

Star Wars: Fan Fiction

Ebon Mortis

The Hunt for Quintano Roo

First edition

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E-book ISBN: 978-1-365-07402-8

None of the characters or events portrays any actual person, either living or dead. Any relation between any character and any person is purely coincidental. Most characters are created from the imagination of the author.

This book is not yet rated. It does contain the following: Language, references to adult situations, drug use, drinking, violence and sci-fi suspense. This material might not be suitable for all ages, parental guidance is advised.

This is a fan fiction book. It does not represent any basis to the Star Wars canon and is only meant to be a possibility of what could have happened. I claim no rights to the Star Wars universe. I do not collect any financial revenue from this book.

This story takes place between “The Empire Strikes Back” and “Return of the Jedi”.

This book is dedicated to all the Star Wars fans out there. Remember, this is only a fan fiction book. I hope you enjoy.

Please note, the Huttese language was rather difficult, so I did my best.

## Characters

A'Den Verda Fett - Mandalorian Bounty Hunter

General Brakin Fess - Imperial General

Lt Draks Kelen - Imperial Lt.

Quintano Roo - Human rogue

Valas - Imperial Agent

## Planets

Korriban - Hot Desert, Sith temple ruins

Felucia - Humid jungles, mushroom plants, farmlands

Jabiim - Lightning storms, muddy

Kessel - Desert, caves, and spice mines

Nar Kreeta - Rocky desert, aquamarine oceans

Nar Shaddaa - City planet

Gamorr - Forests, swamps

Kintan - Lava fields and petrified forests

Tammar - Flat landscape, thin atmosphere, no water

## Ships

Audacious - Orion Dreadnaught Class: Heavy Cruiser

Crew 16K + 3K troops. Ships: 12 T.I.E. fighters

Ebon Mortis - X-70b Phantom Class

Wraith - Fury-Class Imperial Interceptor

## **Book: On the Run**

### **Chapter: Quintano Roo**

“Where...is...the...Seal?”

The voice was filled with anger and impatience and it was no wonder. The interrogation had been going on for almost an hour now and Quintano didn't know how much longer he could hold up under the general's "questioning". The only thing that kept him going was the fact that each moment that he did hang on was another moment that brought General Fess to his own breaking point. It was only a matter of time now; one of them was going to snap and when that happened the situation was going to get very nasty, very quickly.

Quintano knew that if the general broke first then he would start on something more "persuasive" during this interrogation. He also knew that once he broke then the general would have the information that he was looking for and he would no longer be useful. The general would kill him. He was dead either way, it was only a matter of time and a matter of how much pain he was willing to endure.

Quintano Roo was of average height and considered himself a "lady's" man. His hair was short, in its usual, regular, military style from when he used to work for the rebellion. Some habits were hard to break but he had to admit that it kept his hair out of his face and out of the way and made it easy to manage. He had a slight tan that covered his shirtless body from the times that he had spent out in the sun on missions for far too long.

He did consider himself handsome. However, this was probably no longer the case at this moment. His lips had been split from the beatings, his nose was broken, and blood was running down his face. His right eye was swollen shut and he was sure that at

least one of his ribs were broken. He had enough bruises on his body to last a lifetime.

Of course he would have fought back if he could have, he was known to be a decent fighter and could get into and out of scraps while holding his own. However, this wasn't going to be the case in his present condition. Currently he was strapped to a table in an upright position. His wrists and ankles were bound to the table with metallic cuffs that could only be released by the controls on the back side of the table, which were beyond his reach.

The interrogation room was a small room, about ten feet wide by ten feet deep. There were no windows and only the single door that led them in. There weren't any computers or displays. There wasn't even a proper Imperial interrogator, an interrogator probe or even a recording probe. There was nothing to indicate that this was even an interrogation chamber and from what Quintano had heard about Imperial interrogations, this was more like a closet.

He had been picked up near Elom. The T.I.E. fighters had specifically targeted and destroyed his ship's weaponry before taking out his engines. While he was drifting and helpless, the cruiser had come and used its tractor beam to bring his ship aboard. He had been boarded shortly after that and despite his best efforts, he had been caught. The troopers had shot to stun, not to kill.

This had made Quintano very curious. The Imperial troops had every opportunity to kill him. Now, he understood why they wanted him alive, or at least for the time being. They were keeping him alive for the information that they thought he had. He was sure that this would soon change. The moment that he was no longer needed, they would kill him.

No one knew that he was out here. No one cared. If he hadn't been on that stupid fool's errand then he wouldn't be out here in the middle of Imperial space, in the outer rim, in the middle of

nowhere, in the first place. Now, he was going to die because of it.

But the oddest thing was the fact that these Imperials were doing their best to keep everything off record. They had put a hood on his head so no one could see who he was. He had heard that every recording of him was to be wiped, that his ship would be completely dismantled beyond recognition, and that the general would be the only one to interrogate him. All personnel would forget that these series of events had ever happened. This was completely off the records.

“What...seal...?” The words that came from his lips were broken in pain. It was difficult at best to speak through his split lips let alone breathe from the broken rib.

“You know very well what seal I’m talking about. It’s the Seal of Abloaf.”

“I don’t know... what you’re talking about.”

“Let me refresh your memory”.

The punch from the general landed hard upon another rib. The man knew what he was doing. He was systematically harming one area after another so no one area would become dull. Another blow like that and another rib would break.

“Did that help? No? Let’s try one more time. It’s ebony black, about a foot in diameter, two inches thick, and made from dense beskar. Perhaps you would know the substance better as Mandalorian ore. There’s several runes inscribed on the top.”

“Nope...haven’t seen it.”

“Your ship was seen on Korriban. You were seen entering the ancient tombs. Now, reports have come back that the Seal of Abloaf is missing. You were the last one seen...”

“Perhaps one of your archeologists has it.”

“The archeologists have already been searched...”

“Perhaps you didn’t search them deep enough.”

The implication of where the seal might have been and where the general could look for them had angered the officer. Most of the blows up to this point were placed with precision and without emotion. It was as if he was simply doing his job, not liking it or disliking it, just following an order from some higher authority. This blow, however, was personal. Anger had finally set in. The general was about to break.

Pain crossed the smugglers body and agony shot through his form. This had been the worst strike yet. However, it was the one that he minded the least. It was the one that had set off the general and took that smug look off of his face.

The officer looked like any other Imperial officer that Quintano had seen before. He had his shiny, glossy military style boots that had been polished as if the Emperor himself was personally coming to see him. His light grey military suit was pressed and sharp. He wore his rank and accomplishments of red and blue upon his uniform with pride. Not even his hat was out of place. This man stank of devotion. His form spoke of a paper pusher and Quintano doubted that the general had ever really seen combat. Oh, he probably had simulations, but not the real thing. The man seemed to be at attention the whole time as if some stick was up his back side holding him in place.

“Look,” Quintano stated as soon as he was able to catch his breath. “This has been all a big misunderstanding. You’ve searched me and have torn my ship apart. I obviously don’t have what you’re looking for. I’m without a ship and would like to just get off of yours and go anywhere else, so if you would so kindly give me a lift and drop me off, I’ll be on my way.”

“You don’t seem to be able to grasp the situation that you are in,” retorted the general after he composed himself. “You are not leaving this destroyer until I have the seal. Even then you’ll probably be dismembered and flushed with the rest of garbage before we make the trip to hyper drive. Now, tell me where...”

The knock on the door interrupted the general’s speech.

“Not now! I’m in the middle of a...”

“Sir, it’s the Emperor. He says that it’s urgent. Shall I tell him that you’re busy?”

“No! No. I’ll be right there.” The general turned upon Quintano.

“I’ll let you rest here and ponder your situation. Don’t go away, we’re not finished.”

Quintano rolled his eyes as the general left. Did the officer really think that he was being funny?

‘Don’t go away...really?’

“It’s not like I have anywhere else to go!” Quintano shouted at the shut door in hopes of catching the general’s ear. “Mind if I hang here awhile? I’ll clear my schedule just for you.”

‘Yeah...that will teach him to mess with me...’

Who was he kidding? No one was going to believe his false bravado. In actuality he was scared. He was going to die and there was nothing that he could do about it and come to think about it, taunting the one that was going to kill him wasn’t exactly the best idea he ever had.

He knew that things were going to get worse once the general got back. The adrenaline that was pumping through his system would drain by then and his body would explode in pain. Not like



he wasn't already in pain, but it would be worse in a few moments. Then, when the beatings started up again, there would be nothing to dull the sensations. He would break and then he would die.

Quintano was so wrapped up in his own thoughts that he nearly jumped up off of the slab that he was on when the lights went out, and he would have too, had he not been shackled on to it. The complete darkness had caught him by surprise and had not only made him jump, it made his skin crawl. Being able to see what was coming at him, no matter how unpleasant, was one thing. Not being able to see anything coming was another.

He tried to be calm. Perhaps it was just a power outage. That was highly probable seeing how this bucket of bolts wasn't one of the huge Imperial Class Star Destroyers. Hell, it wasn't even a Corellian Class. The empire was spending all of its money of the war front and all of their ships were being used elsewhere. This over sized tug was a long forgotten about, throwback vessel that was probably half falling apart and in disrepair. He was sure that it would soon be scuttled. A power outage wouldn't surprise him.

He kept his fears in check and tried to relax. He was sure that the general wanted to see the look on his face once the beatings began. The darkness wasn't deliberate and he was sure that no one was going to come in while they were working on the lights. That was, until the door became slightly ajar.

"Back so soon? The Emperor didn't have much to say? Hope he wasn't too disappointed..."

The gloved hand came over his mouth to shut him up. This had really made him jump since the general wasn't wearing gloves. This was someone else, someone that didn't want to be seen.

"Now, shut up and do what I say if you want to live. You do want to live, right?"

The nod from Quintano gave his answer.

“Good. I’m going to release you. The two guards outside are dead, so take their weapons. Turn right out of the room and head down the hall until it ends. Take the VCL down to the second to last deck. From there it’s a straight shot to hangar bay. Got all that?”

Again a nod gave his answer.

“No questions. Don’t look back. This is your one and only shot. If you don’t succeed then we are both dead. Now go!”

Quintano heard the individual fiddle with the controls on the back of the table. A few buttons were pushed before the click of the bonds told him that he was now released. Before he could say a word, the person stepped back into the shadows and was gone.

He only hesitated for a brief moment, thinking that this was some sort of a trick, that someone was messing with his mind or that he would be shot if he attempted to run. Then, without any further delay, he bolted for the door.

He reached the portal in only a few strides. Since there was nothing else in the room he hadn’t worried about tripping over anything so he ran as quickly and as quietly as possible. The shot that he had expected or at least the alarm that he thought was going to come never did. He pushed the door further ajar.

