth when a bright blue bolt of light blasted past his helmet, stabbing into the darkness on his right. Veering madly to the left, Chance jammed his controls, plunging his swoop into the low, dark clouds.

A series of bolts followed him down, tracing a pattern along his right side. Keeping his eyes focused forward, he knew who was behind him without bothering to look back.

Border Frieze had arrived, and was looking for payback.

Pinned beneath the large Savrip, A’sok could barely breathe. With a final push, he forced the creature’s body up just enough to scramble free. What was once a clean suit was now covered in blood and grime, saturated with the rank odor of scorched flesh.

“Looks like the Force smiled on you today,” Vic said, holstering his Sentinel and offering the hacker a hand. Behind him A’sok could see the hulking shadow of the Savrip Vic brought down, still trembling as a last bit of life made its exit.

“Yeah, guess so,” A’sok said. His hold out had contained just enough energy to spit one last deadly bolt into the creature’s right eye socket. Lacking the strength to exit the back of the Savrip’s skull, it was fortunately strong enough to pierce the angry yellow orb and embed itself into its brain. Grabbing Vic’s hand he hauled himself up, briefly kneeling to retrieve the hold out from the ground where it dropped. “So, I guess the next question is how the hell do we get out of here?”

Almost on cue, the trapdoor they were forced through earlier crashed open. Drawing his Sentinel, Vic sprinted to the exit shaft and dropped to one knee, aiming up.

“Woah! Woah! Hey, let’s not shoot the rescue team!” A’sok heard a familiar voice exclaim.

Lowering his weapon, Vic shook his head and glanced over to A’sok. “It’s Klux.”

Carefully, one by one, Klux pulled on the Force until A'sok and Vic were both close enough to the lip of the trapdoor to pull themselves up. Breathing deep of the ocean air, A'sok pulled his eyes from the sun, now dipping onto the horizon and glanced about the vast balcony.

To his surprise it was empty of henchmen or partygoers, as if no one had even shown up for Locti's doomed evening.

"Where is everyone?" A'sok asked, walking towards the rear doors of the palace. Through the distorted glass he could see several figures moving, but no sign of the previous crowd.

"They must have bugged out," Vic said.

He was interrupted by the metallic footfalls of a serving droid rounding the corner. It was a standard silver 3PO unit, carrying a silver drink tray that matched its chassis. Sitting in the middle of the tray, a timer, strapped to a large block of detonate, clicked off the last remaining minutes till detonation.

"Frell!" A'sok exclaimed, rapidly backing away from the droid.

"Yeah, that's what I wanted to tell you," Klux said but Vic was already in motion. Jerking his jacket free, he threw the garment over the tray and folded the material over the bomb. In one fluid motion he jerked the bundle from the droid's hands and slung it out beyond the balcony. Somewhere far below the bomb struck the crags of the shoreline and erupted, reduced to nothing more than a muffled "thump".

"Damn right. Never let it be said my reflexes are getting dusty," Vic smirked, looking over to Klux.

The Jedi, trotting over to the large double balcony doors, still wore a deathly pallor. "Yeah, that's great Vic," he said throwing the doors wide, "but what about these?"

Inside, moving back and forth throughout the banquet hall, over a dozen servant droids balanced bombs on silver serving trays.

"Crap on a converter coil," Vic said, backing up towards the balcony.

"The palace is lousy with them," Klux said, turning back. "In fact, if we..."

A rumble grabbed A'sok's attention, pulling it to the upper levels of the main building. High above, gouts of fire and debris erupted from several large windows, dislodging two permacrete balconies.

Panic seized A'sok and he stood immobile as the massive slabs fell free of the building and plummeted towards them. Sandwiched between the ballroom full of bombs and the perilous cliffs and ocean behind them, they had nowhere to run from the impending doom. Dropping to the ground, A'sok covered his head and waited for death.

Slamming beside him, a fist sized wedge of permacrete exploded onto the ground, kicking tiny dust particles into his face that stung as they struck. Coughing, A'sok instinctively rolled away and onto his back. Two meters above the ground, the massive balconies hung suspended in the air, reflecting an orange glow in the late evening Ord Mantell sunlight.

"You might want to hurry, you're about ten seconds from corpseification," Baal's voice floated down to them.

Scurrying from beneath the shadows of the floating mass, A'sok rendezvoused with Klux and Vic on the far side of the balcony that wrapped around the palace. A moment later the permacrete dropped heavily onto the ground, splitting into two massive chunks. Bounding from the top of the nearest building, Baal somersaulted onto the ground, gathering his cloaks about him. More explosions rocked the palace, shaking the ground and belching black smoke from various windows and doors.

"We need to get out of here. We couldn't locate Ket here which means he might be at the swoop race," Vic said as the group descended the long balcony steps into a rear garden.

"We can find Chance through the Force," Klux said, "that would put us within kilometers of the race course."

"Or you could just upload the map to the starting line I bought while doing my recon," Vic said, drawing a silver disk from his jacket and tossing it to Klux.

"Yeah, or we could just do that," Klux said, altering the disks path and drawing it into his palm.

Passing through the gate of a low stone privacy wall, they found themselves amidst dozens of speeders and swoops. All shapes and colors were represented, many with the outline of a white Coryluzah tree etched onto the body or the chasis of the vehicles.

"Looks like Locti's personal fleet," Vic said, straddling a black and red speederbike and keying the ignition. Baal and Klux both piled into an open air speeder while A'sok picked out a luxury model painted deep purple with gold trim. Mirrored windows reflected back the orange flame licking the sides of the palace and the like colored clouds drifting across the dusk sky.

"I'll grab our gear from the Skull and comm you for a location!" A'sok called out, dropping to one knee and madly working at the vehicles electronic lock. After a few tries

he hit on the manufacturers security bypass code and the door rose like the wing of a large avian.

The antiseptic smell of newly cleaned upholstery mixed with the sweet tang of air fresheners drifting from the interior. Turning, A'sok observed that Vic and the Jedi had gone the low-tech route for accessing their vehicles. Slinging a handful of wiring from the front of the speeder, Baal waved and the low riding convertible sped off into the shadows of the estate. Vic took a bit longer, having popped the access panel from the speederbike's engine; a moment later the repulsors roared to life and the outlaw shot off like a dart.

Wasting no time, A'sok dropped into the rich contoured seating and gripped the steering controls; a moment later he was rocketing away from the flaming palace and towards the Skullduggery.

Leaving the depressing stench and voluminous haze of the Vagabonds behind, Chance filled his lungs with a breath of fresh air as his swoop rocketed across a small lake and towards an expanse of lush green rolling lowlands.

Still on his tail, Freize discharged another blast, this one grazing his front right stabilizer and sending a minor tangle of electricity winding about the narrow shaft. The swoop pitched fiercely to the left, almost bucking Chance from his seat; at this speed and altitude, the young racer had no doubt he would leave little more than a smudge upon impact with the ground.

Gripping his controls, he forced the swoop to hold its course, despite his gut telling him that there was more to worry about than simply a singed stabilizer. The Force. He would use the Force to deal with Freize just as he'd used it to deal with Parrick.

Cutting back on his speed, his swoop slowed and he twisted in his seat, bringing his arm up in line with Freize's swoop.

Hand outstretched, Chance envisioned crushing Freize's heart when another bolt of energy pierced the sky and slammed into the rear of his vehicle, showering him with sparks and flaming engine bits. Instead of using the Force to snuff out the mans life however, Chance found himself using it to propel his body away from his own swoop as the engine fire consumed the entire rear cargo area.

Fire erupted close enough to char his helmet and flash burn his exposed neck; plummeting away from the fireball, his body cart wheeled and spiraled as he sped towards the ground. Fear, panic and pain seized him into a rigid knot as immobile and doomed as the flaming husk of swoop that shadowed him towards the ground.

The grassy lowlands raced to meet his body, where he would surely expire on impact, bones exploding into powder and ripping through the tender skin of his torso. Jamming his eyes shut, mere seconds remained of his life when a voice, calm and controlled, unlike Master Coba's, cut through the pain and darkness and echoed throughout his mind.

“Become one with the Force Chance, become one with your surroundings...the air...the wind...let them cradle you like a newborn child.”

With nothing left to lose, Chance succumbed to the voice, letting his body go limp and allowing whatever grace the Force might allow. Mind clear, he pushed all thoughts of impact, pain and death from his mind and without realizing it, began the breathing and meditation techniques taught to him so many months back by Klux and Baal. He hit the ground hard enough to have the wind knocked from his body, and spun into a roll, coming to rest in the lush tall grass of the wide open plain.

Gasping in great swallows of rancid smoky air, he cracked his eyes open and looked beyond the black burn patches on his helmets visor into the rich deep blue of Ord Mantell's twilight.

Surprisingly, his body was still intact, and, after a moment, he rose to find that everything still seemed to work. Arms bent, legs stretched, and even the flash burn on his neck seemed to not sting-much. His racing leathers were charred however, wispy tendrils of smoke wafting from a few singed spots on the red leather.

“That wasn't too bad,” Chance said to himself as a swarm of tiny bugs, disturbed by his landing, buzzed and flittered about his helmet, occasionally slapping into its plasteel faceplate.

Reaching up, Chance grimaced from a bit of soreness in his upper arms and pulled his helmet free. Cool air and a gentle wind rolled over his body, cooling the sweat that ran in rivulets down his face. Closing his eyes, he inhaled a deep cleansing breath that drove out the residual stale air from his lungs. Glancing around, he could see no more than a meter into the tall grass. Off to his left was a tall tree that rose into the sky, holding aloft bundles of leaves with thick gnarled branches. Off to his right a narrow column of smoke, it's lower half glowing a pastoral orange, spiraled towards the heavens.

“Guess I'm going to need to build me another lightsaber,” he mused, tucking his thick black boots beneath him and rising onto his feet. “At least Frieze thinks I'm dead, that's gotta be worth something.” Standing upright, the thick grass reached just beneath his chest, and he slowly made his way towards the fiery remains of his vehicle. More than likely a salvage crew would be around within the hour, and in exchange for anything of value they could pull from the wreckage, he would negotiate a ride back to the finish line.

Unzipping and pulling free of his leather jacket, his body, for the first time in hours, enjoyed the cool evening breeze that chilled his sweat soaked shirt and blew through his curly red hair.

Replaying the scene in his mind, Chance was sure that Border must think him dead. After all, no sentient could have survived the explosion AND the fall. Not at that speed.

“Well, no one but the powerful Jedi Chance Mulgrew,” he mused aloud to himself.

Still, what bothered him more than anything, and what kept his mind mired in the last moments of his descent, was the voice he heard at the last instant before impact. So used was he to the baneful hissing of Master Coba, the voice that instructed him to give himself to the Force caught him off guard. It's benevolent tone was one his father might have used, if he could remember his father, but something about it was so very familiar, as if he'd heard it just hours before.

He continued to roll the voice around in his head as he closed the distance with the crash site. Could it have been Klux? Baal reaching from across the expanse to instruct him maybe? He pushed those thoughts aside. Coba was his Master, and riding on the same swoop as he, it would have been Coba who saved his hide. Not a pair of nitwit Jedi. Stepping through the grass, the swoop lay in two pieces where the vehicles body split in half upon impact. The components were close enough together that their smoke mingled into a single column, but both were separated by at least four meters. Waving away the smoke, Chance jammed his helmet back on his head and quickly darted towards the blackened husk of what used to be the rear cargo compartment. Amidst the smoke and orange glow of fire that burned fiercely within the compartment, a smoking leather pouch hissed and crackled as the intense heat continued to fuse it to the swoops hull.

Without thinking, Chance grabbed the saddlebag and jerked violently, ripping part of it from the swoop while leaving a generous flap still hung tight to the swoop.

Dropping from the pouch a smoking bundle of silk fabric hit the ground. Retrieving it, Chance backed away from the circle of light, remaining close enough to be spotted by any salvage or rescue crews.

Unraveling the silk, the key containing his dark master lay within, untouched by the fire and violence of the explosion. "Master Coba? Can you hear me?" Chance asked as he gently caressed the keys smooth dark face.

"Talking to yourself Mulgrew?"

The voice wasn't in his head and didn't belong to Coba. Spinning on his heel, Chance shoved the key deep into his interior jacket pocket-and stood face to face with Border Freize.

A mere three meters away, Freize's torso peeked from the top of the tall grass. The flaming swoop cast and orange glow on pale skin that seemed to seamlessly blend into his gleaming white racing leathers. A pair of black goggles rounded out the impression that instead of a living being, Chance was staring at a gaunt cadaver whose hand morphed into a blaster pistol now pointed at his chest.

"What? You're going to kill me? Come on Border, you aren't that stupid-there will be salvage and recovery droids here in no time. When they find you, you are going to go back to prison forever."

Frieze cracked a smile. "Prison? Are you that simple? Chance, Ploovo Two-For-One was most unhappy you took his money-and he's pulled in some big favors to take you down. Hell, the Sector Rangers Commander owes his job to Ploovo, and it took only one call to get my record erased from any wrap sheets or tracker lists located on this crappy

planet. Plus, do you really think anyone is going to care about some dead swoop racer who died while racing in an ILLEGAL race?"

Deflated, Chance stared vibroblades at the assassin. "The I guess there's nothing left to do for you to shoot me now."

"That's the idea," Frieze replied smiling, and shot Chance in the chest.

Leaning into the wind, Vic sped through narrow canyons of duracrete and plasteel, as the last remaining rays of sunlight squeezed themselves through the narrow gaps of Ord Mantell's high-rise hotels and casinos.

Crowds of tourists and spacers were slowly being overrun by the planet's nocturnal predators; Gang bangers, spice heads and lowlifes of all manner seeped into the alleys and streets like a virus; those not intermingling amongst the retreating populace were slithering across intersections, slowing traffic, or huddled in doorways.

"Like bad blood clogging a damn artery," Vic snarled, pulling the bike to a stop behind a luxury sedan studded with a million red flashing lights. He's lost site of Baal and Klux early on as the nighttime revelers poured out into the streets. Where some were ending their day of gambling and vice, others were just beginning, picking up where their counterparts left off.

The intersection the traffic was stopped at was created by two casinos catty-corner to each other, while a nightclub and a massive parking structure occupied the opposite sides. In his search for Ket, Vic had secured the location of the illegal swoop race Chance was in, but had only enough time to memorize one route to reach the starting/finish line; the directions, nestled in the swoop the Jedi took, did him no good.

Now, as he sat immobile in the maze of gridlock, he cursed himself for not planning out multiple routes. Unlike the Jedi, he was unable to just focus on a team member and locate them through the Force, he had to rely on actual skill and planning to accomplish his extraordinary feats.

"Like getting trapped in traffic," he grouched to himself. Abandoning the speederbike, Vic walked past the sedan, briefly glancing a long shapely pair of legs through the passenger's window and stepped past its front bumper. In the center of the intersection the cause of the gridlock and confusion was hard to miss.

Towering almost three meters tall, a black furred Wookiee, hair braided in a series of knee length dreadlocks, roared menacingly at a pair of green-scaled Trandoshans. As the Wookiee moved, the Trandoshans, clad in the same red leather jackets moved as well, and Vic could spot a slight Twi'lek female sandwiched between the two, held at knifepoint.

From the brief back and forth Vic could gather the gist of the problem. The Twi'lek was the property of the Wookiee, and the Trandoshans, unhappy with the service she provided, were holding her hostage until the Wookiee returned their credits. Surprisingly, the Wookiee seemed to care less about the girl's fate, seemingly more interested in collecting the remainder of the fee, upon completion of his slaves "services."

Between the trio of scum, the Twi'lek girl shivered and tried to fight back tears as the leftmost thug worked the blade across her slender white neck.

Glancing around, Vic could see no one was about to make a move to help. A pair of casino security watched from a nearby corner, with no further assistance to be found. Even worse, the sidewalks and adjoining streets were now crowded with onlookers and spectators, eliminating any chance he had of bypassing the situation altogether and using the sidewalks and walkways to circumvent the traffic.

Pulling his jacket off, Vic began rolling up his sleeves and stepped into the intersection.

"I don't see Vic behind us any longer," Baal said, turning back around in his seat.

"Doesn't matter, we're almost there," Klux said, switching his eyes between the road and the automap set into the dashboard of the speeder. It had taken him only a handful of minutes to hack the onboard system, letting the Force guide his decision that allowed him to access a city map, laid out like a light green grid and crisscrossed by a mesh of white lines representing alleyways and city streets.

In the upper right corner a red dot designated the site of the illegal swoop race.

"How did you learn to do that?" Baal asked, watching him bypass the basic security system.

Klux shrugged. "I picked up a few tricks from A'sok while killing time at JIE. You should try it sometime, you know, pull yourself away from your lightsaber training and try to pick up a few skills that doesn't revolve around cutting down stormies."

Baal sat silent for a moment. "The Force provides me with what skills I need."

"Yeah, well, that's the problem Baal, what happens when you need the Force and it isn't there? It's not a tool you know, not something to use just to make things more convenient."

Snorting, the Trianni tilted his head and stared at Klux. He could feel the large felinoid eyes locked on him. "You're scared of the Force, aren't you Klux?"

"What? Of course not. The Force binds us and..."

"Right, right. Binds us, strengthen us, allows us to be at one and all of that. But I sense it Klux, I sense your hesitation and fear. Why? Do you not trust in the Force?"

Navigating the tight twists and turns, the approaching darkness was held off by the neon skyline. "I trust in the Force," Klux finally replied.

The Trianni said nothing.

“Just because I don’t use it to ...” Klux stopped himself. A brief flash of insight, of the future, allowed him to see a possible argument approaching that would hinder their success in finding Chance. He clamped his mouth shut and said nothing else. Twisting along narrow side streets and making sharp turns that occasionally scraped the speeders paint against building corners, Klux rocketed towards the starting line. Beside him, Baal focused on checking his weapons, making sure that both sabers were undamaged and easy to access.

“If this ‘Ket’ is on planet, it’s likely this may be a trap,” Baal said, breaking the silence.

Nodding, Klux continued to focus on the shifting traffic. The red glow of bumper lights swirled and moved like an amusement park ride as the two Jedi shot through the city. “It might be,” he said.

“So tell me again why we are rushing headlong into a situation we know little about?”

Klux managed to squeeze his lips into a smile. “Well, first off it’s because it’s never stopped us before,” he swerved to miss an elderly pedestrian who shouted a string of curses at them, “second, because Chance is OUR responsibility, and no one else.”

Baal clipped the weapons to his belt.

“I find no flaw with that logic.”

Eyebrows lifting, Klux glanced at his partner. “What? No pre-battle argument?”

Baal smirked. “No, but maybe later we can continue this conversation, if we live.”

Looking down, Chance could see where the blaster bolt hit. The red leather of his jacket was seared, smoking and his undershirt torched, with a perfect circle ringed in black char appearing right above his heart.

He didn’t feel pain, and expected that it was shock setting in. He expected he would collapse in a heap and lie on the ground while Freize pumped a few more bolts in him just to make sure the job was done.

Freize must have thought the same thing. They stood staring at each other in the light of Chance’s burning swoop. Chance waited for the cold grip of death to close on him, but it never did.

After a moment of watching Chance stand with his arms flayed to his sides waiting to collapse, Freize’s smug expression turned to confusion, then anger.

“What the frell?” He raised the blaster again, but this time, Coba’s voice, a seething whisper of hate, pierced Chance’s brain.

“MOVE YOU IMBECILE!”

He didn’t need to be told twice, and lunged into the tall grass as numerous blaster bolts began to hiss through the weeds, incinerating anything green and igniting anything dry.

Landing hard, the key jammed violently into Chance's ribs and he let out a muffled scream. Clutching the dark artifact, he propelled himself with his elbows and knees through the tall grass trying to distance himself from the madman.

In moments, the fire and smoke from Freizes barrage of blaster fire mingled with the already raging inferno began by the flaming swoop. Over the crackle and roar of flames, Chance could hear Freize slinging a string of Huttese curses as he desperately fired several more bolts into the lush veldt.

"You worthless mealworm, why do you not fight? Stand and crush his heart with your hand you insufferable sludge! FIGHT WORM!!!" Cobra's voice roared in his mind. Chance blocked it out. All around him the heat of the flames grew fierce and he could feel the smoke beginning to filter into his lungs. Trembling, he tried to control himself with the Force, tried to pull some fresh air into his lungs-but he was running out of time. Hugging the ground, he scrambled blindly until he heard the only sound that would make him stop. From nearby, less than two meters perhaps, Border Freizes blaster discharged its empty power pack.

Up in a flash, fear and adrenaline propelled him as Master Cobra's voice roared with instructions. Chance blocked him out, and as he cleared the grass, locked eyes with Freize, less than three meters away and fishing a new power supply from his belt. With more energy and velocity than he imagined he could muster, Chance closed the small distance with the madman and hit him with everything he had.

The Skullduggery loomed above A'sok like a dark silent crypt. Its flat black paint job and menacing silence almost got the most of him, and he considered simply turning around and comming Ten-Spot to bring the weapons out. If Ket was on board, waiting there for him, there would be no one, not Vic, Baal or Klux that would be able to help him. He pushed the thought away and unbuckled himself from the elaborate speeder. Killing the lights, he stepped from the vehicle and marched with purpose up the ramp.

The interior was stifling. Soft ambient sounds of cooling systems and the near silent thrum of the life support system seemed to amplify the already unsettling atmosphere. Unconsciously his hand fell to his blaster pistol-now empty. Cursing at himself, he took a deep breath and headed for the armory.

The "armory" as everyone called it, was nothing more than a deluxe spacers chest nestled in a corner of the cargo bay, easily 2 meters long and covered with an old tarp; a red cargo label warning of biohazardous chemicals was placed menacingly on the dull silver lid. Without a second thought A'sok threw back the tarp and tapped in a memorized passcode on the front mounted locking mechanism. The chest beeped twice and the tiny red light on the lock went from red to green.

Within lay all manner of weaponry. Blaster rifles, a box of fragmentation grenades, several vibroblades and no fewer than six blaster pistols lay in perfect order on wire metal shelving, stacked three levels deep in the meter tall chest.

The top of the chest was outfitted with several brackets, one holding a light repeating blaster while another secured a ammo belt full of blaster clips. The smell of lubricating oil and durasteel wafted from the inside of the chest. A'sok found it oddly comforting.

“You’re going to need more than that.”

Spinning with his hand already gripping one of the Ladykiller II Blaster Pistols stored in the top compartment, A’sok threw himself to the ground at the sound of the voice and brought the sight in line with the person standing just three meters behind him. His finger locked in place, just millimeters from pulling the trigger. Standing frozen, with Vic’s Terminus armor in its outstretched metal hands, stood Ten Spot, the teams armorer droid.

“Spot! What are you doing!?!?”

The droid, slowly hovering in reverse, tilted its silvered domed head. “Just bringing you Vic’s armor. Uhm, I’ll just sit it down in hopes that I won’t get shot for my concern.”

Hand shaking, A’sok watched as the droid, true to his word, set the armor down and quickly hovered away. It was a moment later before A’sok could lower his weapon, and take a huge gulp of air.

“Sithspit, ‘Sok, you , you need to get a grip,” he stammered to himself. Slowly he climbed to his feet and smoothed his armored suit, making sure that he hadn’t inadvertently soiled himself. Taking another deep breath, he shed his jacket and strapped on a weapon harness, loading both holsters with fully charged pistols. In less than five minutes he’s transferred three blaster rifles, two blaster pistols and a handful of frag grenades to a large canvas bag. Vic’s armor was jammed on top, along with his triple barrel light repeating blaster.

Hauling the duffel through the halls A’sok’s mind raced with possibilities. Was Ket behind all this? Was he working independently? Why did the Twi’lek kill Locti? What was to gain? Was he working for Ket? Were they both making a move to set up some sort of crime syndicate and Locti was just a target of opportunity?

Hitting the button to lower the ramp, A’sok was already down and off before its lip touched turf. Jogging to the speeder, A’sok’s comm, buried under a handful of cred chits in his left pants pocket began beeping insistently. Slinging the duffel over his right shoulder while fishing his comm from his left pocket he finally wrestled the silver cylinder free and triggered it.

“Sok here.”

“The team always seems to split up at the worst possible times. Did you ever notice that?”

The voice froze A’sok in place. Already a cool evening, a chill rippled through the young hacker and he felt his hand begin to tremble.

“Ket, you frelling psycho! What the hell do you think you’re doing?!” A’sok finally managed to force out. Silence answered him for a moment and he began to believe the madman had severed the connection.

“I’m killing you all, one by one,” the even voice replied.

A lump of Garnib iceberg began to form in A’soks stomach, and before he could respond, the madman continued. “Do you know how I got your comm number A’sok?”

“Public directory?”

Silence. “You gave it to me. Almost two years ago. If you can’t even be bothered to change your comm number how do you expect to survive against the Empire. Or even an accomplished bounty hunter? I’m doing you a favor A’sok, using your predictability to kill you before someone gets a hold of you and tortures you to death. At least I will make sure it’s quick, and relatively painless.”

A’sok managed a nervous high pitched laugh. “Painless? Yeah it looked like Socatoa just went quietly into the great beyond! That’s exactly what I thought when I was burying his FREAKING SKIN!”