Whoever had told him about the guards was correct. Both guards were on the ground and completely out. It was hard to tell if they were dead or just out cold, as long as they were incapacitated for a while then he should be fine. He only momentarily thought about dressing in one of the stormtrooper outfits. It wouldn’t be his first time and probably wouldn’t be his last. However, if memory served him, it would take quite some time to put the armor on and it was always easier if he had a helping hand. Neither time nor help was with him. He would have to move about the cruiser without a disguise.

Quintano bent down and gathered a blaster from each of the fallen guards and took off to his right. He hoped that whoever had freed him had been truthful. For all that he knew he was heading for the bridge or even the barracks.

He let his feet carry him as quickly as possible. His heart was already racing from the anxiety of his escape and the possibility of being caught again. Now he felt as if his heart was going to beat through his chest. His breathing was labored against the broken ribs and his arms were already sore from being outstretched as he was when he was shackled. Sweat broke out across his forehead.

Fear swept over him. Although he was proficient with the weapons in his hands and even with some hand to hand combat, he still didn't want a firefight out here in the hall without any cover knowing full well that he was already outnumbered and outgunned. Every second that he was out in the open was another moment that he was exposed and vulnerable. He hoped that the sound of his boots beating against the metal hull didn't alert anyone of his flight and he was sure that his heart was beating so loudly that anyone could hear it.

The hall was longer than he thought, or perhaps it was just his frustration and anxiety that seemed to stretch time and distance beyond his initial perception. Either way, once he got to the end of the hall, he was relieved that the VCL was exactly where it was supposed to be. He activated it, calling the platform up to his location, while he spun and dropped into a crouching position. From here he could keep his back to the wall and watch for any stormtroopers coming down the hall while waiting for the lift.

He could hear the gears and cables activate. He could hear the lift slightly move and shake against the walls as it started to ascend to his position. He could hear it taking its sweet time getting to him.

“Come on, come on.”

Quintano's words were directed toward the lift as if the inanimate object could understand him and hurry itself upward any faster. The words were almost a whisper, barely audible to his own ears, yet even then he felt that he was too loud for his own good.

His anxiety was building. He didn't need a trooper to come down the hall while he was waiting. He could feel his heart continue to race. He could hear...

The sound of the lift's doors opening almost made him jump. Instead of being panicked by the sudden surprise of the doors, Quintano spun in place while he was still in his crouching position. He brought the two blasters up and slightly away from each other. He was ready to blast a lift full of troopers.

It was empty. A sigh of relief came from his lips. It wasn't that he couldn't fight, it was that he didn't want to cause any alarms. He had to escape unnoticed or he wouldn't even make it off the ship.

Quickly he rolled into the lift, sprang up inside and to the side. With continued expert speed he found the floor that he was looking for and pushed for the lift to stop there. As the doors began to close, Quintano clicked the button for the next floor beneath his stop. Now the lift would stop at two places.

He held his form to the side of the lift incase it made a stop on the way down. That would be a surprise to everyone involved. Hopefully, whoever had sprung him from the interrogation room would divert the troops away from his route. Even if that were the case, he doubted that all of them could be diverted, that would be asking for far too much, but if enough of them could be diverted then...

The lift stopped on the second to last floor. Quickly he crouched down and brought both blasters up again. The short hall was empty.

Before the doors closed, Quintano spun back around and put one of the blasters up against one of the closing doors on the inside. With any luck the blaster would stay upright long enough to reach the next level. Once the doors opened again then the blaster would fall between them. This would not only keep the doors from closing and thus keep this lift from being operational for the time being, if there was an alarm to his escape then it would also make everyone think that he was on the bottom level, near engineering.

As fast as he could, he made his way toward the door at the end of the hall. If he was in the right spot then this should be at the shuttle bay. He took a sharp breath, ignored the pain in his body and opened the door.

From his vantage point and in the blink of his eye, Quintano was able to see the room before him. His entrance had landed him at the top of the shuttle bay onto a small platform. A set of stairs ran down to the ships below while the platform opened to his right. There, to his right, was a smaller room for the officers that controlled the shuttle bay to oversee the area. This was sealed off by a door and several windows between him and them and at the moment he hadn't been seen.

From what Quintano could tell the shuttle bay had been retrofitted from a cargo bay to accommodate a dozen T.I.E. fighters and one T.I.E. interceptor. The hanger bay doors looked more mechanical and less sophisticated and the area had more of a storage feel than what a regular hanger bay would look like. Never-the-less, the T.I.E. fighters were all lined up in rows as if they were all ready and set to take off at a moment's notice.

At the far end of the hanger he caught a glimpse of his ship. It was, or at least used to be, a Z-95 Headhunter. The ship was a predecessor to the newly designed X-Wing. It had hyper drive capabilities but no room for an astromech droid. This meant that he had to punch in the coordinates through an astro chart and continue to make adjustments as needed. The process only made him a better pilot and he didn't have to continually listen to an

astromech droid trying to second guess his destination or his flying capabilities; which by the way, he really was a fairly good pilot, or at least in his mind.

He had permanently “borrowed” it when he left the rebellion. It had been such an older model and there was too much attention to the war that was going on with the Empire that no one had noticed that it was missing until he was too far away to do anything about it. Despite the fact that it wasn’t on anyone’s inventory radar, it still had an excellent feel and he enjoyed flying it. It was reliable and got him to where he was going. Now, it was in pieces and it would take a lifetime to reassemble. His only recourse now was one of the T.I.E. fighters.

He knew that some T.I.E. interceptors were upgraded with hyper drive capabilities, though this was a rarity. Still he would have liked to have gotten his hands on that ship. It had excellent speed and maneuverability. What it lacked in shielding it often made up with firepower. However, this one either belonged to the general or at least some higher ranking officer. It would definitely be missed and that was if he could get it out of the hanger. He was sure that it was probably locked down with some access code that prevented just anyone from simply taking it. No, he would have to settle for one of the regular T.I.E. fighters.

This meant that there was no chance for something with hyper drive. He would have to hope that there was a nearby star system, one that wasn’t too hostile, and one that would have something that did have a ship with hyper drive. This was something that he would have to worry about once and if he could get his hands on a ship. Right now, he had other problems to be concerned about.

All of this went through his mind in a matter of moments. He had no time to really process any of this. There was really only one thing that he could think about.

Quintano opened the door to the control room and shot at mid-section. The bolt flew through the air and blasted the first on duty officer in the chest and he dropped dead before he even realized

what had happened. The second officer was in motion before the first one fell and had his pistol drawn. The blast was accurate.

Quintano had dropped to the ground after the first shot, leaving the return shot to fly harmlessly by to strike at the spot where he had been. A quick roll brought him up in front of the second officer. A strike across the man's face sent the man to the floor, and before he could recover, Quintano let off another blast into the man's chest, killing him on the spot.

It didn't take him long to find the controls to the loudspeaker.

"All personnel to engineering, we have an escaped prisoner. We think he's heading for the escape pods in the bow section. All personnel on the lower decks report to engineering. Repeat all personnel report to engineering."

The stormtroopers in the hangar bay moved with expert military precision. They grabbed their weapons and moved with all due haste toward the exit beneath him. That exit would be on the lower deck and would eventually lead to engineering. They would run past the open lift and this would give credence to his ruse.

Quintano waited until all of the troopers had cleared out of the docking bay before running down the stairs. He could easily grab one of the fighters, but he had to make sure of his escape before even attempting it. A short blast to the door's electronic functions sealed the door shut.

"That should keep them out, at least for now."

The words seemed to more of a confidence builder for himself than anything else, and more of a form of wishful and hopeful thinking. He hoped that the troopers didn't have anything with some heavy firepower that would be able to blast the door open before he was able to get out of there.

On his way back up the stairs, Quintano blasted the controls to the door that he had entered through. That should keep the troopers at bay for a little bit longer if they tried to circle back up to this floor.

Back in the control room, he started to punch in the controls for the docking bay main door. As the doors started to open, the energy screen started to come into place. The shield was a weaker form of energy shielding. It was strong enough to prevent the vacuum of space from entering and the atmosphere of the ship from leaving. However, it would allow larger objects to pass through. This would allow the fighters to take off and land without depressurizing the whole cruiser.

Before the doors were able to get all the way open, Quintano blasted the controls. Sparks came out in all directions as the panel short circuited in many places. Electricity danced across the panel as its power shot from one control to another. With the doors open, the cruiser wouldn't dare use its hyper drive engines, there would be too much of a risk of something coming into their cruiser. They would have to sit and wait and make repairs before making any further attempt at traveling through space.

The banging on the lower door told him that the troopers had caught on to his ruse. They weren't as stupid as the rebel alliance believed them to be. It would only be a matter of time before they burst through the door.

With all do haste, Quintano rushed back down the stairs and headed for the closest T.I.E. fighter to the main hanger bay. With one more look toward his ship he gave a shake of his head. This would be the last time he ever saw his beloved craft.

"I told you that I didn't have it."

The controls to the T.I.E. fighter weren't too difficult to figure out. He had some basic training on one of these while in the rebellion just to get a feel of what they could do. The simulators



weren't perfect; however they were close enough for him to get the gist of things.

As the twin ion engines were revving up to launch, the lower door to the hangar bay burst open under the firepower that the troopers had brought in to solve their problem. It was a tripod mounted heavy repeating rifle and it had put enough holes into the door to ensure that it was no longer structurally intact to hold up under its own weight. The entire process had only taken a few moments and Quintano knew that the same could be said about the T.I.E. fighter that he was currently in.

The smuggler gave a sudden spin on his controls while he brought his weapons online. He didn't even bother using the targeting system, he simply let loose.

A barrage of heavy laser blasts shot through the air. Two of the sitting T.I.E. fighters exploded under the onslaught before his ship was able to complete its spin and find his true targets. Several of the troopers went down, including the one that had operated the repeating rifle. There was a sudden lull in the firefight as the troopers took cover and tried to find a better vantage point.

Suddenly the door to the upper floor, the one that he had come through, burst open under the same firepower that the bottom door had opened under. The troopers had circled around and now had him pinned. The problem with the second mounted heavy repeating rifle was that it had the higher ground and Quintano couldn't get his T.I.E. fighter up at the right angle to hit it.

Quintano wanted to finish the job and blast more of the troopers. He even wanted to destroy the rest of the T.I.E. fighters in the bay so that he couldn't be followed. However, every second that he remained here was another second that would allow more troops to come in through the doors and he was already caught on the wrong end of crossfire. There was only one thing that he could really do. A hasty retreat was in order.

His hands went into motion and his ship flew backwards through the energy field and out into the void of space.

## Chapter: The Call

General Brakin Fess stepped out of the interrogation room and entered the hall beyond. The call from the Emperor couldn't have come at a more inconvenient time. The prisoner was about to break and he would get the information that he needed. Had he been given just a little more time, then he would have had something to tell the Emperor. However, now the news was going to have to be delayed and the Emperor was never happy about delays, even if he was the cause of it.

'No,' General Fess thought to himself. 'It would not be wise to tell the Emperor that it was his fault that the information hadn't been received yet. That would not go over very well.'