Again, silence for a moment. “That was business. Socatoa made the wrong enemies and eventually paid the price-in flesh. A lesson you and the rest will soon learn.”

A’sok was tired of this. Tired of the whole Vornskr and mouse game and tired of feeling like a victim.

“Frell you nutcase! Me and Vic, we don’t sweat some nutjob who wasn’t able to cut it in Raptor Squad!” Moving again with purpose and powered by anger, fear and adrenaline he crossed over to the speeder.

“You know what you are Ket? A two-credit boogeyman who doesn’t have the Death Stars to hit us face to face! Who has to pull this attack-and-fade crap because he knows a straight on fight would leave him sucking the rest of his meals through a straw.”

“Is that right?”

A’sok allowed himself a smirk. “Yeah pal, that’s dead on right.”

Ket’s voice was even. “You know what you are A’sok?”

Absently, A’sok reached down with his right hand and popped the handle on the speeders rear door. “No, what am I smart guy?”

Ket Adkins sat inside with a blaster pistol trained at his chest.

“Predictable.”

A’soks hands gripped his comm and duffel in a vice grip as a brilliant red blaster bolt lanced from the dark interior of the luxury speeder and hit him solidly in the chest.

“What’s the chances of this ending peacefully without me having to unload a pocketful of beatings on at least a few of you fine folks?” Vic asked smiling and gently sitting his folded topcoat on the ground.

The Wookiee slightly turned his head in Vic's direction and emitted a low growl. The two Trandoshans spat something vulgar in their native language but never took their eyes off of the Wookiee.

Sighing heavily, Vic shook his head back and forth and stepped between the two groups. They all were now forced to stare at him. He gestured to the trembling Twi'lek.

“Step away from there, and, if you have the brain cells, start anticipating what sort of employment you are going to try your hand at next. Preferably something that doesn't involve Wookiee pimps and prostitution.”

Jerking her lekku back, the Trandoshan on the left turned the knife against her throat slightly and bared a row of fangs at Vic. The prostitute glanced between Vic and the scaly green fist and lethal weapon held tight against her throat.

Holding his hands out to his side, Vic slowly advanced. The Trandoshan's partner intercepted him before he could get too close, swinging at Vic with a wide haymaker, causing the outlaw, bracing his weight on his right foot, to lean back just far enough so that the fist missed his face by inches.

Springing back up, Vic straightened his right hand into a solid edge and struck violently into the nerve cluster beneath the thugs left underarm.

Letting out a muffled grunt, the Trandoshans momentum carried him through, leaving him clutching his ribs as he dropped face first onto the hard permacrete.

Rising back to his full height, Vic cracked his knuckles. “Wow, is there anyone in six blocks of this dump that didn't see THAT coming?”

“Kill her!” someone screamed from the crowd.

Turning a cocked eyebrow towards the masses, Vic almost burst. “Kill her? What the hell is wrong with you freaks?”

He was cut short by a blow that nailed him squarely in the back, lifting him the ground. His shoulders balled up and his body literally sailed up and over the remaining Trandoshan. He was able to maintain consciousness enough to turn his torso so that he landed on his left side, his arm curled beneath him.

Pain exploded throughout his body, and married with the previous explosion between his shoulder blades, left him gasping for air and slightly disoriented. Shaking his head clear, he blinked back the darkness in time to see the Wookiee, returning his hands to his hips, roaring with laughter. Even the Trandoshan had turned to watch him crash onto the street was snickering.

The taste of iron and saliva mixed in his mouth and he spat a gout of blood and skin onto the ground. Laughter surrounded him and before Vic could comprehend what was happening, he was on his feet, charging towards the Wookiee. The Wookiee of course, was ready, bearing his fangs and claws and letting go with an unholy roar.

Less than two meters away, Vic crouched and rocketed himself forward like a proton torpedo, his sore shoulder slamming hard into the face of the snarling creature.

Teeth shattered and bone crunched together in a sickening explosion of violence. The Wookiee, caught off guard and off balance, fell backwards with Vic riding his face down like a repuslor board.

Hitting the ground, the outlaw grabbed two mighty handfuls of black dreadlocks and repeatedly slammed the pimp's furry head into the ground until the crack of bone was replaced with a wet squishing sound.

Staring down into the dead eyes of the Wookiee, Vic realized the crowd, previously engulfed in laughter, was now eerily quiet. Shoulder dislocated and mouth dripping blood, Vic stood and slowly scanned the crowd while wiping his bloody hands off on his silk shirt.

Fear. Fear had paralyzed them all into statues.

Turning towards the Trandoshan and Twi'lek, the Trandoshan, watching with large red eyes, slowly lowered his knife and backed away, disappearing into the crowd. The Twi'lek, tears streaming down her face, rushed over to what was left of the Wookiee.

Sobbing, she began slinging curses towards him.

“You killed him! You killed my poor baby!”

"He killed himself the second he put his furry paws on me you stupid whore." The voice was his but the words were those of a hardened bounty hunter who'd spilled lakes of blood in his gritty, dark history.

Terminus.

Not for the first time in his life, Vic questioned his own sanity.

Chance hit Border with everything he had, his shoulder slamming hard into the man's abdomen. Something crunched and Border let out a short gasp as both spilled into the high weeds. Gritting his teeth, Chance hammered away at the madman, landing several hard shots to his face before Border rolled, pinning Chance to the ground.

"Gah! I'm going to make you pay for that you scumsucker!" Border spat, spraying Chance with a fine plum of spittle and blood. He followed up by landing a hard right across Chance's face that exploded a sunburst that almost dropped him into unconsciousness. Deep down, Chance could feel his anger, rage and pain boiling over. Before Border's fist landed again, Chance intercepted it and held it tight in his left hand. With his right, he gripped Borders racing leathers by the chest and pulled him down, meeting the man's chin with his forehead.

Bone cracked and the madman fell backwards, off of Chance and into the weeds. Wasting no time, Chance was up in a flash and back on Border. Without thinking his hand dipped into his jacket and pulled free the black flawless Sith artifact. Gripping it's rounded bottom, Chance hefted the weight upwards and slammed the point of the pyramid into Borders face. Through shattered teeth the madman let out a whimper, driving Chance to repeat that assault...again and again. After another shot he could feel Border slipping away, could feel the man's life essence draining away beneath him.

“Oh, not yet you don't. You wanted a piece of me, well you are going to get a lot more than that...right Master?” Chance snarled.

“That's correct my young apprentice, now...let's have some fun.”

Beneath him Chance could sense Freize on the verge of passing on. Focusing, he could feel the energy coursing from Coba's prison into his body, pumping like a fountain of life that

rejuvenated him and washed away all of his aches and pains in a blinding wave of euphoria. Tingling, he reached down with his left hand and shoved his palm against Freize's chest. The madman gasped, hacking blood from his now toothless mouth and purple bulbous lips. Eyes swollen shut from the assault cracked open as Freize mumbled something unintelligible.

Smiling, Chance kept his left hand on his chest, literally pulsing life into Freize's body and keeping him alive-then with his right he once again hammered the swollen face with the bloodied black artifact.

Sliding the speeder to a stop, Klux and Baal exited and approached a group of beings who were packing up several crates with holo-recording and projection equipment. Bonfires were lit, the burning rubble illuminating several knots of racers and spectators but for the most part it appeared the race was over.

"I don't sense Chance nearby," Klux said, scanning the area.

"No, he's not here," Baal confirmed.

Several meters away an Asp droid loaded a crate onto a speedersled. As the Jedi approached he turned his tall narrow head.

"Excuse me, could you..." Klux began, then, like an unseen hand, the Force tightened his body into a ball and slung him to the side. Scorching the air beside his head, a brilliant red blaster bolt slammed explosively into the chest of the Asp droid, sending it hurtling over the speedersled.

"Sniper!" Baal roared, dual crimson blades roaring to life.

"You think?!?" Klux screamed, igniting his own blue blade. The left side of his face felt as if someone had pressed a smoldering iron against it and the stench of scorched hair assaulted his nostrils. Blocking it all from his mind he crouched, focusing on the towering shadows of dead starships reaching into the distant sky.

"The shot came from that starship graveyard," Baal said, twirling his blades with a "hum." From behind screams filled the air as the remaining illegal swoop spectators and racers scattered, seeking whatever cover they could find.

From the darkness of the towering graveyard another bolt lanced out like a red glowing spear, but Klux was ready, bringing his glowing blade up and batting the blaster bolt away where it sailed harmlessly into the sky.

"Did you see where the shot came from?" Klux asked..

"Yes, I know exactly where he is," Baal growled killing his glowing blades. "Follow me."

Shutting down his weapon and following Baal away from the bonfires and into the darkness, Klux tried to calm himself and let the Force carry him along towards the intimidating black shadows that scraped the azure night sky.

Gliding across the ground as if on repulsors, Klux and Baal covered the distance to the starship graveyard in mere minutes; launching themselves over a rickety wire fence built more to keep the random piles of rubble and debris in more than to keep intruders out, they landed silently and scanned the dark misshapen terrain laid out before them.

“I sense him, he’s moving,” Klux whispered, hand gripping the deactivated shaft of his lightsaber.

Wrinkling his nose, Baal nodded. “I don’t need the Force to sense him-he smells like week old rotgut and sweat.”

“Let’s split up, you go left, I’ll go right,” Klux said moving off. He’d taken two steps when he stopped and turned. “And try to keep this one alive!” he hissed, but his partner had already sprung off into the darkness. Letting the Force guide him, Klux kept his guard up, following an invisible route through the groaning dark hulks of durasteel. The winds had picked up on Ord Mantell, sending mini tornadoes and dust storms gusting throughout the graveyard. Bundling his cloak about him, Klux sensed the sniper just a handful of meters away, crouching behind a ruined triangle of durasteel.

Using several piles of debris as cover, Klux closed the distance. Then, drawing on the Force, propelled himself into the sky, twisting as he sailed over the snipers cover and came down to land on the ground. Igniting his blade, he severed the rifle barrel being leveled at him-and just had the presence of mind to intercept two crimson blades aimed at the Snipers neck.

Weapons crossed, Klux had to exert every ounce of strength he had to stop Baal’s lightsabers from slicing the sniper-a Nikto paralyzed with fear in the shimmering light of the weapons-in two.

“What are you doing!?!” Klux screamed at the narrow green eyes of his partner.

“He was going to shoot us, I had to stop him,” Baal replied evenly.

Pushing with all of his might and a little help from the Force, Klux forced Baal back and away, the Trianni back flipping with both weapons held easily out to his sides.

“I DID stop him from shooting us,” Klux replied. The Nikto made a move to run but Klux brought his blade up within centimeters of his throat, freezing him once more. “Don’t try me assassin, just because I stopped him doesn’t mean I won’t use your head as a gravball.”

From Baals belt an insistent beep rose to be heard above the howling winds. Baal shut down his weapons and retrieved his comm, triggering it to life. “Baal here.”

“It’s Vic!” Klux heard from the comm, the voice sounding as if it were being buffered by the same windstorm they were in the middle of. “A’sok has been kidnapped, I need you both back at the Skull...pronto!!!”

Baal shook his head. “We’re in the middle of something here Vic, we can’t leave, we haven’t found Chance yet.”

“I’m sorry, you must have a bad connection- I said A’SOK’S BEEN KIDNAPPED,” the voice roared from over the comm. “Most probably by Ket. So drop your little babysitting mission and get your asses back to the Skull!”

“We can’t just leave without...” Baal began.

“Look,” Klux could tell Vic was at the end of his rope. “Chance may be missing but a team member has been kidnapped. A VALUED team member-one that doesn’t piss me off, so” he let that hang for a minute. “I can count on you both to be here?”

Klux could sense Baal about to protest so he raised his own voice. “We’ll be there Vic.”

“Good, make it fast,” Vic replied and the comm went dead. Baal looked from the comm back to Klux.

“You do not speak for me. I’m going to continue to search for Chance.”

“Then when you find him I hope you both have enough creds to find a ride back to Garnib.”

Smirking Baal crossed his arms. “And what is that supposed to mean?”

Not taking his eyes from Baal, Klux moved with fluid grace pulled the lightsaber to his opposite hand with the force, simultaneously drawing back and slamming the Nikto across the jaw with his closed fist, dropping him to the ground in a heap.

“Vic’s done with you, Chance and the whole Jedi deal Baal,” Klux pulled a reel of synthrope from his robes. “We don’t go to help him rescue A’sok, we all might as well start looking for a new place to hang our lightsabers.”

“We need to find Chance, and if Vic can’t understand that...” Baal began, but Klux was already shaking his head.