He turned left down the hall and headed toward the bridge. From there he would be able to move into his isolated command station where he would be able to listen to the Emperor threaten him and humiliate him in private, without having to be publically humiliated in front of his troops. But it was more than that. The holo communicator in his room was encrypted, there would be no way that anyone aboard his ship would be able to overhear or record the conversation.

The need for privacy was not only commanded by the Emperor but it was also highly beneficial. The Emperor wanted the information to be regarded as a need to know basis and no one else needed to know. General Brakin had already suspected that after getting the information that the Emperor needed, that he would no longer be on the "need to know" list and would have to be "removed" from the situation. He hated to think of the Emperor in such regards, but other officers had "disappeared" under lesser circumstances.

The benefit was also so that the he couldn't be publically humiliated, or worse, blackmailed. He was the superior officer on

this ship and he couldn't have his men watch him being belittled. The morale of the whole crew would disintegrate if they ever found out. And if only one person found out, then that threat could be held over him.

That last thought was more relevant than the first. General Fess suspected that there was at least one spy aboard his ship. He had no proof and it was probably just his paranoia that had settled upon him. However there were at least a couple of individuals that seemed to be gunning for his position and any proof that he had fallen out of favor to the Emperor would only fuel the desire to overthrow him either politically or even my sheer mutiny. No, it was absolutely best that the Emperor's message be kept completely secret.

As General Fess opened the door to the bridge, he let his eyes take in the scene before him. There were two columns of computer terminals, one on each side of the bridge and each manned by a competent officer. A few more terminals were in the center, and finally, near the back closest to him, was his station. Lights blinked, screens flashed with information, data and information was being collected and transmitted and individuals were talking into their comm. links to others around the ship.

This was the brain center of the Audacious, the Orion Dreadnaught Class Heavy Cruiser. It had a crew of about sixteen thousand with an additional three thousand troops. The hanger bay had been retro fitted to accommodate about twelve T.I.E. fighters. The cruiser carried a wide array of heavy cannons and a large stash of missiles.

The cruiser wasn't as powerful as the large Star Destroyers and wasn't even close to being as fast as the Corellian class ships. It was considered outdated and had been retro fitted several times throughout the years. There had been talk about scrapping the ship entirely. Yet, each time the conversation had come up with the powers that be, the ship was sent on yet another mission.

This ship was an old ship, but it was his. The Audacious had a history of officers either being promoted or demoted. That was, an up and coming officer might be sent aboard this ship before commanding a large Star Destroyer or an officer being demoted might be sent down the chain of command to this ship to see if he still had the ability to command.

As a lesser important ship, it was given lesser important missions or at least missions that seemed less important. Usually it was sent to do minor tasks such as patrol missions back along the outer rim, or to escort freight ships or even to keep smugglers at bay. The heavy Star Destroyers saw the major missions or the heavy battle while the Audacious usually saw the backside of a Gungan.

Sometimes, these missions only looked like a less important job when in reality they were more important than they seemed. They would often carry a secret item, a few plans, pick up an individual or two, or even drop off an Imperial Agent such as the infamous Agent Valas. These missions could be done in complete discretion under the guise of a mere patrol ship.

General Fess had been a promising officer coming up in the ranks. He had shown initiative and discretion and was noticed by higher ranking command. This was now his opportunity to show exactly what he was capable of handling by tanking on the role of commanding officer of The Audacious.

With that in mind, the Emperor had given him the order to intercept the smuggler and obtain the information and whereabouts of the Seal of Ablao. It had disappeared right after the smuggler had visited the tombs and it was of the highest importance that it be brought back under any circumstances. Along with its importance was the absolute need for secrecy.

He had picked up the smuggler and would have gotten the information out of him if it wasn't for the call. The timing had been so inconvenient that he couldn't regard it as a coincidence. He was sure that someone had deliberately contacted the

Emperor just to sabotage the interrogation. The question was, who and why?

He had his suspicions as his eyes fell upon Lieutenant Draks Kelen. That one had been gunning for his position and it seemed that he would do anything to take it. If he had any proof then he would take the officer out onto a deserted moon and shoot him several times for good measure. Even if it was him, what was the lieutenant gaining from talking to the Emperor? If the Emperor wanted this mission off the books and to be handled by the least amount of individuals as possible then why would he tolerate a call from a lesser officer?

None of it made sense. He would have to wait to see how it all fell into place and hope that he caught any conspiracy in time before it turned around and bit him in the back side. Meanwhile he had a report of a “non-report” to give to someone who would not be happy to hear it.

His private room was luxurious to say the least. Each individual that had held this post had added a personal flare to the room in order to boost their ego. His chair was covered with some animal hide that made it comfortable to sit in. His desk was made from some rare wood on a long forgotten planet. It was black and sleek. The computers had been retro fitted to have some of the best programs available including the holo communicators that he was about to use.

The general hit the comm. button which allowed the communication from the Emperor to come through. The image of the old, wrinkled man’s face, mostly covered by the hood of his robe, filled the holo screen. As usual, the Emperor’s face was difficult take in and it was everything that he could do to not cringe at the image. He had heard that the Emperor’s apprentice’s face was worse, although that was hard to imagine.

“My apologies, Emperor, I was...”

“I don’t want to hear any excuses, all I want are results. Is that understood?”

“Yes...yes Sir.”

“My spies have told me that you have intercepted the smuggler that was last seen with the Seal of Abloof. Is my intelligence correct or have you failed?”

‘Spies?’ General Fess thought to himself. ‘Is someone really spying on me? Is someone really reporting my movements to the Emperor behind my back?’

“Yes Sir... I mean no Sir... I mean...yes I have captured the smuggler and have not failed you. He was ready to inform us of the whereabouts of the seal...”

“Excellent. I need that seal and I need it intact. Is that understood? I need it intact. This is of the utmost importance. Nothing is to happen to that seal.”

“Yes Sir.”

“After you have retrieved the seal, you will dispose of anyone that had ever seen it, you will wipe all recordings of its existence and destroy this very conversation from your record data base. You will contact me immediately once you have it and I will personally retrieve it from you. Am I clear?”

‘Since I have to dispose of anyone that had seen it,’ the general continued to think to himself, ‘does that mean that I’ll have to be disposed of as well? Does this mean that the Emperor will kill me as soon as I deliver the seal?’

It was only then that General Fess remembered the rumor that the Emperor could read minds. He wasn’t sure that he put any faith in the old Sith force thing, but he was sure that the Emperor did believe in it and if there was any credence to the rumor then he would have to be careful about what he thought. He wondered

that if there was something to this “force” thing after all, then just how far the Emperor could read minds. He shook his head to clear his thoughts and came back to the conversation at hand.

“Yes Sir, perfectly clear.”

“Now, my apprentice and I have a more pressing matter at hand. I hope that you can handle the situation with promptness, efficiently, discretion and no delays.”

“Yes Sir, you can count on me. We’ll have the location of the seal soon.”

“Good, I would hate to be disappointed. If I shall become disappointed, then I’ll have to send my apprentice to deal with the situation and he won’t be happy to have to be dragged away from his very important and personal mission. He would have to show my disappointment as well as his own. Does this need to happen?”

“No...No Sir.”

This threat caught the general’s attention. It was bad enough to have the Emperor personally overseeing this mission, it would be worse to have his apprentice do the same. That one was known to have violent outbursts and several generals had met untimely deaths while under his command. It was best to get the seal and be done with this mission as quickly as possible.

“Good. Fetch me results and keep this under the highest priority and highest security. No one must know. Now, fetch me that seal intact.”

“Yes, yes Sir.”

General Fess waited for the Emperor to sign out before switching off his holo comm. He didn’t want to appear to be rude by being the first to shut off communications. Everything was



going as well as could be expected, the last thing he wanted to do was upset the Emperor.

The general took a moment to compose himself before he left his private chambers and headed back through the bridge. His mood was foul from the Emperor's belittlement, although it wasn't as harsh as he had expected. All he needed to do now was to finish the interrogation without any further interruptions, get the seal and be done with this assignment.

"Sir."

The voice that was calling him had caught his attention. He stopped dead cold. He hoped that this wasn't any delay in the mission.

"Sir," one of the lesser officers continued. "We have an unauthorized departure of a T.I.E. fighter and the docking bay has recorded shots fired and heavy damage. What are your instructions?"

'Damn it!'

The general had to hold his breath to not say that aloud. He couldn't let his men know about the frustration on his mind.

'If that's who I think it is...Of course it is. Who else could it be?'

It had been reported that Quintano Roo was very competent as a smuggler and was difficult to catch, at least red handed. His name and reputation had preceded him. Of course this seemed to be highly exaggerated once the general had caught him. Now, those rumors seemed to have some credence. The seal was never found on the smuggler's body nor had it been found on his ship. On top of that, Quintano had now escaped.

General Fess knew that the escape wouldn't have happened if he had been authorized to utilize everything at his disposal. As it was, he had to keep the smuggler out of the regular holding cells,

holding cells that Quintano would have never been able to escape from. Yet again, the Emperor seemed to be at fault. Then again, he had put only two guards on duty. They had better be dead because of they weren't then he was going to kill them himself.

Then there was the entire docking bay, its crew and officers. They would have to have been compromised as well. Someone was eventually going to have to be held accountable for the smuggler's escape. The problem was, if these troops were dead, then it would be him who would take the blame.

It was too late to consider who was to blame and who was to be held accountable. He had to tell his crew something. If he ordered the ship to be blown up then he wouldn't get any information from the dead smuggler. If they sent out a patrol to fetch the escapee then the Emperor would find out about his incompetence and then he would have his head. No, it was best to keep this quiet and deal with it himself.

At least now he knew that the seal wasn't in the smuggler's ship or else he wouldn't have left it behind, and he knew that it wasn't on the smuggler himself. This meant that Quintano was going to make his way toward the item and he couldn't follow him without tipping off the whole crew of the Audacious. He had to think of something quickly.

"Let it go. It's an agent that I have sent out on a special mission. Wipe all traces that this ship ever existed. Get an engineer crew down to the docking bay and see what they can do to fix any repairs."

"Yes sir."

A few of the officers started to go through the motions of cleaning the records of the ship's departure as a couple more started coordinating efforts with the engineering crew.

'There,' General Fess thought to himself. 'If there were any spies for the Emperor then that would satisfy their curiosity and

the appropriate message would get back to him. Meanwhile I'll have some time to rectify the situation.'

"Set a course to..."

"Sir, we can't go into hyper drive with the docking bay door stuck open. We'll have to wait until the engineers..."

'Damn, damn, damn.' Again the general did everything that he could to not show his frustrations to the crew members. 'Once I get that seal, I will personally enjoy killing that smuggler.'

"Fine, report back to me once we are able to engage hyper drive. I'll be in my command room."

The general had given his order as he turned around and started to head back to the very room that he had just came out of. There was a call that he needed to make.