“Chance has never shown himself to be anything but a selfish child,” Klux said, crouching to bind the Nikto. “Asok’s been there for us and risked his life for us-several times. He’s a part of our team Baal, and if you have any desire to continue to be a part of that team, you will help me bind this guy up so we can be on our way.” He expected Baal to sling a retort and run off into the darkness, and knelt down, pulling the synthrope together and began to tie a knot. A moment later a pair of blue furry paws appeared beside his and took over the synthrope.

“You tie knots like a crippled Gundark,” Baal growled. “Let me tie this so we can be on our way.”

“Tenspot told me he was in the cockpit when the sedan raced off and saw these lying on the ground,” Vic pointed to a black duffel lying on the landing pad. The wind was gusting viciously across the landing pad and it took effort simply to stay upright. As Vic was getting back on his speederbike after his altercation with the Wookiee and Trandoshans his comm had gone off. Tenspot had informed him of the curious fact that A’sok had sped off without taking their gear and Vic instantly knew his friend was abducted.

“I got back and made sure this bag wasn’t rigged to blow the second someone touched it...it’s clean.”

“So how do we know it was Ket?” Baal asked. “We’ve made enemies while on planet, how do we know...”

“It was Ket. This is exactly his style...kidnap someone, torture them, if they are lucky kill them...” Klux sighed and dropped onto a nearby crate. “I can sense him, residual patches of...insanity, here and there,” Klux motioned to the landing pad.

“I’m glad that crate wasn’t rigged to blow,” Vic shook his head. “Klux is right, this is Ket’s style...plus the enemies we’ve made seem to have their own little war going on, I doubt they are paying a bunch of offworlders much mind right now.”

A beeping sounded from beneath Klux’s robes. Vic crossed over to the Jedi as he retrieved his comm and thumbed it to life.

“Klux,” he answered. What sounded like a muffled scream came from the other end.

“You would think elastitape would prevent someone from making that much noise if it’s wrapped around their mouth a half dozen times,” a cold detached voiced observed from the comm.

“Adkins,” Vic said.

“Hello Vic. Bet right about now you and your crew are standing around trying to figure out how to take me down. Don’t waste your time, you all are probably about as absent minded as your helpless hacker. But I have to ask, was she worth it?”

Vic Baal and Klux all exchanged curious glances. Finally, Vic spoke. “Uhm, was who worth it?”

“You don’t even remember her name!?!” Adkins roared over the comm.

Vic realized his error and backtracked. “Whoa, whoa partner, I was just confused over who uhm...we were talking about. No, of course not, whatever I did I’m sorry, lets not make any rash...” he was stalling now, gesturing for Klux and Baal to get the gear in the speeder as he took the comm. from Klux.

To his surprise, on the other end of the comm it sounded as if Ket were weeping. Finally, laughter crackled like thunder from the tiny metal cylinder in Vics hand.

“LeMoyne was flawless, perfect in every way, until you got your hands on her...until you and the Wookiee passed her around like a party favor. I should core A’sok’s head with a blaster bolt right now for what you’ve done,” Kat snarled.

Vic stood motionless. He knew the neural implants Ket received before leaving the team were eating away at his mind-it seemed he was now imagining events that never happened. He also now realized that continuing to lie and play along wasn’t an option if he wanted A’sok back alive.

“Look, Ket,” Vic said evenly, “I’m not sure what you think you know, but just tell me what you want so we can get A’sok back.”

Silence filled the air as the wind that blasted across the dimly lit landing pad took on a noticeable chill.

“I’m behind the Paradise Lost casino right now. Meet me in five minutes and I’ll let you have back what is left of your partner.”

The trio rocketed through the skyscraper canyons, dodging oncoming traffic when necessary, bypassing it altogether by taking to the sky when they couldn't. Vic was locked behind the speeder's controls with Klux riding shotgun and Baal in the back. The speeds they were traveling were dizzying, but the onset of nightfall cast most of the streets and alleys they passed in impenetrable shadow and darkness.

"He's not far, less than two hundred meters," Klux relayed to Vic, focusing on A'soks' life sense through the Force. "He's hurt, scared, but not dead."

"Not for long if we can't get there in time," Vic said, eyes squinting against the gusting wind that howled throughout the corridor. Pulling the speeder up on its side, Klux had to grip his restraining harness to prevent being thrown from the speeder.

"Sorry," Vic offered as the speeder leveled out.

Before them the Paradise Lost casino, a spire of gleaming glass and purple neon that blossomed at its apex like a flower springing six massive petals, loomed large. The powerful wind gusts had no effect on the casino's clientele as a mob of revelers and gamblers mixed and congregated at the base of the massive spire. Klux shook his head—so much vice and darkness, it's almost as if he could actually see it washing about the ankles of the disorderly throng.

Pulling the speeder past a group of drunk Neimodians, Vic slowed as he followed the casino's rounded base towards the rear.

"Gonna be hard to get the drop on him like this...the second we get into view he's already going to have the upper hand," Vic said, fingers dancing along the controls to dampen the repulsors' whine.

"You do realize this is a trap, don't you?" Baal offered from the back seat. He'd been quiet during the trip and Klux suspected it had much to do with the discussion they had back at the starship graveyard.

"Of course. Ket is too smart to try to trick him or fool him," Vic replied.

"So what are we going to do?" Klux asked.

The outlaw glanced over and Klux could tell his mind was calculating the odds of success.

"Whatever he wants us to," Vic finally replied.

They'd finally reached the rear of the building, and beyond a water exchange system and gouts of steam a black speeder sat with its engine purring like a tiger. As soon as they were fully out of cover the vehicle roared to life and came at them, head on. Modified engines growled from the rear of the vehicle and Vic had just enough time to jerk their own speeder out of harm's way before the sleek black sedan shot past.

Pulling their vehicle around, Vic gunned its engines and fell in behind in pursuit.

"What's he doing?" Klux screamed above the engines' roar.

“Toying with us,” Vic replied. “Or leading us into an ambush, I’m not sure yet, give me a minute and I’ll get back to you on that.”

Both speeders twisted and turned, leaving streaks of paint on more than a few street signs and parked vehicles. Driving erratically, it was all they could do to keep up with Ket, who had taken to clipping unlucky pedestrians trying to scramble out of the way.

“That lunatic is killing people!” Klux screamed, drawing his lightsaber. Behind him Baal was shrugging off his robes.

“Get me close enough and I’ll jump onto his speeder,” the Trianni offered.

The speeder roared in protest as Vic jammed his finger against the propulsion switch. The convertible lurched, then felt like it was actually losing ground. “Sorry Baal, this is as close as you are going to get,” Vic said between grit teeth.

Thumbing his lightsaber to life Klux focused all of his attention on the back of the black speeder. “Lets see if we can change that,” he said and slung the humming blue blade towards Ket’s vehicle.

Using the Force, Klux propelled the whirling blade forward, where it sliced into the rear of the vehicle’s engines amid a shower of sparks and smoke. The black sedan careened to the right, smashing through a wall of cargo crates and sending a fountain of foodstuffs spraying into the sky. Coughing smoke, the speeder slowed just enough for Vic to pull almost even with it.

Calling his weapon back into his hand, Klux ducked just as Baal launched himself from the backseat onto the hood of the convertible, where he remained just long enough to bound onto the black speeder on their right.

Ahead, Klux spied the ten-meter tall walls that surrounded portions of Circle City-and a gaping black opening that led to the uncharted plains beyond.

“He’s going for the gate!” he shouted to Vic who was focused on the approaching barrier. To their right Baal was hanging on to the speeder, but just barely. Igniting his lightsaber the Trianni drew back- and froze as a blue electrical charge coursed from the vehicle and lit him up like the Coruscant Skyline. Klux just barely had the presence of mind to reach out with the force and pull Baal into the safety of the convertible, before the Trianni pitched off of the sedan and hit the ground going at over eighty kilometers an hour. Cutting in front of the convertible, the sedan, trailing black plumes of smoke, shot through the gate, and as Vic tried to close the distance, Klux felt his heart leap into his throat as the form of a bound man was ejected from the sedan, falling like a ragdoll and crashing to the ground.

Slamming on the brakes, Vic brought the convertible to a stop in the darkness of the evening. Before them, illuminated in the vehicles headlights, lay the unmoving body of A’sok Thurgood.

Following Vic, Klux leapt from his seat and both rushed to A’soks side. Shallow breathing escaped the hackers lips and Klux spied the neat hole burnt into the center of his silk shirt. Calming himself, he placed his hands on A’soks chest as Vic produced a fastflesh medpack and began to go to work.

Moments later, through the miracles of modern science and the Force, A’soks eyes fluttered open and took in both the outlaw and the Jedi.

“Do I...do I still have my skin?” he asked through cracked lips.

As Vic tended to A’sok Klux stood and looked out into the dark plains and black peaks of distant mountains far beyond. Even through the Force he couldn’t sense Ket, couldn’t even

see the light of a retreating speeder. The man had just disappeared into the wilds of Ord Mantell without a trace.

“He’ll hit us again,” Vic said from beside him. “He’ll keep hitting us until we’re dead. A’sok was just an example- a lesson to us all, that we aren’t safe anywhere, anytime.”

Klux fought back the rage that filled his bones and tried to moderate his breathing. “We can’t win against him Vic...he knows too much about us.”

The outlaw remained quiet, and Klux finally looked at his partner. The outlaw looked tired, broken, but something in his eyes told Klux that no matter what, Vic would see this to the end. “We’ve been playing catch up with him for too long. It’s time to call in some favors...it’s time to take the fight to him-on his turf.”

The Bounty Heads Inc. Drop-Off Kiosk was marketed towards the “Bounty Hunter on the Move,” the angle being that there are bounty hunters so busy racking up perps that they can’t be bothered to take an extra ten minutes and leave their acquisitions with the standard local authorities.

Vic hated it. It was exactly the kind of mindless flavor-of –the-month concept that made his stomach turn into knots. Only used by posers and wannabes who were trying to impress their friends, it wasn’t used at all by those who weren’t serious about their work.

It was no surprise to him that Chance commed the team and told them to meet him at one. Pulling his poncho tight about his Terminus armor, he wandered from the speeder where Baal and Klux sat silently to the three-meter tall cylinder ringed with neon and the Bounty Heads Inc. logo.

Set chest high into the kiosk was a circular window bleeding faint blue light into the cool darkness of the Ord Mantell morning. Beyond, a bored looking Quarren in an ill fitting officers suit fiddled with his mouth tentacles while tapping away at a datapad.

He stood for a moment expecting the attendant to look up but he never did. Finally, Vic/Terminus tapped on the circle of transparasteel protecting the attendant from any unpleasantness Ord Mantell might hurl at him.

“Have you seen a red-haired kid, kinda stupid looking come around?”

The Quarren glanced up with little interest, still picking at his mouth tentacle. “Like, ever?”

“No dumbass, tonight,” Vic snarled.

Setting the datapad down, Vic watched as the Quarrens hand dipped beneath his desk. “No, now, is there anything else I can do for you?”

Chuckling, Vic shook his head. “Unlikely. Just don’t, you know, GO anywhere.” Vic walked back to the speeder staring at the Ord Mantell skyline and wondering if the sub terrain holding cells located beneath his feet were housing any bounties at this hour. Normally once a mark was turned in to the kiosk they were taken down a lift shaft and deposited into one of several holding cells while the real authorities showed up for processing. The fact that Bounty Heads Inc. raked in 10% of the bounty and some idiots actually paid for the service astounded him, they had more creds than sense apparently.

“Any sign of him? You two keeping your little Force feelers out?” he asked the two Jedi who’d barely said a word since they “rescued” A’sok from Ket. The hacker still lay in the back of the convertible covered in a blanket, motionless-Vic’s idea. He didn’t feel safe leaving him anywhere else.

“We are, but given your obvious dislike of the Force and our methods I find it curious that you seem to rely so heavily on our abilities,” Baal snapped, locking his eyes Vic.

A low chuckle escaped Vic’s mouth and emerged from the Terminus helmet sounding like someone grinding together two pieces of durasteel. “Don’t flatter yourself. All you are is a glorified electric blender with a radar dish Baal, nothing more, nothing less. Well-maybe less.”

“He’s coming,” Klux said, staring towards an alley parked behind the Bounty Heads Inc. kiosk. Terminus turned as the two Jedi stepped from the vehicle and fell in behind him. Hovering slowly from the darkness of the alley emerged a white swoop spattered with mud. Sporting a charred sleeveless shirt that had seen better days, Chance piloted the vehicle up to the Kiosk and sat for a moment, pulling a white deathstick from his pants pocket and lighting up. Slung over the back of the bike was a bundle Vic identified as a body.

“Where have you been!?!” Klux asked as they approached.