General Fess turned his holo comm. back on and started to relay his message. He not only wanted to scramble the message to make sure that only a select few understood it, he wanted to send it on a particular frequency that only bounty hunters were known to transmit on. This was his only saving grace.

A single bounty hunter would only include one other individual in on the escape of the Quintano Roo. This would be manageable and the bounty hunter's silence could easily be bought. On top of that, a one man ship could get to places and be more discreet than a huge Imperial cruiser. Finally, any Imperial troops would draw attention to both the hunted and other Imperials. No, this was the best way to go.

"To any and all bounty hunters near Korriban, this is General Fess. The Imperial ship known as the Audacious now has a bounty on an individual named Quintano Roo. Last known location was near the Korriban system. If anyone is near this system and is looking for a quick and easy bounty, reply on this frequency. Contract is negotiable."

General Fess gave a sigh of relief. This was his only hope. The only variable left was not knowing if and or when the message would be heard and, if so, then if it would be accepted. He would have to sit back and wait until...

"Imperial ship Audacious, this is A'Den Verda Fett. Message received. Interest is piqued. More information required."

The general was surprised on how quickly the message had been responded to. If his luck could hold out then this just might work out after all. With a new hope he answered back.

"A'Den Verda Fett, this is General Fess of the Imperial Cruiser Audacious...isn't Fett the name of the bounty hunter..."

"The name Fett is a Mandalorian family clan name."

"Yes, I've heard of it. Your family has a reputation..."

"...a reputation that I intend to keep."

General Fess remembered that Mandalorians had a unique code of conduct. They were very honorable, in their own way, and would keep to their contract. They were known to be relentless and wouldn't stop until they were either killed, called off, or had their prey. To add to this, the family known as Fett was starting to get quite the reputation lately and this Mandalorian wanted to keep up that reputation.

'Yes, I think this might work,' mused the general.

"I have a bounty for the live capture of this fugitive. Are you interested...?"

"I'm sending you a standard contract. You'll notice my fees at the end of the page. I'll require these plus expenses."

The general waited for the file to download and then opened it. He gave a cursory glance and then stopped. He couldn't believe what he was reading and he thought that he had read it wrong. His second and more detailed read only proved that he had read it correctly the first time through.

'Hazard pay, travel pay and fee per day. These didn't include bribes, meals, or equipment needed, damaged, destroyed or used.'

This was going to be very expensive very quickly, but as long as the bounty hunter could keep everything quiet, leave no traces that neither Quintano nor the Empire had any connection with the seal, and could deliver the smuggler then it would be worth it.

"Everything seems to be in order. Just one last thing; this must remain completely confidential. No one must know that this mission ever existed. You must leave no traces of the smuggler's whereabouts and you have the fullest authority to delete any and all evidence and remove all witnesses as you see fit."

The bounty hunter's tone didn't even change during the reply. "As you notice, section four subsection two, there will be an added expense for removal of all records of our conversation and this mission and the silence of any who know about it."

'Damn, this bounty hunter is serious.'

"Good, then we have a deal. Good hunting."

## Chapter: Valas

The tall, thin man stood in the kitchen and poured himself another drink. After today's work, he needed the second one before heading back out again, but not for courage or strength, not to relax his mind or come to some consensus of his conscious, and definitely not to dull his memories or erase his past of the things that he had done or the things that he was about to do. No, the liquid that he had found in the bottle, hidden away deep in the wine cellar, was too good to let to go to waste. With one last flick of his wrist, Valas drained the bottle into his glass and began to drink.

The fluorescent purple liquid was a strange tasting drink, one that he had never had before. It almost seemed to be alive by the way it gave a slight pulsating glow. There was an exotic fruit taste that he had never had before and he gave wonder to which planet it had grown on. It was hard to describe all of the unique tastes that were combined together to make the drink, but he was sure that the labor intensive process was a greatly guarded secret that was probably passed down from generation to generation. As such, the contents of the bottle were probably very expensive, like the rest of the tasteful art and furniture of the home that he was currently in.

Valas was an Imperial agent. He worked for the highest ranking officers and usually off the record. Very few individuals even knew that he existed at all. He was a shadow, a ghost, a myth that was spoken about in back alleys, over tavern tables through drunken stories, in cargo bays, and as horror stories throughout the ranks when they had off time. Some of the stories were even true.

Valas had one of those faces that would seem to be nondescript. He had no facial hair; no scars, no tattoos, and nothing that would

make him stand out. This was one of his greatest assets. This gave him the ability to blend into a crowd or pass by a target or even an officer without even being spotted. It also gave him the ability to disguise himself as needed. This was why there had been no known description of him and had only added to the fact that he could be anywhere or anyone.

As an Imperial agent, Valas was the one to be turned to when things had turned ugly and an issue had to simply be swept away. Perhaps it would be an officer that had become indiscriminate in an affair, or an individual that had mishandled information, a contact that had turned bad, a mole that needed to be found, or perhaps a top official on some planet that needed to be persuaded to join the Empire. There were countless of missions that he could be called on to do from planting evidence, removing information, bribing, infiltrating or even assassination.

This time it had been a mishandling of information. The Empire had a super weapon not too long ago and the information was supposed to be heavily guarded. Unfortunately the secret plans had gotten out, a weakness had been found and the destruction of the weapon had been made possible. With it, came the deaths of many Imperial soldiers. The cost of the loss had been staggering and the empire's attempt at finally crushing the rebellion had been lost.

The regular soldiers that had held the secret plans had died during the apprehension of the information, that wasn't the problem. The problem was that someone had leaked the existence of the weapon in the first place. Had the initial information not gone out, then the plans wouldn't have been appropriated. Valas's mission was to find whoever had let out the information in the first place and deal with him.

Since Valas didn't exist, he had no official clearance. This meant that he had to break into several top secret facilities and tap into high security data files to read top clearance information. This led him to find the individuals that had access to the weapon's existence beforehand. There were many troopers,

security guards and workers that could have had access to this information, but these individuals were closely monitored and were held on base until the work was done. No, he was looking for someone higher in the ranks. With this in mind, there were only a few suspects left.

From here, Valas had traveled to several taverns and listened. He sat up all night with several comm. devices and listened. He went to underground meetings and infiltrated rebel troops and listened. He interrogated spies and informants. He tried to find an individual that could deliver highly sensitive and classified Imperial information to the market but what he got instead was something entirely different.

Valas had overheard how a rebel liaison had been sleeping with another man's wife. This had initially intrigued the Imperial agent since he could always use this information as blackmail from both parties. However, his interest had piqued when he had heard the woman's name, she was the wife of one of the officers in charge of keeping the weapon's existence a secret. This was the leak, he was sure of it.

The Imperial agent had made his way to the high officer's estate and continued his surveillance. As soon as the lover had come and gone and Valas had been sure of the leak, he knew that he had to make his move. He had waited until the officer had come back home from his long departure.

The guards had been easy enough to kill off. They were amateurs at best, especially against his abilities. They had been lax in their duties since they were so far behind enemy lines that they really didn't believe that they had anything to fear. This alone made them useless and Valas had no remorse slitting their throats one by one.

Once the major opposition was taken care of, he had gone after the family. One by one, systematically, he had slaughtered them all. He spared no one. He had killed the hired help, the women, the children and finally the high ranking officer that had been in



charge. The officer had been the last one to die so he could see the repercussions of his actions. He had allowed the leak to happen from his house. It hadn't mattered who had created the leak and even if it had been an accident, his entire house had paid the price.

Valas had been paid to find who had released the information and he had. He had been paid stop any further leaks and he had. He had been paid to bring justice to the guilty party and he had. He was even sure that anyone else who even thought about releasing information would reconsider after hearing about what had happened.

Blood had splattered the walls and floor. Blood was dripping off of the windows. Blood had been smeared across countertops and furniture. Blood had flowed like streams and had come together in pools. Bodies were strewn about in carnage. They were cut and stabbed in many places and the place had looked like a meat locker had spewed its contents everywhere. By the time he had finished, there hadn't been a single identifiable body to be found.

Valas had used his curved hook assassin dagger during the entire operation. He had felt that the release of information was a betrayal of loyalty and he took that very personally. It wasn't that he was patriotic to the cause; he could have worked for any group that had hired him. But this was the point. These individuals were paid to do one job and one job only and they failed miserably. They broke their contract, they broke their loyalty and for that they had to die a very painful, up-close and personal death.

Although the task at hand seemed best to be dealt with through the use of his dagger, he still carried a blaster at his side. He might have been confident in his ability to take down the entire fortress of guards with his dagger, he wasn't stupid. He always had a backup plan and never left himself vulnerable.

However, neither of these two were his favorite weapon. He had left his trusted sniper rifle back aboard his ship. His greatest

skill was probably his marksmanship, but the larger weapon would have just gotten in the way and slowed him down when he wanted to deal with the matter personally.

Although the family did have poor judgment and lacked in their discretions, he had to admit that they did have good taste. This drink of theirs, wherever they had acquired it, had been the highlight of this assignment. He was going to have to find out who made it and make sure that he acquired a private stash.

Valas gave the bottle a slight twist as he burned the shape, size and color into memory. The type of glass would give him a clue to what planet it had come from and since he had already familiarized the taste of the drink of the whole bottle, he was sure that he would be able to track down its source in no time. He smiled at the thought of having his own supply.

With an act of finality, Valas flipped the shot glass upside down and placed it upon the countertop. His right hand had reached for the flare at his hip. It wouldn't take much to ignite the fuel that he had spilled all over the house. One good flick of the wrist and the place would burn to the ground and all of this would be ruled as an accident. All the evidence that suggested that he was even here would be burned away and reduced to ashes like the rest of the house. The thought had brought a smile to his face, which quickly turned to a scowl as his comm. device signaled an incoming call.

Valas knew that only a few individuals knew about this frequency and they wouldn't have called if it wasn't important. Still, this had irked him. He hadn't finished this mission yet and if the called had been ten minutes earlier then it would have given his position away or would have interrupted his last kill. Still, it was an opportunity for another job and as such more credits.

The assassin pulled out his comm. device and turned it on. The round disk like object came to life and an image sprang from its center. This had always please Valas as he felt that he was looking down upon the person who was calling him.

“Yes?”

Valas gave no warm greeting or a formal reply. Either the caller knew who he was or they had accidentally transmitted on his frequency. If the later was the case, then he would hunt them down and make sure that it didn't happen again. Either way, there was no need to give his name.

The man that appeared on his holo comm. wore a hood over his face. When he spoke it was monotone in an attempt to keep his voice from being identified. He also had spoken softly and Valas could only assume that the contact was in a location where he could be overheard if he raised his voice any louder.

Valas knew the man, although not personally. He had never met him and had never seen his face, however, this wasn't needed. If the hooded man wanted to hide his identity then that was up to him. As long as he paid for the job at hand, then it really didn't matter who he was. This was how he had come to understand the man. The individual had paid him handsomely in the past, without question and without haggling. He could be trusted.

“I hope I haven't called you at a bad time.” The tone didn't sound very apologetic even if he had caught the assassin at a bad time.

The sound behind Valas caught his attention. He spun in place as he drew his blaster. He was sure that he had killed everyone in the compound and if not then he was going to rectify the situation immediately even if that meant not being able to use his dagger to finish the job but to rely on his blaster instead. The sight wasn't what he had expected.

The dead body that Valas had left dangling on the upper landing had shifted its weight too much. Gravity took over and the corpse fell ten feet before striking the ground floor in a sickening splat.

“Nope,” Valas answered back putting his blaster away. “Not at all, I’m just wrapping things up.”

“Good. There is a smuggler named Quintano Roo. The Empire has taken a bounty out on his head to be taken alive and brought back to the Orion Dreadnaught Class Heavy Cruiser name Audacious. General Brakin Fess is commanding officer.”

“Quintano has information about the Seal of Abloof, a Sith artifact from Korriban of major importance with implications that are far reaching. A Mandalorian bounty hunter named A’Den Verda Fett has been sent to fetch Quintano alive and bring that information to General Fess.

“This must not happen. General Fess does not have the best interest in the matter. The smuggler already has a contact to which he needs to deliver his message. Quintano must make his contact at all costs.”

“Your job is to remove all obstacles that stand in Quintano’s way so that he can make his contact, stop the bounty hunter from bringing in the smuggler, and ensure that Quintano’s meeting with General Fess does not happen.”

Valas couldn’t help but think how detailed the information had been. It would seem that his contact and payer source was actually an officer about the Audacious itself. It still didn’t matter, as long as he paid for the services requested. Then again, it might be worthwhile to find out who the cloaked man was so he could blackmail him at some point. He was going to have to think about that for some future plan. Right now, he had business to do.

“I require the usual fee plus expenses.”

“Of course.”

Valas gave a pause, he reached for the bottle that he had put down upon the counter and gave it a curious look.

“...and I want to know where I can find more of this. It used to contain a vibrant, almost glowing purple, drink.”

Valas could tell that the hooded man also gave a pause. It wasn't much to go on, he had to admit, but perhaps something could come of it.

“I'll do what I can.”

With that, Valas turned off the holo comm. without a cursory farewell or even an acknowledgement that he would even take the mission. There was no reason to say what was already known and he was never known to be a conversationalist.

Valas turned his attention back to his flare. A quick strike activated it and the flare came to life. Flame came from its end. He gave it one last cursory look, a respect of the power and destruction that it would bring. Then, without giving it a second thought, Valas tossed it over his shoulder to ignite the fuel that had been laid down.

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The Fury Class Imperial Interceptor sat just behind the ridge line, not too far from the ultimate destination. This was where Valas had landed to make sure that it wasn't picked up on radar or spotted from a distance. Yes, it was a little ways to walk, but it had been well worth it.

The ship was similar to the shape of a smaller T.I.E. Interceptor, but this one carried about half a dozen people, had sleeping quarters, and could hit hyper drive. It was loaded with heavy cannons and came packed with missiles. Yes, Valas knew that he could have taken down the entire household with just his ship, but that wasn't how he operated. He always wanted to make

sure that his target was dead, always wanted to watch them die, and not leave any room for error or chance.

With this in mind, Valas looked back toward the household that he had just come from. From here, he could see the structure all ablaze with fire. The inferno had lit up the sky and the glow could be seen for miles. When this was over, there would be nothing but ash and rubble.

Satisfied that his job was finished, Valas took out his holo comm. once again. He tapped a few buttons and waited. Within a few moments the holo comm. sprang to life and the holo image of his previous contract came into view.

“It is done.”

The words that he spoke were few and simply, but they carried the weight of the entire starfleet. The officer on the other end nodded as the implications were fully understood. What was also fully understood was the payment arrangement. Valas watched as the officer punched in a few commands on the ship’s console that he was standing next to.

“The Emperor will be pleased...”

The officer was never able to finish his sentence. Valas had shut off his comm. link before he was subjected to the officer’s speech about Imperial pride and how the Empire was stronger because of him. He didn’t do this for the Empire; he did it for the credits.

This brought his attention to a small data pad at his side. After he punched in a few commands he was able to see the results that he was looking for. The credits that he had been promised had been moved into his account. That was all he needed to know.

Now it was time to move on to his next mission. With resolve, Valas entered the Wraith, his Fury Class Interceptor and started

to make preparations to travel to Korriban. If the seal had come from there then that would be his first stop.

## Chapter: Korriban

"Imperial shuttle...this is Korriban substation 13. Please state your designation."

The message over the comm. was full of static and barely audible. The Imperial copilot made a few adjustments to bring the signal in better. A large sandstorm was already sweeping through large areas of the planet making communication difficult at best. With the adjustments the signal came in better, at least for the time being.

"Korriban substation 13 this is Imperial Shuttle KhaRon. We have four archaeologists, two pilgrims on their pilgrimage journeys and one Mandalorian on board. We are on our way to the southern tombs."

The shuttle was on time, like it always was. Individuals could set their schedule to their arrival and departure and both the pilot and copilot were both very proud of this known accomplishment. They wondered, sometimes, why anyone ever called concerning their arrival. Of course it was protocol, but still...

"Imperial Shuttle KhaRon... please enter your security codes."

The security codes changed on a daily basis and it was impossible to get on or off this planet without the proper codes. Any ship attempting to do so would be shot down by one of the substation or even the major ports.

The copilot rolled his eyes. This was a pain. They knew who they were, but again, it was protocol. Sometimes the Empire was too proficient for its own good. With a few keystrokes, the code was entered.



Time passed as the Corellian Imperial shuttle came into the planet's atmosphere. The red sand that covered the vast majority of the planet gave everything an eerie crimson glow. This was only intensified by the various sandstorms that had kicked the sand into the air.

The planet was known to have minor sandstorms quite often. These would be localized and last for only a short amount of time. Individuals would simply buckle down and wait them out. However, every once in awhile there would be one of these that would ravage most of the planet. Most of the smaller outposts would close down completely, small towns would be abandoned and the vast majority of the archeologists would pack up and leave. Even the major cities would look deserted.

This would make navigation difficult for the incoming shuttle. They would start to lose sensors and comms the closer they got to one of these storms. They would make a few adjustments to their course to stay clear of the sandstorms and would try to hurry their landing as much as possible. However, it was only a matter of time before their destination was hit by the storm, and the quicker they were clear of the area, the less likely they would have to deal with the full force.

If they were hit then visibility would be nil. Their sensors would only show one massive solid object. The wind would throw their shuttle as if it was nothing and only the Maw near Hutt Space would be worse. Finally the sand would be pelted at them with such a force that it would cut through the ship's plating. Attempting to fly in this would be suicidal at best.

This was why they had to hurry with their mission. However, they would still have to deal with the mass exodus of traffic as well as longer wait times for clearance as the stations tried to coordinate all of the ships in the area.

"Imperial Shuttle KhaRon, your codes have been validated. What's a Mandalorian doing aboard your shuttle?"

"Korriban substation 13, I don't know. I don't ask any questions. As long as the correct paperwork is filled out and the fee is paid then I just run them. Who knows why anyone wants to be out in this desolate location anyway. It seems like you got the backside of a Gungan if you got this position."

"Thanks for the reminder Imperial Shuttle KhaRon, and a most pleasant day to you as well."

The copilot smiled at the sarcasm that came over the comm.

"Imperial Shuttle KhaRon...you are clear land on landing bay number four. The other three landing bays are full of gear waiting for a *real* cargo shuttle."

The copilot shook his head. The "real" cargo shuttle was actually them. They were to drop off these individuals and pick up the gear before the storm hit. They were going to have to work quickly and efficiently if they wanted to get everything on board before all hell broke loose.

The shuttle dropped deeper into the planet's atmosphere and brought its flight path closer to ground level. This kept them out of the sand that was beginning to circulate higher up and gave them better visibility. As they did, the landscape unfolded before them.

The planet was a barren wasteland of red, rocky crags, crimson columns of layers of this world's foundation, stony structures sculpted by the howling winds, and patches of rust colored and hardened clay. Mostly, there was the sand. The ochre colored sand seemed to be everywhere and got into everything. It moved and shifted across the planet almost like a living being and threatened to bury all that it touched.

The shuttle continued to skim the surface of the sand, kicking up the loose material in its wake. It adjusted periodically to avoid a column or two and readjusted again to avoid the crags before coming upon the landing site.

The landing site was nothing more than four pads that had been erected haphazardly and quickly to accommodate the archeologists that were starting to come into this area. Three of the pads were loaded with gear awaiting this shuttle to take it to predetermined places off world.

The shuttle went through its landing procedures and made a soft and steady descent until the ship came to a complete stop. The whine of the engines ceased as the power was shut off. It was then that the shuttle door opened to let out the passengers.

“Welcome to Korriban, the armpit of the galaxy. This shuttle will be leaving within the hour. Meteorologists’ reports suggest that the sandstorm will hit here in a little over an hour. You have until that time to find shelter. There will be no room aboard the shuttle. Hope you enjoy your stay.”

None of the passengers seemed to mind the apocalyptic threat that was given to them. Each seemed to already know and understand what fate might await them if they stayed too long out in the open. With this in mind, the passengers started to gather their equipment and leave the shuttle that was all except one.

“What’s with the Mandalorian?” The pilot asked his copilot hoping that he would know more about the passengers. It was the copilot’s job to take care of the smaller details while he took care of the ship and flight path.

“I don’t know, let me go check.”

The copilot hoped that there wasn’t going to be a problem. They had only taken on the armored individual because all of the paperwork had been in order and the appropriate fee had been paid. The Mandalorian hadn’t spoken a word and hadn’t even taken off his helmet.

“This is the last stop,” the copilot announced as he drew closer to the last passenger. “We won’t have room for any passengers...”

The sudden movement of the Mandalorian stopped him in his tracks. The armored individual quickly stood and reached out a closed fist. As the voice echoed through the mechanical amplifier, the Mandalorian’s hand opened to reveal a set of coins.

“I was never here.”

The copilot's heart had raced and sweat broke out across his forehead. At first he thought that the Mandalorian was going to shoot him with one of the many pistols that were carried or even the rifle that was slung over the individual’s back. But, after seeing the amount of coins being presented, the look of worry and concern turned to greed. As he took the coins, he gave his answer.

“I’m sorry, who were you again? No sir, we haven’t seen any Mandalorians on our flight. It was all a misunderstanding. Even our records show no sign of a Mandalorian.”

The Mandalorian gave a quick nod before leaving the shuttle. The expense of the shuttle here, the cost it took to forge the correct documents and the bribe were going to be added on to the fee being collected.

The harsh heat and the bright sun hit the Mandalorian like a fist. Such conditions would have stopped others dead in their tracks. However, the armor had a built in visor and a minor coolant temperature regulator built in. This would keep the bounty hunter cool, at least for a short amount of time, and the visor would cut down the glare.