“You’ve put this entire mission in jeopardy!” Baal added.

“I never knew you smoked,” Vic said, nodding to the smoldering stick now hanging out of the side of Chances mouth.

“Yeah, not always, you know, just when the mood strikes me.”

“So, is that why you wanted us to meet you here? Why you wanted me in the Terminus persona?” Vic asked nodding to the bundle.

“I need you to turn this bounty in for me, it’s Border Freize.”

Vic stared for a moment. He’d seen the name show up on bounty postings in a few other systems, and was surprised Chance had brought in someone as lethal as Freize on his own. “Really? Must have took you quite a bit of luck to bring this one down,” Vic said as he hauled the bound body off of the speeder. One look at the mans face-or what used to be his face, almost turned Vic stomach. It was raw pulp, as if someone had taken a spiked bat and worked him over repeatedly. “Sithspit Chance, did you shove him face first into a meal grinder first?”

“What did you do?” Klux asked, astonished.

“Took care of business, Mulgrew-style,” Chance replied, blowing smoke in the direction of the two Jedi.

Shaking his head, Vic checked for a pulse and surprisingly found one. “He’s still alive, but just barely, if he doesn’t get some real medical attention soon...”

“Puh...pleeeeeeeeeease,” Border slurred, spittle and blood dribbling from from his mouth. Stunned, Vic almost dropped him back to the ground. “Yeah, yeah look pal lets just

get you over here and the nice man in the neon booth will help you.” Grabbing one arm, Chance assisted Vic in getting Freize over to the Bounty Heads Inc. kiosk where they dropped the assassin to his knees. Peering from inside the booth the Quarrens eyes grew wide.

“What the hell is this!?!” he asked stunned.

“Dropping off,” Chance smiled, flicking ashes on Borders head. “Border Freize”

The Quarren froze. “No way. No frigging way man.” Chance pulled back Borders hair to expose his face, but the Quarren simply tilted his head.

“I don’t know, he don’t look like any pics I ever seen of Freize-course it’s hard to say with his face all pummeled and whatnot. Here,” the attendant passed a hand sized flat scanner through the bottom window slot, “scan his hand, if he’s Freize his record and posting will come up.”

“Chance, you’ve put us all in jeopardy,” Baal said. He and Klux stood away from the kiosk and were watching the whole ordeal with a look of disgust. “A’sok was abducted by Ket just a while ago.”

“Did he kill him?” Chance looked up as he pressed Freize’s hand against the scanner. “Ket I mean, is A’sok dead?” Vic could almost detect a hint of hope in Chance’s voice as he passed the scanner back to the Quarren.

“No! A’sok is in the speeder, we rescued him,” Klux said, shaking his head. “What is wrong with you? Have you lost your mind?”

“Hey, pal,” the Quarren said from behind the circle of glass, “this guy ain’t got no posting or record or nothing. So this sure ain’t Freize. I would suggest you let him go, you know? Beating some guy to a pulp is still illegal on this planet, well, most of the time anyway.”

Chance shrugged at the news. “I was worried about that.”

“Look, we’ll just take him…” Vic started but stopped when Chance drew his blaster and fired a bolt into Borders skull. The superheated blood vessels exploded, spraying Vic and Chance both with gore. Freize, now a corpse simply fell over to the side.

“WHAT THE HELL!” the Quarren screamed, fumbling behind the glass for what Vic guessed was some sort of weapon.

“Move!” Vic screamed, sprinting towards the speeder. Both Jedi stood motionless, staring at Chance and the corpse now spilling a lake of blood into the street. Diving behind the controls of the speeder, Vic pulled the vehicle around and screamed again. “Klux! Baal! Haul ass!!!”

Both seemed to regain their sense at about the same time and sprinted for the speeder, followed closely behind by a grinning Mulgrew. Vic jammed the controls and sped off as blaster bolts reached from the tiny glowing kiosk and peppered the back of the speeder.

Both Jedi were screaming in his face but Chance merely smiled, taking the final puffs off of his death stick. Some words filtered through, “insane”, “darkside”, “evil” but he shut them all out. It was a nice night and he had no worries, sitting atop A’soks prone legs while both Jedi were seated in the front beside Vic, turned around and trying to make some point or other.

“Well done Chance, you eliminated Freize in front of the impotent Jedi-and they did nothing,” Coba purred in his mind. Chance nodded in agreement, of course the Jedi thought he was nodding at them and stopped for a moment.

“So? You agree that you’ve lost touch? That Baal and I must find some way to reprimand you?” Klux asked. His eyes were still wide but had taken on a stern gaze.

“Huh? What? For killing that scumbag?” Chance replied. “Come on Klux, you guys do this crap all the time. If we let Border go he would have healed up and gone back to killing people-I did the galaxy a favor,” Chance smiled, flicking the deathstick into the air. The speeder was rocketing along the back alleys and side streets of Circle City so quickly Chance felt as if he were back out racing again.

“It’s not right Padwan, you can’t assassinate someone in cold blood while...” Baal began but Chance cut him off.

“You sound like a broken record! Remember that Ventral warrior you LET Vic kill a few months back? Remember that? You both stood by because YOU couldn’t be bothered to find another way to deal with him-something that would have kept HIM alive! For all of your pathetic morals and codes, in the end you are just a couple of hypocrites! I stand there and do the EXACT same thing Vic did and now all of a sudden I’m wrong? You sit there and judge ME? Frell you both! You’re nothing but a pair of two-cred wannabe heroes who only abide by your codes when it’s convenient and makes you look good!”

Klux began to speak but, to Chances surprise Vic spoke up.

“He’s right you know.”

Klux and Baal both turned angry stares on the outlaw.

“Vic,” Baal began, “this isn’t your affair, this is...”

“Yeah, ‘Jedi Business’,” Vic slowed the speeder and pulled into a dim alley just blocks from the landing pad.

“Chance, whether I agree with it or not, is a member of this team,” Vic said, pulling his Terminus helmet off and shaking out his shoulder-length auburn hair now soaked with sweat. “You both let him join, you both decided-for whatever reason-to train him as a Jedi and now,” he turned his gaze on Chance, “you both need to deal with what he’s done. And what he’s done, he’s done because you both have failed in your training.”

“You’re wrong Vic, we didn’t fail,” Baal argued.

“Yes, we did. He’s right, we let Chance slip too far from the code,” Klux countered.

“See? You both can’t even agree on this. Your little ‘Jedi Business’ has produced a dud-no offense Chance-and you both are too blame. And now, it’s cost a life and will probably cost more in the future.”

“You kill all the time Vic! Does the name Trevis Lorne ring a recent bell in your head?” Baal roared, jamming a large blue furry finger in the outlaws face. Chance’s heart leapt at the possibility of the two waging a fistfight in the speeder, but Vic showed no reaction.

“That was a cheap shot, but you’re right. And I’m sure I’m going to kill a lot of people before my days are up. But I’ve made peace with what I do Baal. You and Klux,” he nodded to the silent Jedi who sat stroking his goatee, “are JEDI. You claim to live by a code, to uphold values the rest of the galaxy seems to have forgotten. If you allow your Padwan, the man you are training to be the next generation of Jedi, if you allow him to ignore your code and kill wounded unarmed prisoners without the slightest degree of remorse, where does that leave the rest of us ‘heroes’? Where does the line fall that separates us from the scum of the universe? I never claimed to be a Jedi or a hero or any of that nonsense. But you DO.”

All sat in silence for a moment, then Chance spoke up. “That was touching, really, are you guys going to make out now?” He smiled wide, challenging any of them to argue or curse him. The Jedi remained silent and to his surprise, Vic said the only thing that would ever have hurt him, would have made an impact..

“I bet your sister would be real proud if she could see what you’ve turned into,” he said with distaste.

Chance had nothing to answer Vic with, and looked out the speeder at the Ord Mantell evening wondering what he was becoming.

Sitting in the upper gunwell of the Skullduggery, A’sok stared out at the black of space while his hand subconsciously went to the layer of bandages that covered his chest. Below, the Skullduggery was silent, with the other members of the team either asleep or nestled in their own corner of the ship reflecting on what went down on Ord Mantell. A’sok tried not to think anymore about it and focused on what was in front of him, beyond the dull gray metal of the quad laser cannon.

It was all so beautiful-the stars, brilliant and colorful filling the black of space. He thought back to that night, not so long ago, when he held Deuce in his arms and they stared into the Tierfon Station evening watching the sky grow from violet to black, with the stars appearing as if someone had thrown a bucket of flawless diamonds across an onyx dance floor. It all seemed so romantic and easy then- running with Raptor Squad, playing hero, saving lives all for the greater good-all the while making credits and living a fairy tale romance with a strong beautiful woman.

Then he got shot in the chest.

Then, it all changed. When the bad guys win, and to A’sok, Ket most certainly DID win, and had done so repeatedly-when that happens it all changes. It goes from being a b-grade

holo full of larger than life heroes who always win and bumbling comical villains to a very real, very dangerous life.

His mind replayed what Deuce had said to him months back-that Raptor Squad was attracting the wrong kind of attention and that he might die. And he realized, when he looked into the speeder and saw Ket nestled there with a blaster trained on him, in that millisecond before he was struck in the chest by the stun bolt that took him out, that she was right.

He only hurt when he moved or breathed, so he tried to do neither, and surprisingly had little trouble. Being a descendent from an aquatic species, A'sok was able to hold his breath for up to five minutes at a time-this he did, giving him five minutes of peace and tranquility, broken up by the searing pain that accompanied his lungs inflating when he ran out of air. If it weren't for the meds Vic pumped into his body he would be unable to move, but he felt pretty good, the soreness from being thrown for the speeder almost forgotten.

Below him, the click on the turret rungs signaled someone ascending to the gunwell.

"Thought you might be up here," Vic said, squeezing his upper torso into the small space between the gunnery chair and the transparasteel dome. Leaning against the bulk of the quad-cannon he scratched at his stubble and leaned back. "Want to talk about what happened?"

A'sok sat quietly, still staring into the black void. He's expected this talk, and while it might ruin his calm, figured now was as good a time as any to discuss it. "I got shot. Guess there isn't really any more I can say about that is there Vic?"

Following A'soks gaze, the outlaw shrugged. "Look partner, don't worry, okay? We're going to head back to Garnib, get you healed up, get re-equipped and then we are going to head back out and take Ket down. I've got some contacts, we've got some leads. He can't run forever."

A'sok gave a small nod and looked at his partner. "Sounds like a solid plan. I wish you the best of luck."

Vic remained silent a moment, then returned his stare. "I hope this doesn't mean..."

"It does. I'm done Vic, through," A'sok said with finality.

"He's still out there A'sok, you won't be safe, none of us will until we take him down."

"Don't care, Vic. I can't live happily ever after with Deuce if I get shot for real next time. Ket's insane, out of his mind. He was going on about you and some woman you've never even heard of. If Deuce uses her alliance contacts we could have new id's and be living on some backwater planet spending the rest of our days lying on a beach somewhere together," he allowed himself a small smile while Vic cast his eyes down and nodded.

"You'll always be in danger 'Sok, I can't guarantee you'll ever be safe or he won't take us out and come after you."

A'sok laughed and clapped his partner on the shoulder, causing an explosion of pain in his chest. "Ow! Damn! Look," he tried to crack a smile to show Vic he was ok. "Vic, buddy, you were on the same planet as me and Ket still got to me. It's not your fault ok? Not everything that happens to someone on this team is your fault or your responsibility, and you better get a grip on that concept. Someday Vic, someone on this team is going to die, just like Socatoa," he let the sentence trail off. "I can take responsibility for my own actions and decisions."

Fiddling with a clasp on the quad cannon Vic nodded. "I know, I just, it's a character trait from when I was in charge of my Ivory Brigade guys, I just can't turn off my feelings for them-once you are a team mate, you are a team mate for life."

"Well, we may not be team mates after we set back down on Garnib, but we'll always be friends," A'sok said with a smile.

Returning the smile, Vic went to slap him in the chest, but at the last second caught himself and instead redirected his hand to A'soks knee-to his relief. "Sounds like a better deal after all 'Sok. So, we hit Garnib you are heading on to find Deuce?"

A'sok nodded. "Sure am, I've got a surprise for her that has been a long time coming."

The walls of the Skullduggery hummed with life in the darkness as Chance lay on his cot trying to shut out the voices in his mind. At first he expected Coba to deride him for his feelings of shame and remorse, but the Sith Master had been curiously quiet. Instead, the voices that came to him in the darkness were those of his sister, Leeza who had been killed by Dark Jedi while she was attending college on Mrllst.