Beyond the landing platform were only three things of note, besides the seemingly infinite crimson dunes with its sporadic stone crag structures. The first was a crimson sandstone structure that was barely sticking up out of the ground. A trench had been

dug and an opening had been found between two standing columns. From what could be seen, there was some form of complex hidden under the sand and from what A'Den could guess, this had been a recently discovered tomb.

The second item of note was a ship. It was an old design, an X-70b Phantom Class. It had a sleek form and was silver in color. It could easily be mistaken as an oversized missile. If memory served correctly, then the ship was mostly for luxury. It still had a punch and had hyper drive capabilities, it just wasn't a fighter. It was a classy ship that held about a half dozen individuals and was designed to ferry those that were important, or at those who thought that they were important. The model would have had sophisticated sensors and some state of the art computers for its time. This would have made repairs on the ship expensive so not many were made. Now everything was old and outdated. It would need to be retrofitted with some decent weapons and its plating might have to be refurbished. Repairs were still going to be expensive. Still, if it could fly, it would be a decent ship.

The third, and closer item, was a mock-shelter. This was more of a lean-to made of military grade metallic rods with thick canvas on three sides. This gave shelter from the sun and from the harsh winds. It probably wouldn't stand after the storm hit.

Inside the lean-to there was an Imperial trooper in his field attire. He was currently packing up supplies and a few sensors. It seemed that he was more of a guard who had lost some bet or had been insubordinate and was assigned to this remote and out of the way guard duty to watch over a bunch of sand. This was probably the first place to start the investigation.

"If you're looking for the Tomb of Darth Ablao, it's over there. Hope you've made some arrangements for accommodations, the storm will be here soon enough."

The Mandalorian nodded at the information given. It was time to get more. It was obvious that Quintano wasn't here anymore and wasn't coming back anytime soon. The reason for coming

here wasn't for an immediate capture of the smuggler; it was for why he had come here in the first place. The reason why would point to where he was going next and who he might be meeting.

"The tomb looks fairly recovered." The statement from the Mandalorian was obvious and plainly put. It was done in such a manner that it didn't seem like a question was being asked.

The guard nodded at that as he took a small break from his packing.

"There used to be nothing out here that was until some archeologist got lost in a sandstorm and accidentally discovered an ancient tomb. No one knew anything about it. Apparently it had never been recorded, or perhaps its records were erased."

The Mandalorian took note of this. This would coincide with the need for discretion about the whole mission. It wasn't just Quintano's escape that needed to be silenced; it was what he had discovered.

"Whatever the case, it has caused quite a buzz lately. Many of archeologists have come in over the last month or so. We've only recently been able to put up this site and it's barebones at that. However, during the short time of its discovery they've been able to find an ancient computer that they have been trying to fix and they have found the Sith's burial chamber. They've even been able to uncover that ship." The guard's head nodded toward the ship that lay between the lean-to and the tomb.

"Uncovered that ship? What's so special about it?"

"That ship? It's mostly a museum piece; I doubt that it even runs. It might have belonged to the Sith Lord that's buried here, no one knows for sure. We get a few pilgrims to glance it over every once in awhile, keeps them in touch with the old ways, at least that's what they say. We try to keep it clean."

The Mandalorian considered all of the information that was given and everything fell into place. From the looks of things, the smuggler had stolen an ancient Sith artifact and was now trying to sell it on the black market. He couldn't sell it to the rebellion and he had to stay away from Imperial space. Then there was the fact that there was only a limited amount of dealers and only a few individuals who would be interested in the artifact. Most wouldn't want to handle such items. There would be too many problems with the Empire, there would be problems with the Emperor and his apprentice and such items were said to be cursed. There was only one nearby place left where anything and everything could be bought and sold and that was Nar Shaddaa.

Nar Shaddaa was in the middle of Hutt space and was controlled by the Hutt cartel. Smugglers could come and go as they pleased and the Hutts would welcome both the rebellion and the Empire, but wouldn't tolerate violence, unless they could profit from it somehow.

Now that the possible final route was known, it was only a matter of calculating the shortest route and all of the planets in between. These would have to be considered after an astro star chart was consulted. Until then, there was a few things left to sort out.

The next thing was, where would he hide the item if both the smuggler and his ship were thoroughly searched? The Empire was often referred to as blundering fools, but that wasn't the reality. The reality was, they would have done everything in their ability to find what they were looking for before calling in a very expensive bounty hunter. This meant that he never had the item on him in the first place or he got rid of it another way. The recovery of the item in question wasn't part of the deal, but finding out what happened to the artifact would lead to the smuggler. So, if the smuggler wanted to get rid of the artifact just in case he was caught and wanted to be able to pick it up again once he either was let go or escaped, then he would have...

The bounty hunter's eyes turned toward the piles upon the other three landing bays. These items were being shipped out without being checked. The smuggler could have easily sent a package to himself on an earlier shipment. It was doubtful that it was in these piles, the smuggler would have wanted to watch it being packed and watch it leave instead of risking it being accidentally left behind. It would be so easy to pick up a package at Nar Shaddaa and immediately sell it.

The final pieces had all come into place. There was the item, the destination, and the item's possible location and route. All the information that was needed had been gathered. There was only the clean up left.

The Mandalorian reached into a pouch and pulled out a small electronic device. A snap of a finger pushed the button and the bomb aboard the shuttle exploded.

The blast rocked the ship and blew apart several of its bulk heads. Debris flew everywhere as superheated metallic fragments cut through the air. A second and then a third blast continued to demolish the ship as the initial blast had hit the main fuel lines.

The loud explosion echoed off of the sand and its sound could be heard for miles, bouncing off of the dunes. As the echo came back, the second and third explosion joined it so it sounded as if the area had turned into a war zone.

The concussive shockwave blew across the desert and rippled through the area. Anything that it touched was picked up and thrown. Sand blanketed the air and obscured sight and threatened to skin anyone in the area. The force alone was like a meteor impact, a punch so hard that its blow alone could crush a normal individual.

The supplies scattered and flew like missiles with incredible speed. The lean-to was blown until the military grade poles snapped like twigs. Computers were shattered. Crates were destroyed.



The heat from the blast was a blazing inferno that superseded the temperature of the desert. It melted sand in its immediate area into glass. Flammables around the craft burst into flames and small fires broke out among the three landing pads.

The bounty hunter's armor absorbed the brunt of the force and displaced the heat. The helmet's computerized visor shifted and blocked the blinding light and any debris that was sent toward the bounty hunter was reflected away. The Mandalorian hadn't even bothered to move.

The guard in the lean-to wasn't so fortunate. He had taken several pieces of hot shrapnel, one to his thigh and another to his stomach. Blood was spilling from him and it was only a matter of time before he bled out. He was already dead, he just didn't know it yet.

With one last desperate attempt to stop the Mandalorian from doing any more damage, or at least to avenge his death, the guard struggled to get his blaster from his holster. His hands shook, his body went into shock. His fingers gripped the handle.

It was too late. The Mandalorian pulled one of the pistols being carried and blasted the guard in the head, killing him on the spot. Without missing a beat, the bounty hunter spun, dropped, pulled the second blaster and opened fire toward the opening of the tomb.

The archeologists and pilgrims had all dashed out of the tomb to see what had happened. The explosions had rattled the sandstone blocks and had threatened to bring the whole structure down upon them. Sand and rubble had started to fall and it was just as much out of concern for their safety as it was curiosity of the blast that they had left the underground tomb.

The blasts from the Mandalorian cut through the air and struck with precision. The dual pistols fired in tandem and the expertise of the bounty hunter had proven to be fatal. The scientists and

religious pilgrims were cut down as soon as they came out into the open. None had been spared.

The Mandalorian nodded; being proud of the accomplishment.

‘The general did say to not leave witnesses. As far as anyone will be able to tell, the ship hadn’t lifted off in time, was caught by the sandstorm, and blew up, killing everyone here.’

Immediately the bounty hunter moved toward the ship that had been uncovered. This was the answer to leaving the planet undetected.

The ship was in worse shape than had been initially thought. There were several pieces of its hull that needed to be patched, a bunch of its wiring that needed to be fixed which meant that some of its more luxurious amenities wouldn’t work, and sand had gotten into everything. It seemed that the sand had blasted away quite a bit of the plating’s shine and there were several spots that had shown where the ship had been in a firefight with residue of heavy blaster fire.

Inside had proven to be just as ravished by time and neglect as the outside had been. Several of the bunks in the minor quarters needed to be replaced, wires were exposed, a couple of the interior doors had been shifted off of their inner tracks and needed to be either repaired or replaced, many of the computer terminals were broken, and there had been a small electrical fire that had blown several fuses in the medical chamber.

All-in-all the damage was minor. It would be expensive to fix, repair, and or replace everything, and to give everything a proper cleaning, but by the initial look, it seemed that the major power supply and engines were still operational. The only potential problem was that sand could have gotten into the more sophisticated sections and could prevent the engine from starting. Beyond this, the ship should prove to be space worthy and if the hyper drive was working then it would do for the task at hand.

The initial plan of the bounty hunter was to set up a distress signal to bring in a rescue ship and then accommodate that craft for space flight. Since this ship offered a better opportunity and came with fewer complications, this was going to do nicely.

The Mandalorian went to work right away. Tools, spare fuses, and minor spare parts were easily found in the engine room and it didn't take long to get power online, or at least power to the major functions. The power to the heavy blasters had to be redistributed to the main engine, the minor crew quarters had to be shut off and the small medical bay was rendered all but useless. This allowed emergency lighting, bare minimum life support, artificial gravity, the main engines and the navigations systems. The comms were completely shot, targeting was sporadic at best, and sensors were all but nonexistent. However, this could be repaired in flight. It wasn't pretty, but it could fly, and just in time.

The storm started to pick up outside. The sand started to swirl as the sky started to turn a dark crimson color that border lined black . It would only be a matter of time before the full force of the gale winds and the blasting sand that would follow would come upon the ship mercilessly like a hand of a wrathful and vengeful god.

There was still a little time to wait to see if the ship was completely worthy of flight, and although giving the ship a trial flight after all of these years while in the middle of a sandstorm wasn't under the most ideal situation, it was the best idea if leaving the planet was to go undetected. With this in mind, the bounty hunter started to look through the navigation star chart. There was only so much distance a stolen T.I.E. fighter with limited fuel and no hyper drive could go and based on the location of its initial departure, and from the star chart, there was only one system that the ship could reach and that was the planet Felucia.

The storm continued to build until visibility was reduced to nil and the ship started to rock against the fierce winds. This was the best time to take off since the gale would mask the ship.

Then Mandalorian took the pilot seat and went through the preflight adjustments making sure that the flight path lead to Felucia. The ship's engines came to life and added a hum that vibrated throughout the ship. Power flickered as the engines drained the life from the ship and a couple of fuses blew sending showers of sparks in all directions. Despite the strain and the lack of being used for all of these years, the ship lifted off of the ground.