"You're better than this Chance, you always have been," Leeza's voice echoed in his mind, and he could almost make out her smiling innocent face in his mind. He was sure it was simply his conscious mind echoing what he already knew-that what he was doing was wrong. And every time he tried to black it out, every time he tried to push those thought and voices away, the faces of the Vernol Mother and her child flashed in his minds eye and guilt fell upon him like Kashyykk timber.

After a moment he began to weep, and turned in his bunk hoping to bury his face in his pillow so he could sleep-and try to forget.

"It hurts, these feelings of remorse, do they not?" Cobas voice asked in the darkness. The artifact lay bundled in his jacket in the corner of the cabin on the floor. He tried to ignore the Sith Master but Sith Masters are not to be ignored and Coba manifested himself, his glowing red aura surrounding his body and casting crimson throughout the room as he stood towering over Chance.

"Answer me Mealworm. Do they hurt? Are you so weak that mere feelings cause you to cry like a lost little child?"

"Shut up," Chance managed, trying to close his mind. Instead, a vision of a golden cat creature, slicing through his sister's body filled his mind. Anjhai, the dark Jedi who killed his sister-who he vowed to destroy.

"You do not tell me to 'shut up' Mealworm. I have used and tossed away apprentices a thousand times more worthy than you for sport. Apprentices who were strong, who did not cry and pout and whine like spoiled little females."

"Shut your mouth old man. You don't know anything about me, you don't know who I am. Hooking up with you was a waste of time."

“A waste? Then why do you not go back to your former Masters? The Jedi? They certainly seem to have your best interests in mind-stealing holocrons just so they could lose them? Fighting amongst themselves to the point where they don’t even realize you’ve left? Oh yes-those two seem to be perfectly capable of teaching you the ways of the Force,” sarcasm spilled from Cobas voice like an oil slick.

“And what have you done?” Chance spat back.

“I’ve imbued you with REAL power Chance. I have chosen you to be my predecessor-to carry on my teachings and experiments, to restore the Sith to their prominence. I’ve put my trust in you, that’s what I’ve done you sniveling ingrate.”

“You’ve destroyed my life! The Jedi are going to punish me-hell, maybe even turn me in. I don’t know,” Chance shook his head and felt despair fill his body. “I just, I wish I could bring that woman and her kid back, I wish I could at least do that. Or Leeza, damn, am I becoming the same kind of bastard that cut her down? AM I!?”

Coba stood silent for a moment. “Are you done crying? Are you done sniveling? You’re useless Mulgrew, a worthless waste of time and resources. I would have been better off staying trapped on Farzhul,” contempt filled Cobas voice and Chance felt rage blossom in his body like a sunburst.

“Shut your hole grandpa! You’re nothing but a two-bit Sithlord who’s been out of the game so long he can’t even get it up anymore! So pipe down and keep your trap shut!”

He sat silent waiting for Coba to degrade him some more but the Sith Master had fallen silent and Chance noticed Cobas shoulders slump-just a little. Was the Sith Master growing weak? Losing power?

“You will regret the day you spoke to me in this fashion Chance. I’m going to retire to my prison for now. We will discuss this more later when the Apprentice has had time to meditate on what he has said to his MASTER.” Coba’s form shimmered, and slowly dissipated as the crimson light in the small cabin diminished, returning it to darkness.

Deep down, Chance realized what he had to do and stood, strolling to the corner of his cabin and pulling the artifact from his jacket. In the faint light cast by a nearby emergency panel the ball-pyramid combination was as black and flawless as the first time he had put his hands on it. “I’m already regretting a lot of things ‘Master’ Chance said quietly. “Now, let’s you and I go ‘have some fun.’”

Klux intercepted Vic in the Skull’s central corridor. “Did you hear that?” he asked. Moments before he’d heard shouting coming from Chances room, though he wasn’t able to make out what was said and for some reason was unable to make a connection to Chance through the Force.

Cigarra dangling from his lips, Vic nodded. “Yeah, maybe the kid was having a nightmare about whacking Freize,” he offered.

“Maybe. Let’s go check on him, if you don’t mind,” Klux said. Vic nodded and both headed towards Chance’s room.

“Where’s Baal?” Vic asked.

“Locked in his cabin. He and I haven’t spoken since we left Ord Mantell. He said something about starting a temple or something when we got back to Garnib-he’s mentioned it before. I’m not sure about the details.”

“Well, a temple means followers and if recent history is any indication Baal can’t handle owning a pet goldenfish, much less training or leading folks. Maybe I’ll move JIE to another planet.”

Exiting his cabin with his jacket bundled in his hands, Chance emerged just a handful of meters down the corridor and threw a glance in their direction, giving both a shaky smile.

“Hey, uh, where’s Baal at?” he asked, nervously glancing around. In the pit of Klux’s stomach something felt-wrong. But he couldn’t put his finger on what it was. Given the event’s of the past few days, little seemed right anymore.

“In his cabin, why?” Klux asked.

“Oh, I was wondering if I could show you guys something. Do you think Baal could join us?”

“No, I doubt it. You can talk to us Chance, we’re all on the same team here,” Klux said, trying to calm the younger man down. Something had him spooked and the hairs on the back of Klux’s neck began standing up.

Vic snorted. “Yeah...’team’. That’s exactly what we are...”

“Vic, hey, I wanted to get your opinion on something,” A’sok said, entering the corridor holding a data disk out to the outlaw.

Walking on ahead, Chance entered the cargo hold, clutching his jacket to his chest. Vic was directly behind Klux with A’sok in tow.

“Can this wait ‘Sok? Chance wants to talk to us about something,” Vic said as the trio followed Chance into the dimly lit hold. Out of habit A’sok triggered the door shut.

“I guess so, what does he have to tell us that’s so important? What? Is he going to give us a shadow puppet show of how he capped Freize?”

Turning, Chance let his jacket fall to the ground. In his hand, glistening like a midnight pearl of darkness and despair, sat an object that Klux thought he had lost months ago- a Sith artifact, that now, as it lay exposed just meters from him, exuded waves of pure, raw evil.

“I...I don’t know what to do with this, I know I should have told you about him sooner,” Chance stammered, tears pooling in his eyes.

“YOU FOOL! YOU’VE BETRAYED ME!” a voice roared in the cargo hold, shaking the floor panels and rattling the teeth in Klux’s head. His lightsaber was in his hand before the sentence was finished, but he was unprepared for what happened next.

An unholy scream, let loose from the depths of a dark soul, sent forth a wave of pain and destruction that filled the entire hold. Crates flew through the air to slam against walls and the entire group dropped to the ground almost simultaneously as their bodies were assaulted by unimaginable pain.

Dropping to his knees, it was all Klux could do to call on the Force to keep his body from imploding. As if the scream would never end, its force twisted everyone in the hold on the ground like ragdolls, burning their flesh from the inside out.

Forcing his eyes to remain open, Klux tried to focus himself, to block out the screams of his teammates and rely on the Force to shield him from the violent assault that was trying to rip his body into pieces. Before him, on the flat durasteel of the cargo floor, spots of blood dropped from his eyes and nose, making several fat puddles of crimson.

A moment later he felt himself lose his grip, and a evil blackness covered him like a burial shroud.

Inside, Vic Palisades felt as if his brain had been pulled from his head, dropped into a grinder and set on 'high'. No word could describe the pain he felt, so he tried to drop back into unconsciousness, but the stabbing sensation in his head wouldn't allow it. Instead, he tried to crack an eyelid to see where he was, but the moment any light made its way through his head swelled and a groan escaped his lips.

He knew he was still on the Skull, could tell by the hum of the ship and the familiar groan of the air exchangers and life support system, sounds he normally couldn't hear were now hammering inside his head like a drummer.

So, with nothing better to do, he waited, opening his eyes intermittently to allow them to adjust to the light. It took hours, but eventually he was able to keep them open. Once his eyes adjusted to the dim overhead light of the makeshift med bay he wished he had left them closed.

Across from him on the Skull's second medbed lay Klux. Dried blood streaks ran from his ears and eyes, as the Jedi lay motionless, his voice a hollow rasping sound emanating from behind a clear oxygen mask. His face had been drained of all color and if it weren't for the shallow breathing, Vic would have thought the Jedi a corpse.

Something caught Vic's eye on the floor past Klux's medbed and he squint, trying to make it out. When he did his heart caught in his throat and he lay stunned for a moment.

A bodybag.

Drawing all of his strength into his body, Vic pulled himself up and rolled from the medbed, leads and IV's popping from his torso and spilling fluid onto the cold deck. A monitor began beeping erratically somewhere behind, but he paid it no attention. Hitting the floor, Vic scrambled through cold slick fluids that rained down from the IV to the bodybag, gritting his teeth against the pain and cold that racked his body.

Reaching the black plastic, Vic slowly pulled the seal down and pulled apart the shell. The sickening stench of blood mixed with bodily fluids hit him in the face and almost made him gag, but he forced it back and stared into the horrific face of Chance Mulgrew.

The young man's eyes had exploded, leaving gore filled cavities that resembled a mask. Large trails of blood fell from both corners of a mouth frozen in a scream and his face was as white as a stormtrooper's helmet. Vic shook his head and pulled the seal closed.

"You shouldn't be out of your bed," Baal said from behind him. Vic remained motionless, kneeling over Chance's body.

“Where is A’sok? Did you have to move him to another room? Is he alright?” Vic asked, trying to block out the stabbing pain erupting throughout the raw nerve cluster that was his body

“No, I didn’t move him to another room Vic,” Baal said quietly. Confused, Vic turned to look at the Trianni, and spotted another bodybag near the door where the Jedi stood.

“No...NO!” Vic screamed, ignoring the pain and standing, slowly walking over towards the second bag. Baal intercepted him, gently barring his way.

“Vic, he’s gone, you don’t want to see him like this...”

“Frell you! Frell you and your damn Force!” Vic screamed into the Jedi’s face. “He’s dead because of YOU! You damn Jedi!”

Both remained locked, with Baal looking away and Vic staring hot death from behind teary bloodshot eyes.

Gently stepping back and steepling his fingers, Baal spoke softly. “Vic, calm yourself, I am merely...” but the words were barely out of his mouth before Vic was lunging at him, balling his fists and leaping forward with everything he had. Darkness raced in from the edges of Vic’s vision and everything went to black. In his last moments of consciousness, he felt two furry hands grip him, and mustered just enough strength to wrench himself away and crash back to the ground.

“I don’t think this is right,” Klux commented, bundling his robes about him and casting a cautious gaze at the mass of travelers and transients that flooded the receiving lobby of Gigers Spire—a derelect space station located in the far reaches of the Blue Xenith System in CSA controlled space.

“Don’t care Klux, just follow along or go park yourself back on the ship,” Vic, wearing the Terminus armor, said. Navigating the crowd, they both soon found themselves in a wide concourse that curved around in a spiral. The ‘Spire as the regulars called it, was one big cone shaped mass of durasteel, with it’s interior a curving spiral that wound down to it’s lower levels. The station had seen some years, with dingy walls and a décor that screamed “function” rather than style.” Massive girders and rivets the size of a persons head held the station together, and the designer, if there was one, felt that showing the strength of the structure would put visitors minds at ease. With the way Vic moved and navigated some of the side hallways, it was obvious he had been there before.

“You familiar with this place,” Klux asked, changing the topic of discussion. A group of spacers were engaged in some sort of drinking contest in a nearby cantina, with an overweight twi’lek bartender cheering them on.

“Yeah, I spent a little time undercover in system a few years back while with the IB,” Vic adjusted the large duffel slung over his shoulder and kept moving at a brisk solid pace. It had been just two weeks since both had taken the Dark Jedi’s Force Scream head on, and both were still feeling it’s effects—but you couldn’t tell by Vic’s strong strides and squared shoulders.

A moment later they veered down a short hallway and up to a nondescript window set into a filth and graffiti-covered wall. Behind a smudged window sat a rail thin Arconan with brilliant yellow eyes and mottled silverfish skin.

“What ya need?” it asked.

Hefting the duffel from his shoulder, Vic planted it on the ground and leaned it up towards the window, unzipping it. The smell that poured forth almost made Klux lose his dinner but he couldn't look away. Falling away from the black leather folds to smack against the window flopped Chance Mulgrew's pale blood streaked head.

“Collecting on a bounty,” “Terminus” replied in a harsh even tone. Name's Mulgrew, Chance, you'll find all of the info on the latest postings out of the Etti system.

The Arconan stared at the corpse and then back to Terminus. “Would you mind pulling him back into your sack? He's leaking blood on my counter.”

Complying, Terminus pulled Chance's corpse back into the duffel, pulling a lifeless arm free, and pressing Chance's hand against the identification pad the Arconan was offering through the window slit.

“Fine. Good scan. It's sometimes hard to get a reading when the mark is missing fingers or it was furry or...”