The wind continued to buffet the ship. Sand hit upon it like a swarm and its sound echoed throughout the craft. The storm howled and between its vocal frustrations and the beating of its claws upon the craft, it was as if a large beast was trying to tear the ship apart.

The controls faltered as the ship was thrown up and back, yet the Mandalorian didn't fight it. The bounty hunter simply allowed the storm to do most of the work while only slightly adjusting the flight, angling up to let the craft gain some lift. A few more adjustments went into stabilizing the ship until...

The Mandalorian spun the ship and punched the throttle to full. The ship took off like a shot through the air and cut through the storm. It seemed as if the craft had forgotten how to fly for only the briefest moment, but now that it had remembered, it came to life and performed without flaw. Its sleek design allowed it to maneuver with ease through the onslaught of the storm. A few more adjustments and the ship left orbit.

The bounty hunter made sure that the coordinates for Felucia were set properly before engaging the hyper drive. It wasn't necessary to engage this engine, but since the bounty hunter had a huge lead, it was beneficial to get to the system as quickly as possible. It was still going to take a little time and would give the Mandalorian a chance to make a few more repairs.

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The Fury Class T.I.E. Interceptor came out of hyper drive. Its appearance was sudden and quick. Anyone who had watched it arrived would have been startled by its presence.

Valas watched as the planet Korriban came into view. The various patterns of the planet's surface was obscured with the raging sandstorm below. Everything was now a crimson red and nothing could be seen through the haze.

The Imperial agent opened his ship's comms and listened to the traffic and various communications that the planet would normally have. It was useless. The storm had either knocked down transmitters, was interfering with any communications that was trying to be transmitted, or no one was even trying to use their comms at all. All he was getting was static.

A few more buttons were pushed and sensors came online. Computer read outs and radar started to capture data from the planet below, but Valas already knew what he would find and the information he received confirmed his suspicions. All that he received was one large mass of sand being blown through the air.

There was nothing more that could be done on Korriban until the raging sandstorm blew over and that could be at least a few of the planet's days. That just would not do. The longer that he waited would mean that there would be a greater chance of the bounty hunter capturing Quintano and thus having the information delivered to the wrong person. Valas had to think about his next move.

If the smuggler had an ancient Sith artifact and he wasn't giving it to the Empire through General Fess, and the paying contact had been obscure about any buyer, then Quintano would have to go to a place where the Empire wouldn't be notified of any transaction and where anything could be bought or sold. In this area of the galaxy, that left Hutt space. Although this was

only a working theory, it was still a place to consider. Within Hutt space, the best place to buy or sell anything would be Nar Shaddaa.

Keeping this in mind as a possibility, Valas tapped through his computer. After a few moments the security screen came on his monitor. It gave the standard warning of entering an Imperial database, that any attempt to enter without the proper security would be a violation of several Imperial codes, and a description of the various sentences that could and would be carried out. Valas ignored all of the warnings and put in a code, one of many that he had acquired depending on what level of security he wanted and who he wanted to frame if he was caught.

Once in the database, the Imperial agent called up all of the information pertaining to the smuggler known as Quintano Roo. It seemed that all recent reports were deleted. Valas only shook his head. Nothing was ever really deleted.

It took a short while, but in the end Valas was able to retrieve everything concerning the connection between Quintano and the Audacious. It became quickly apparent that General Fess was completely incompetent and it would be no wonder if an officer within his ranks was trying to get rid of him. However, no matter how incompetent the general was, even he could search the smuggler's ship and the smuggler himself for the stolen artifact.

This meant that Quintano didn't have the artifact and couldn't make his meeting without it. The smuggler would have to use connections to hide the package, set up the meeting, or hide from the Empire or even from the bounty hunter for that matter. This was the next bit of information that Valas started to look for.

According to Quintano's file, there was a major contact out in this area that he might be able to run to. This would be the first place to start looking. Even if the Besalisk hadn't seen the smuggler for any length of time, he might be able to provide more information. This would also be kept in the back of the assassin's mind and might prove to be useful later.

The last bit of information that Valas gathered was how Quintano escaped. According to the records, the smuggler had left in a T.I.E. fighter. These didn't have hyper drive capabilities and this meant that the ship could only cover a short distance.

Drawing a route from where the Audacious was to the Besalisk and then to Nar Shaddaa across his star chart, Valas factored in how far a T.I.E. fighter could get and came up with only a few planets that Quintano could reach. Only one of them was hospitable and that was Felucia.

With a few adjustments, Valas set off to his next destination, Felucia.

## Chapter: Felucia

The T.I.E. fighter control panel blinked warning flashes of red and yellow and lit up the cockpit with an eerie glow. The bright neon colors were a direct contrast to the deep darkness of space that surrounded the ship. It was also a major distraction and so were the warning sounds that echoed in the small space occupied by the single pilot.

“Yes, yes, yes, I know I’m out of fuel,” Quintano said out loud as if the ship could hear his response and would stop giving him the warning of impending doom.

The smuggler went through a few of the controls in a desperate attempt to divert fuel from one of the twin ion engines to the other in order to try to run on just one engine. This had done two things. The first was that another warning came on telling him that one of the engines was now offline. The second was that the T.I.E. fighter was becoming less responsive.

The ship had been built around both twin ion engines operating. It could run on just one, but it was difficult at best. This was not “at best”. The same stormtroopers that had hit the fuel line and had created an “ion leak” were the same stormtroopers that had managed to hit the navigation controls. The T.I.E. fighter’s controls had gone from bad to worse.

“...and who said that stormtroopers were bad shots?”

Quintano tried his best to call upon every ounce of training from when he was with the rebellion. He guided the ship instead of trying to fight with it. Even then it was everything that he could do to keep it stabilized. The alternative was to lose his fuel before even reaching the planet below.

The large orb shape of the planet continued to take up his screen. Felucia was known to harbor intelligent life, have



breathable air and had been visited by both the rebellion and the Empire. With any luck there would be another ship that he could “borrow”, preferably one with a hyper drive engine.

This was if he could get the help of any of the natives. The planet had gone back and forth between its alliances since it had felt abandoned by one side and betrayed by the other. On top of this, they would have been ravaged by war and it wouldn’t surprise him if any took a shot at him the first chance they had. Still it was a risk worth taking since it was the only shot he had.

Entering the atmosphere was worse than he thought. The thick clouds dropped visibility to almost nothing and his sensors had a tough time picking up anything. Rain was falling hard upon his cockpit window and not only cut the visibility down even further and made it more difficult to pilot but it also displayed ghosts upon his radar. It was becoming difficult in determining where he was going. That was until he came out of the clouds.

The thick tropical jungle came into view sooner than he had expected. His trajectory had been too sharp, the clouds had been too low and his speed had been too fast. It was everything that Quintano could do to pull up on the throttle as hard as he could.

It was no good. The T.I.E. fighter was no longer responsive and it was too late. He was going in hard and fast.

The tops of the large trees slapped against the spacecraft and broke under its speed and mass. Branches snapped and limbs fell from the tops of the trees of the rainforest to go cascading down to the ground until the craft fell too low. Then, trees broke and were knocked aside.

The T.I.E. fighter continued to take on damage from its quick entry. Its solar panels were the first to snap off which sent the core body of the ship into a spiral descent. Thick branches broke through the cockpit window and the engine became tangled with debris as the remains of the ship continued to spin out of downward.

The impact onto jungle floor had blown dirt, mud, branches, flora and debris in all directions. Several more trees had been blasted apart and were sent crashing to the ground. By the time the last part of the T.I.E. fighter pod had come to a stop it seemed as if a war zone had hit the area and had left it devastated.

Quintano moaned in pain. He was surprised that the T.I.E. fighter had held together as well as it had. They weren't known to have strong plating and it was usually very easy to blow one into stardust. However, he figured that since the craft had run out of fuel, there was nothing to explode.

At first the smuggler thought that he had taken a hit so bad that the world had spun and he waited for it to correct itself. It wasn't until the blood started rushing to his head that he realized that the pod had landed upside down. The only thing keeping him in his seat was his pilot harness.

Without thinking, Quintano pushed the release button on the harness. Gravity reminded him of his poor judgment and the fall upon the ground with the bruise that followed drove home the point. Again he moaned in pain.

It took a little doing to kick out the last of the T.I.E. fighter's cockpit glass so that he could crawl through. The entry hatch had been blocked by the angle of which the ship was sitting and the tree that had fallen upon it had only served to further hinder the portal from opening. On top of that, the ship's frame was so bent out of shape that he doubted that the door would ever open again.

The tall green trees that surrounded him reminded Quintano about the planet and the heavy raindrops that were constantly dripping from them only helped reinforce his memory. Felucia was known to have most of its surface covered in a thick, humid rainforest. He had hoped that the vastness of the forest had been an exaggeration. He had hoped that the description of the humidity had been blown out of proportion. He had hoped that he

would be able to land somewhere near civilization. None of his hopes had come to pass.

The humidity hit him like a fist. It was hard to breathe with the moisture that was in the air and he was sure that he would have been able to breathe easier if he were a Mon Calamari and had gills. The moisture drenched his clothing and stuck to his body and he didn't know if he was sweating or it had been the water vapors in the air that soaked him. Even his hair had matted to his head and had gotten into his eyes.

Quintano shook his head. This was not what he wanted. He was stuck in the middle of nowhere and there was only one thing that he could do. With hope of finding something, someone, some town, city or any form of civilization, he turned and headed randomly into the forest.

The thick mud of the forest floor only slowed him down and the constant moisture in the air weighed upon his soul. Rain constantly fell upon him through the trees. Everything was soaking wet.

Moss had grown on every side of every tree. Anything that had fallen was also covered with moss and at times all that could be seen on the ground was a carpet of wet green. This, combined with the mud, only served to hinder his process.

Mushrooms and fungus also grew in abundance. There was shelf fungus that grew upon the side of the trees, sometimes big enough for him to sit on. There were mushrooms that grew in stalks that formed rings upon rings. Then there were blobs of red and blue and neon green that dotted the area and Quintano was sure that these were also some other form of fungi.

Quintano had to admit that he knew nothing about mushrooms except for the fact that some were edible, some were hallucinogenic and some were downright poisonous. While he could use the nutrition while he continued to hike through the

misty, rainy, dripping, and wet forest; he knew that this was not the time to experiment with mushrooms.

Hours passed, or at least what seemed like hours. It was difficult to tell time on a planet that he had never been on. He had no idea how fast the planet was rotating and the slow movement through the forest and the strong desire to leave only made the process seem that much slower. The only real constant of passing time was the rumbling in his stomach.

Hunger and fatigue were starting to set in and as the light that had filtered from the branches above started to fade, he knew that he would have to find food and shelter soon. Food would be problematic. He hadn't seen any animals since he had landed. He had heard a few every now and then, probably some small mammal or bird up in the trees, but there hadn't been any sign of something that he could easily catch.