“How long before I can get my creds,” Terminus said, interrupting the Arconan who had already stepped through a small side door to the left of the window and pulled the duffel inside. When the door was shut the Arconan reappeared, shaking his T-Shaped head. “Might take a few hours, a day even, we're backlogged.”

“That's not acceptable, we've got places to be,” Terminus replied.

“That's too bad. You've got places to be, and I'm,” the Arconan glanced at his chrono, “at lunch. Come back later.” And with that the Arconan hit a trigger and the window went black.

“What the,” Klux looked at Vic. “Great, now we have to sit around here for a day just to get the bounty.”

The outlaw was already moving down the hallway, sidestepping into a small alcove with the word “PATC” flashing in red neon directly above. Klux followed as two small Gran and Quarren children raced down the hallway playing with toy blasters. In the alcove, Vic had removed his helmet and shaken his hair loose, and was typing away at the public access terminal.

A moment later Klux heard a beep.

“LoJann here,” a thick accented voice filled the small alcove.

“How you doing you old pirate?” Vic asked with a smile.

“Hey! Vic Palisades! My favorite actor!!!” The being on the other end responded. “Are you one station? You should come up for a bite! I've got a few ladies who need breaking in!”

Vic shook his head and smiled. “Maybe later Papa, but right now I was wondering if you could do me a favor...”

The Arconan looked irritated and angry but was doing a good job of remaining professional-even more professional since Vic had made his call. “Just need a signature please,” he said trying not to make eye contact with Terminus.

“Of course. I hope your lunch won’t get too cold,” Terminus replied with a chuckle.

“Uhm, no, I was having a salad,” the Arconan muttered.

“Healthy choice.”

“Yeah, I guess,” the attendant pulled a credstick from beneath the counter. “Here is your bounty, it came out to one hundred and eighteen thousand-“

“I believe the fee was to be waived,” Terminus interjected.

“Uhm, oh yeah. Then it’s One Hundred and Twenty –Five large,” the Arconan smiled, replacing the credstick and producing a new one.

“Obliged,” Terminus replied, and within minutes they were both back on their way to the Skullduggery.

“He was a team mate Vic, even if, in the end he did, you know...” Klux was still trying to rationalize what they had just done, deep down, it just didn’t feel right. Stopping, Vic moved quickly and Klux, caught off guard, found himself shoved against the side of a “Happy Lucky Orange Fizz” kiosk.

“Look pal, I know he was your Padwan and all of that garbage, but he **KILLED** my friend and partner. I wouldn’t give you one A’sok Thurgood for a thousand Chance Mulgrews on any damn given day. So, unless you want to pack your junk and get the hell off my ship, you better rearrange that big Jedi mind of yours and accept that Mulgrew’s ass has been written off.”

Klux stammered, “But, we just turned him in for-”

“For a bounty. You’re exactly damn right. For credits that will go towards burying A’sok on his home planet,” Vic trailed off and his metallic voice dipped low. “A’sok deserves to be buried a hero...Chance deserves to be forgotten. One was a friend and a valued member of this team, the other was a mistake I allowed you and Baal to talk me into making. Chance was an inexperienced gamble we should have dumped a long time ago,” Vic shook his head and Klux watched his red reflection move back and forth in the helmets crimson visor. “And when we are done, we’re going after Ket and ending this cat and mouse game once and for all.”

Gathering his robes about him, Klux nodded. “Agreed. Baal and I can...”

“Klux, I said ‘we’, that Trianni bastard can go make snow angels on Garnib until I decide what to do with him,” Vic said with finality. “You said he mentioned building a temple? Good, because that will take time, and time and space is exactly what I need between

us. Once we're done burying A'sok I don't want to see that stupid furry face for a long time."

Nodding, Klux knew better than to argue, and followed the bounty hunter down the hallway and back to the ship.

EPILOGUE

"Of course Mr. Valance, you realize that A'sok Thurgood was responsible for providing a Krish terrorist faction with plans that allowed them to bypass our shield generators and eliminate several Baldin colonies," the bureaucrat, a light skinned male with sharp features and no hair offered a dire frown that showed Vic just how grave he perceived the situation to be. But Vic knew better, behind this pencil pushers eyes lay the soul of a reptile-the kind that can be bought or killed to get what you want.

Vic needed this worm, who went by the title "Secretary of Retirement and Burials, Do'got Seemaz", so he opted for the less violent option.

"We all make mistakes, Mr. Secretary, and we all change. I'm not going to sit here and try to convince you what A'sok did was right," Vic opened his hands and smiled, adjusting himself in the conforming chair parked before the swooping white contours of the bureaucrats desk. Seemaz's office was large, with a picture window overlooking the Baldin Azures, a massive sea that now sparkled with the last glimmers of daylight. "But, I would like to point out that A'sok risked his life to get information to the New Republic that allowed them to overthrow the Empire on Endor," Vic continued. "Without those shield generator plans, the rebels wouldn't have known where to..."

"Yes, yes, I've read all of this in the report you filed this morning with my clerk. Gripping events to be sure, especially the letter of honor from," Seemaz examined the flimplast with tiny black irises, "Colonel Jax Sheba, of New Republic Intelligence backing up your claims."

Nodding Vic smiled. He'd just worked up the forged letter that morning. Jax was still missing and going through standard New Republic channels would have taken time-time he didn't have. "That's right. So, having A'sok named a hero of the New Republic and a burial shrine erected out on the Baldin Azures shouldn't be a problem. I would also like to start a trust fund for a local charity," Vic began.

Seemaz was already waving his hands, "Mr. Valance, again, I'm sure in the hectic world of the New Republic things are done quickly and efficiently, but here on Baldin, Thurgood is a criminal, who..."

"A hero," Vic corrected standing.

Seemaz's false smile turned into a minor snarl. "A criminal..."

Vic reached inside his jacket and took pleasure when Seemaz's narrow eyes flew wide, his mouth opening to scream. When Vic's hand emerged with an envelope and not a blaster the man managed to take a breath. Vic tossed the envelope onto the desk where it lay between them like a thick white barrier reef. "There's twenty thousand credits in there that says he's a hero and deserves a hero's burial. There's another fifty thousand that needs a trustee to make sure it gets invested and distributed in a charitable fashion-a trustee who would be able to keep half of any dividends that the initial investment would make. With the current galactic interest rate, that could potentially come out to another seven thousand per year just to sign some papers. So, what do you say?"

The false smile returned, showing a row of perfect narrow teeth and Seemaz opened his hands wide. "I do suppose we could do business Mr. Valance. Would you like the shrine built from white marble or black?"

"White. I've had my fill of black marble."

"I made some tea, I thought you might need a bit to take the chill off," Mil'ea Thurgood said, offering Baal a large mug. He was seated on a deck chair, overlooking the crashing waves that surrounded the home she shared with her twelve-year old son Ja'suuk. Elevated on massive pillars anchored into the reef, the circular two-story building was surround on all sides by the ocean, set out from the volcanic mountains that edged Baldin's main continent. Similar buildings sprung from the waves farther down the surf, but this one was curiously situated to itself.

"Thank you, it's been awhile since I was able to partake in good company and refreshment," Baal said, cupping the warm mug in his hands. Despite his heavy navy cloak and bodily fur, the evening had gone from one of comfortable warmth to chilled.

Between the two deck chairs a fire pit simmered and Mil'ea took a moment to stoke it back to life, quietly sitting in the vacant chair across from Baal once small flames began dancing back amongst the coals. He glanced to his left and took in her features and was still amazed at how young she looked. He placed her at just under fifty standard years, but her eyes carried the same dancing mirth as her son A'sok, and her body showed the benefits of healthy clean living-she could have been in her early thirties, easily.

"You're friend Vic returned earlier and retired to bed. Apparently he had some success in arranging A'sok's burial."

Waves crashed below and a bit of spray made it over the wooden deck and onto the planks a few meters from Baal's boots. Upon arrival at Baldin Vic had made contact with A'sok's Mother and she'd insisted that they stay with her throughout the entire affair. But upon entering her home, Bala realized it was an offer not bred from any sense of hospitality, it was simply how things were done on Baldin. He took a sip of tea and turned in his seat. "This is good news. A'sok deserves a proper burial," Baal replied.

Mil'ea remained silent, watching the waves. The silence grew into several minutes and Baal tried to make small talk, feeling himself growing more and more uncomfortable. "The tea is excellent, thank you again," he said, taking a drink of the warm brew. It tasted slightly of sea salt and herbs, but was warm and comforting.

“Did he have others friends? Anyone he was involved with?” Mil’ea asked. Her voice was quiet, somber but strong.

“He uhm. He was involved with a soldier in the military. Her name is Deuce, they had been together for a while.”

“Deuce. I would like to have met her. A’sok was always drawn to expensive, extravagant things,” she said, smoothing her white tunic. “I’m surprised he fell in love with a soldier-that seems almost too...common...for him. And what of the rest of you? Do you have loved ones?”

His fur began to feel a bit too warm and Baal felt himself growing uncomfortable. “Well, Vic has a woman he- uhm. No, no I don’t think you could say we have any loved ones.”

“Sad. So much death in what you people do,” he eyes still focused on darkening horizon. “Someone should weep for you when you die.”

The comment caught Baal off guard and he felt his mouth fall open. “Well, I certainly hope that isn’t something I need to worry about in the near future,” Baal said without thinking.

Turning in her chair, Mil’ea fixed Baal with a pair of piercing green eyes. “I hope you’re right Balthazar. But I hoped I would get my son back in one piece after he was done traveling the galaxy on his silly crusades. But that didn’t happen, did it?”

“I’m sorry for your loss Mil’ea. A’sok was...”

“I don’t want your sorry! I want my son back!” she shouted, her eyes filling with tears that poured down her face, glistening in the orange glow of the fire pit. Long black hair fell across her face in strands as she folded her arms across her chest, her body racked with sobs. Below, waves crashed loudly into the supports as a flock of avian took flight, soaring across the cloud streaked evening sky. Silently, not sure what to do, Baal sit his mug on the ground and stood, turning to walk back into the home.

“You’ve still got a chance. You can stop living this life, you don’t have to die alone,” he heard her whisper behind him. Turning, he watched her use her long thin fingers to pull strands of her hair away from her wet cheeks so she could lock wide almond shaped eyes on him.

No, my path is set before me, just as A’sok’s was,” Baal replied.

“A path of loss and sacrifice? For what?” Fresh tears began falling down her face. “So others have to die for some silly ideals?”

Baal turned back towards the house. “Others already have,” he said, disappearing into the doorway.

Pushing. Fighting. Surviving. It was all he ever seemed to do anymore. One enemy goes down, three more crop up in their place. The Azure Seas had a predator like that, called a “Moz a’ ton Dilad”, the native tongue that translated into “Multiplier Fish.” Vic heard A’sok talk about them before, how he would joke that some of their enemies-Tremayne, Ket, the Dark Jedi- were all the same entity, and that their adversaries were just spawn from one main villain. Pushing A’sok out of his mind, Vic swam against the powerful waves that threatened to pull him near the crags of the reef and shatter his body.

He swam harder, harder than he needed to so the sea knew who was in charge. So he could make a point.

The Azure Seas hammered him with crystal blue water that was so cold he could barely feel his limbs anymore. But he didn’t quit. The sun had just crested above the horizon, and others would be waking, getting their morning started with hot mugs of coffee and healthy breakfasts. He would worry about food later, he had to teach the seas a lesson. He swam on for another half an hour, much longer than he should have. Cutting through the waves he was well beyond the point of exhaustion, Vic finally felt he’d fought enough, and swam back towards the black sand shores to the point where the seas took over and slowly, gracefully deposited him back onto land. The sun was in the sky now, its warmth baking away the moisture from his body as he lie on his back, eye closed.

“You, you swim a lot, you sure you aren’t from here?” someone asked.

Vic turned his head and cracked his eye. A’soks younger brother Ja’Suuk stood just a meter away, staring out at the sea-almost as if he was avoiding looking Vic in the eye. “Nah, I don’t get to swim anywhere else, so when I get an opportunity I don’t like to pass it up. Go ahead and cop a squat,” he gestured to the black sand.

The boy, A’sok had told him he was only twelve once, dropped next to Vic on the sand. He looked a lot like A’sok in the face, but for his youth he was a bit soft and thick around the middle-a contrast to A’soks tall thin frame. Vic smiled and could almost imagine Mil’ea forcing the young man to indulge in elaborate evening meals, and as he did so he felt himself envious, thinking of his own mother who would cook up slabs of salted Vol Kol Sunrays-fish he and his father would catch and bring home from their frequent father-son vacations.

“Yeah, I bet you are always busy. You know, taking down bad guys, saving the girl, and all that,” Ja’Suuk said, gripping something in his hand. “A’sok told me about your adventures. You know, you don’t have to worry though! He sent everything in a code he taught me, I could tell it to you if you don’t believe me, it’s written right here on his letter,” Ja’suuk displayed a piece of blue flimplast he gripped tightly in his hand.

Waving his hands, Vic returned his head to the sand and closed his eyes. “Kid, it’s ok. I believe you and I’m not worried. Your brother was smart and careful, I don’t...didn’t worry about things A’sok did.”

The water lapped the shore and Vic felt himself growing drowsy in the warmth of the suns rays.

“So...I guess you guys are going to be needing a hacker now.”

“Yeah, you almost always need one on the jobs we do. Your brother was the best. Good at infiltration, handy with a heater, going to be hard to replace him,” Vic said fighting

a loosing battle with exhaustion. His body was sore, tired and he wanted nothing more than to catch a few minutes of sleep.

“Well, I can have my stuff ready to go in a few hours.”

Thoughts of naps and sleep disappeared in an instant and Vic’s eyes flew open and he rolled over and propped himself up on one elbow. “Did you say something?”

The youngster looked away, still focusing on the horizon, stealing a glance back at him. “I said I could have, uhm...”

“No. No, no, no,” Vic said sitting cross-legged and turning towards the young boy. “Ja’Suuk, I’m sure you are a fine hack-uhm-programmer. But you are only twelve years old. Sorry kid, but we’ve got a age minimum and you just aren’t old enough,” he lied.

“You guys aren’t exactly a military academy Mr. Palisades,” Ja’Suuk said turning towards him. The young mans face held a healthy tan that contrasted with the green tunic he wore. “I can help you! I want to do something to help you.”

“Ja’Suuk, you want to help me? Then stay here, look after your mom, and stay in school! Grow into a productive member of Baldin and help erase what everyone thought of A’sok. Your brother was a good man, and everyone deserves to remember him that way.”

The young man’s shoulders fell and he nodded. “I can do that Mr. Palisades. I...I still think I can help you but I guess I understand. Anything else?”

“Uh, yeah don’t do drugs.”

The youngster looked up. “Are you serious?”

“Yeah. Sort of. Just, keep your nose clean kid. And someday, when you are a man and if this crazy galaxy still needs help, come find me and I’ll help you find a group that can use your skills,” Vic smiled and slapped the younger man gently on the shoulder.

“Thanks Mr...”

“Vic. Call me Vic.”

“Thanks Vic. You know, I wanted to tell you at dinner last night, but you seemed pretty tired and my mom was around but-“ Ja’Suuk shook his head slightly, “our father died when we were younger and my mom always thought A’sok was foolish for what he did; she thought he did it because he didn’t have a strong man to tell him right from wrong. And for a long time I was mad at him until I heard from him and heard what he was doing-trying to right his wrongs and everything. But I just wanted to say thanks. Thanks for helping my brother make a difference. I’m going to miss him, but at least I know he died for something important.”

A ball of emotion caught in Vic’s throat and he smiled and nodded, choking it back. “You’re welcome Ja’Suuk. I’m going to miss your brother as well.”

Smiling, Ja’Suuk stood and turned back towards the house situated farther down the coast. In his hand he still gripped the crumpled piece of flimplast-the last words from an older brother who sacrificed everything, to his younger brother who was just becoming a man.

Climbing to his feet, every muscle in Vic's body screamed with a fiery roar, but he set his jaw, blocked out the screams and plunged his body back into the icy water of the Azure Seas.

"A'sok Thurgood was a Hero and a friend, and was taken from us far too soon," Klux began, standing before A'sok's sarcophagus located on a raised white marble dais. Inside, A'sok lay, adorned in a fine black suit and surrounded by several items—a holo pic of he and Deuce that showed them laughing at some sort of carnival, a holstered Thunderer Heavy Blaster Pistol and finally a small white bead—placed there by Vic without any fanfare or explanation.

Staring at him was a small crowd made up of Vic, Baal, Ten-Spot, See-Beez, LZ, Chance's repair droid, Secretary Seemaz, Mil'ea and Ja'Suuk, who sang a low sorrowful tune that carried throughout the platform, mixing with the gentle lapping of waves.

A handful of reporters and cameramen broadcast the service that would be broadcast later that evening.

All were arranged in a semi-circle, as the shrine was a circular glass disc, hovering above the ocean on repulsors and ringed in white marble columns and topped with a domed roof. Below them, Baldinian Wave fish raced and frolicked, oblivious to the ceremony taking place directly above their playground.

"I know A'sok had a sketchy past here on Baldin, but when we are young, we make mistakes, because we simply don't know the future consequences of our actions. Even when we have Mast-uhm, parents, who try to tell us what is right and wrong, we sometimes don't listen. And sometimes, we find out too late, that they were just trying to look out for us and guide us—for our own good," Klux stopped. Visions of Chance filled his mind and he forced himself to take a deep breath and focus beyond the white marble pillars to the brilliant white clouds that seemed to hug the sea, lazily moving through a brilliant blue sky wherever the gentle winds took them.

"We...have to be responsible for what we do, and when what we do is wrong—we must redeem ourselves," he looked at Vic who watched from behind mirrored sunglasses, and Baal, who sat quietly with his head down—both seated on opposite ends of the row. "We cannot undo some mistakes, but we can try to do the right thing from that point on, we can, and must, try to salvage what honor we can, so that our future actions are pure and right and selfless," he felt tears pull at his eyes and channeled the Force to calm his breathing.

"A'sok may have done damage here, but in the end, he sacrificed himself, helping to bring freedom to billions throughout this galaxy, and that has to be worth something," Klux turned to the clear lid that covered the sarcophagus and placed a hand gently on top of its flawless surface. "Goodbye my friend. Your memory will live with us until the end of days."

Vic jerked his jacket off and threw it aside once he was up the Skullduggerys ramp. Tenspot, hovering directly behind, silently dipped and retrieved the garment.

"Any word from the New Republic? Perfo?" Vic asked, heading down the hallway.

“Yes, he sends his condolences and said that Deuce was on assignment and incommunicado for at least another month, if not longer. I told him you wanted to break the news to her personally, and he agreed,” Ten Spot replied, relaying the messages he loaded from the ship's computer. The normally sarcastic armorer droid actually sounded despondent as he relayed the messages.

“Vic, we need to talk,” Baal shouted from behind as he entered the ship. Vic, angry, hurt and tired was almost to his cabin. He stopped, considered going on in and ignoring the Trianni, but decided not to. Slowly, he turned around. “That’s funny Baal, I’m racking my brain and I can’t seem to find one damn thing I want to talk to you about.”

The Trianni pulled up and stopped, towering over Vic by at least a meter. Vic stared holes into him and waited.

“I...you can’t blame what happened to A’sok on the Force Vic. I was able to use the Force and pick up some residual thoughts from the artifact before I spaced it out the airlock. The being's name was Master Coba, and when he used the Force Scream, it killed him. He’s dead Vic, gone, the Force didn’t kill A’sok, this Dark Jedi did.”

Nodding, Vic seemed to ponder the thought. “Well,” he began, putting a finger up to his temple, “You’re right about one thing Baal. The Force didn’t kill A’sok, but it wasn’t some old washed up Dark Jedi, It was YOU.”

Recoiling as if struck, Baal took a step back. “Me?”

“Yeah, you. You can try to blame this Coba, or Chance or any other being you want pal, but at the end of the day, Chance had that damned Sith trophy because you and Klux decided to train him and dropped the damn ball. Klux has admitted he screwed up, he told me he was sorry for what happened, and you know what? I believe him, but you...” Vic gave the Trianni a disgusted look. He expected Baal to come to him at some point and was just waiting to lay into him. “You can’t even be bothered to take responsibility for your own damn actions. You make me sick Baal.”

Eyes narrowing, Baal shrugged off his robes where they fell into a silent pile at his feet. “You have no right to pin this on me Palisades! It wasn’t my fault Chance took that pyramid and began learning from it, it wasn’t my fault he fell to the teaching of a dark lord!”

Leaning easily against the cargo hold, Vic snickered.

“Oh yeah? Well maybe, just maybe, he wouldn’t have been tempted if some Scrag humper hadn’t HID THE JEDI HOLOCRON. You ever think about that genius? You ever pull yourself out of your selfish bubble of denial just long enough to think that you hiding the holocron maybe caused him to embrace the teachings of this Sith Lord?”

Silence hung between them for a moment and Klux appeared in the corridor, hanging back and remaining quiet. Vic noticed the Jedi’s hand actually fell conveniently close to his lightsaber. Inside Vic smirked...Klux need not be bothered-if he knew anything he knew Baal didn’t have the backbone to attack him.

“So where does that leave us?” Baal asked quietly, crossing his arms and titling his head a bit.

Shrugging, Vic turned back towards his cabin. “It leaves you buying your way back to Garnib or wherever the hell you want to go and Klux and I heading to the Elrood system to look for Ket.”

“Just you two? You will need me,” Baal began, but Vic snapped, and was back in the Trianni’s face, shoving a finger just centimeters from Baal’s black snout.

“THE HELL WE DO!” he screamed. “You take your self importance and your misplaced sense of worth to this team and get the hell off of my ship Baal. Klux and I need you like we need another brain explosion, you useless scrag!”

Baal remained still and fixed wide blue eyes on the outlaw. “Vic, Calm...”

“If you tell me to calm myself one more time I swear by the stars in the sky I’m going to rip your throat out and line the walls of the cargo hold with your intestines,” Vic said calmly, hands falling to his sides. “You want to be added to the list of Force Users I’ve killed then go ahead and say it-say it you tall, dumb bastard.”

Klux was between them in a flash, gently pushing Baal away. “Come on Baal, I’ll help you find a freighter heading towards Garnib.”

“You’re wrong about this Vic, you’re going to realize that,” Baal shouted past Klux, but Vic was already heading down the corridor towards A’soks room and didn’t bother to verbally respond, but managed to throw a gesture over his shoulder that expressed more than any words could have.

Seated on A’sok s bunk, Vic pulled his friends spacers chest out and was hunkered over it, going through the property of his dead comrade. On the bunk in one pile were items Vic wanted to keep or could use. So far, the pile contained a disk simply labeled “Give to Deuce”, a hacking upgrade for a comp deck, a handful of holopics of A’sok with Deuce, or various members of the team or JIE employees, a Ryloth Heat Thunderball jersey that smelled like Deuce and a half empty bottle of Soccorran Rava.

The last, Vic took and uncorked, downing half of it in one swallow. The drink burned through him and he felt it hitting his still throbbing brain, numbing the still lingering effects of Master Coba’s Force Scream-or whatever the hell the Jedi had called it.

“Damn Force Users,” he mumbled to himself, fishing inside his coveralls for a cigarra. Instead of a smoke, he felt his fingers close around a small circular disk. Pulling it out, he realized it was the disc A’sok handed him in the hallway immediately before they entered in to the cargo hold with Chance and his Sith Master.

Grabbing a nearby datapad, Vic slowly inserted the disc and listened as it whirred, and started scrolling information on the screen. The following blue letters appeared:

Possible wedding Vows:

“I A’sok Thurgood, do choose you, Deuce El’Kar as my soulmate and partner, to live out this life and whatever lies beyond as husband and wife...”

Vic’s throat swelled, “Aw Damn. No...”

In the near darkness of A’soks room, surrounded by the remaining personal effects of a hero and a friend, Vic scrolled through a wedding ceremony and honeymoon plans that would see A’sok and Deuce retire into a life of happiness and love, far away from the ravages and death of a galactic civil war that both had fought in and both had sacrificed for.

By the time he reached the end of the list of arrangements, he could barely breath. The last was a closing message from A'sok, verbally encoded so that the hackers voice emerged from the datapad, echoing off of the durasteel walls of the cabin:

“Vic, what do you think? I know there are still some rough spots but I figured a guy like you would be able to tell me if the vows or the honeymoon package was nice or not. Oh and make sure you leave the date open pal, cause I'm going to need a Best Man, and I can't think of anyone better than you.”

Sitting in the near dark of A'sok cabin, Vic swallowed the rest of the Rava, letting the liquid fire burn away the pain and rage that threatened to overtake him. When the bottle was empty he violently slung it across the cabin, where it shattered against the bulkhead, raining a million shards of glass onto the floor.

At some point, after re-reading the message for the hundredth time, he fell into the bunk and was overcome by fatigue and exhaustion. And in the darkness, he dreamt, dreams that showed a dark future, filled with men in black and women in white. And somewhere, nestled in the middle, a figure in gold who walked a path that Vic felt was somehow, some way, intertwined with his own...

THE END