This only brought another thought to his mind. There may be predators here that he hadn't considered before. The moment that he stopped to rest could be the time that something decided that it was also hungry and he was sure that he would look good on any predator's menu. Then again, he could be attacked by swarms of small creatures, like insects or some poisonous rodents. These thoughts only drove him forward in desperation to either get out of the forest or to find better shelter.

By the time the sun had set, physical exhaustion had overcome fear. He needed to rest; his body simply couldn't go any further. Without the ability to find anything dry, he at least found something comfortable upon some soft moss and laid his head up against a fallen tree.

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The X-70b Phantom Class cut through the clouds with ease. Its sleek design made it easier to handle through the atmosphere than any other ship that the Mandalorian had ever handled before,

which admittedly wasn't that many. Even the rain didn't seem to bother the ship.

As the bounty hunter dropped out of the cloud level, the ship skimmed over the forest with grace and ease. It was going to be difficult to find a single ship, let alone a single individual, in the middle of these trees. Nothing was visible and the smuggler could be anywhere, and that was if the assumption had been correct. If the smuggler had made it to a different planet then the hunt would have to start all over and he would have a much larger lead. Yet, the bounty hunter pushed on.

The Mandalorian shifted power from the engines to the main sensors. It was still going to be a struggle to keep power distributed to various stations until the whole ship could be brought up to standards. The sensors came online after flickering several times.

Nothing; there was nothing. Sensors were useless. The thick rain had only created ghosts upon the radar and the thick forest hid everything under it. The Mandalorian was going to try a few more locations before finding a place to land and reconsider how the search was going to continue.

That was until the broken tree line had been spotted. Something large had come through here, hard and fast. At that trajectory, it had probably crashed and although it could have been a meteorite, it was still worth an investigation.

The trail of broken tree tops lead to a trail of broken trees that lead to the crash site. There, in the middle of a mass of broken branches and fallen trees, were the remains of a T.I.E. fighter pod. The solar wings had been ripped off. The smuggler had made it this far and only just barely at that.

The crash site had cleared enough trees for the Phantom Class to make a landing, although it wasn't graceful. The ship still broke through several of the branches that were in its way, knocked down two trees that were already half destroyed, and

smashed the debris on the forest floor. Any attempt at a stealthy approach was dashed aside.

Still, despite the warning given by the loud landing and the obvious amount of space taken up by the ship, a warning that could have sent the smuggler fleeing into the jungle, the Mandalorian had to be ready for almost anything. For all that was known, the smuggler could be waiting, setting a trap for the bounty hunter, and even though the Mandalorian was sure that any threat could be dealt with, it was mostly the thought of losing the ship to the smuggler that was in consideration. It would be one thing to lose the target; it would be another to be stranded here while that same target took the ship and possibly the only means to get off of this world.

A push of the portal's control panel opened the door from the Phantom Class as the Mandalorian pulled both pistols, rolled to one side of the ship's entry way and dropped to one knee. The ship's hull would create enough cover and the small opening of the door and dropping to a smaller position would offer less of a target. The bounty hunter was ready for a firefight.

Nothing; nothing came. The attack of a cornered and hunted prey hadn't happen.

Slowly the Mandalorian came out of the cover that had been given by the ship and started to walk down the landing ramp. The bounty hunter gave a continual look between left and right in an attempt to remain ever vigilant of any potential threats. Still nothing came. A quick jog to the downed T.I.E. fighter pod was also without incident.

By the look of the wreckage, it didn't seem as if anyone could have survived. The damage had been far too extensive. Still, there had been individuals who had been in worse and had walked away.

The Mandalorian had hoped that this was the case. Payment wasn't for a dead smuggler, it was for a living one and if this

individual had managed to get himself killed then there wouldn't be any payment. This was not only problematic for the family reputation of not delivering on a promise, but there was doubt that there would be any money to compensate for the already increasing expenses that had occurred. The smuggler had better be alive. The bounty hunter shoved both hand held blasters into the cockpit to lead the way.

It was empty. The pilot had not only survived, but by the looks of things, had left pretty much left intact. There was no signs of blood or a struggle.

A'Den spun in place in anticipation of another attack. None had come. Wherever the pilot was now, he wasn't here.

The bounty hunter holstered both blasters and dropped toward the ground. Although it was very damp and the moisture had threatened to wash away any evidence of tracks that might be in the area, the soggy forest soil had been deep enough with enough plant life to hold the foot prints. It was hard to tell how old they were, and they would fade soon enough with all of the moisture, but darkness was fast approaching and it would be foolish to try to continue in the night time. The smuggler would have to rest as well and A'Den knew that a fresh start early in the morning after a good night's rest should give the ability to catch the smuggler who had a rough journey the night before.

With this in mind, the Mandalorian went back into the T.I.E. fighter. For the most part, the equipment on board had been fried, or was busted or broken. The equipment wasn't the focus, it was the parts. Several parts were still good and could be used to further repair the X-70b Phantom Class. Not all of the parts would be initially compatible, they would have to be adapted or retrofitted. Still, they would help with the repairs that were needed. Although a lot of repair and cleaning had been done on the trip over here, there was still a lot more to do.

After several trips from the wreckage, with large armfuls of wires, modulators, fuses, gears, a navigation unit, a comms unit,

amplifiers, regulators and a few other items, A'Den stopped near the front of the Phantom Class ship. There, across the side of the ship, was the ship's name. It hadn't been seen before since the dirt and grime of the desert had completely concealed it. Now, after the rains had washed away the sand, the words could clearly be seen; the words of Ebon Mortis.

“Who in their right mind would name their ship ‘Ebon Mortis’?”



## Chapter: The Farm

Morning came harder than Quintano had thought possible. There had been times when he had been hung over and he thought that those were bad. This was worse.

The long hike during the evening through the thick mud, the moss, and every time that he had to climb over a fallen tree, had worn him out. The moisture in the air and the periodic rain showers during the night clung to him like a heavy blanket. The inability to lay down properly had made his body scream in anguish. Then there were the bruises from the crash. He hadn't felt them while his adrenaline was running; now he felt every bump that had ever happened. He was sore all over and his body was not happy with him.

Despite the fact that fatigue and pain yelled at him to stay where he was, hunger pushed him forward. With that in mind, Quintano slowly made his way through the forest in the direction that he hoped he was going last night. It would be another long day if he didn't find food and shelter and it would be longer still if he didn't get moving.

The hike continued to be long and arduous. It rained once more before the sun reached its zenith and one more time before he thought that he would quit altogether. It was then that he came upon the edge of the forest and stopped.

There, before him, a large clearing opened. The trees had all been cleared and from what he could tell, there was a farm. His heart almost burst through his chest from excitement and sheer joy.

This was no ordinary farm, though. It didn't grown stalks or tubers nor did it raise animals for meat, or even fruits and

vegetables as he had seen on other farms. Instead, Quintano saw before him rows and rows of tall mushrooms.

The mushrooms were of various colors and heights. Some were low to the ground while others were almost as tall as he was. There were blue and green and bright red ones. There were orange and purple. Some were multicolored and others seemed to glow and almost pulse with life. They had been planted in rows and columns by their various shapes and sizes with enough room to walk between them.

Quintano had been so caught in the view before him and the fact that there had to be someone out here farming these mushrooms that he hadn't noticed the movement to his right. It was only when the large creature burst through the row of fungi did the smuggler notice it and by that time it was too late. The large insect was upon him.

The giant beetle was nearly two meters high at its highest spot at the center of its back and was probably four meters long. The creature had five legs on each side of its body. Its mouth had a small set of pinchers, at least for the size of its body, yet they were big enough to do considerable amount of damage.

Quintano instinctively moved back away from the charging creature while attempting to pull up his blaster and tripped over the crop that was being raised. His body tumbled backward, his blaster dropped from his hand out of reach and he fell to the ground hard. He could only watch in horror as the beast started to descend upon him.

“Click, click, hiss, clock, pop, pop, click.”

The sounds, that sounded as if the creature might have made, didn't come from the insect itself but rather from behind the insect. It seemed that someone or something, else was talking to the beast and it seemed to be working. The aggression of the creature dropped considerably, although not completely gone altogether.

“Who are you?” The voice came from behind the beast.

Quintano gave a slight peek around the large insect that still seemed to be very hungry and was waiting for the command to eat him as a snack. There, to his surprise was a simply humanoid. The creature was short but what he lacked in height he made up in bulk. The individual had thick arms and legs in proportion to his body. The four fingers on each hand welded what looked like some kind of hoe or other farming implement in a menacing fashion. His head was elongated and it reminded Quintano of some sort of reptile or even a tortoise. The individual's skin was green and had red eyes with black pupils which only gave further credence to being related to some sort of reptilian creature.

“Do you...do you speak basic?” Quintano asked with a slight stutter. He hoped that he had heard the words from the humanoid correctly and that it wasn't just his wishful thinking. If the Felucian humanoid turtle creature didn't really speak common, then he would have to fight off the giant blue beetle and that was just something that he wasn't looking forward to doing.

“Yes. You're not welcomed. No more of your wars. Go and take your wars with you.”

“Look, I'm not trying...”

The Felucian gave a series of clicks which seemed to agitated the large blue insect.

“Ok, ok, I don't want any trouble, just show me where I can get some food and I'll be on my way. My ship crashed back in the jungle and I just want to get home.”

“You came through jungle?”

“Yes, down that way, some distance I guess. It's about a day's journey. You'll come across my crash, but it isn't my ship. I had to borrow it. Look, I'm not part of the war...”

“You came through jungle and lived? There are many bad things in there. You come, you eat and leave. I show you where more ships are and you leave.”

With a few more clicks and pops from the Felucian, the large beetle turned away from the fallen smuggler and started to follow him. It took a few moments for the shock to wear off before Quintano stood, brushed himself off, and was about to follow suit when he remembered his “borrowed” blaster. He had a quick snag of the fallen weapon and turned to catch up with the Felucian. With any luck he would be off of this planet and as quickly as possible.

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A'Den left the “Ebon Mortis” and stepped into the hot, humid jungle. The humidity struck hard and the Mandalorian had almost forgotten what it had felt like from the night before. The cooler atmospherically controlled environment from the ship during the night had been refreshing compared to the heat and humidity of the planet. At least now it was cooler moisture than last night and it wasn't raining.

The evening had been productive with the items from the T.I.E. fighter pod. The repairs had gone well and the systems of the ship were slowly coming around. There had even been time to get more of the sand out of the spacecraft. This had all been satisfying to the Mandalorian.

Sleeping on a comfortable bed had also been very satisfying and extremely refreshing. The Mandalorian hadn't slept on a comfortable surface in a long time. Most of the time sleep came on some shuttle or in some dormitory between jobs. This job was going to change all of that. With this new ship and the credits that were coming in from the bounty, there would never be another poor night's sleep again.

With the clearing of the skies, which the bounty hunter had taken was a rarity, A'Den was able to see that the tall plants all around weren't trees after all, they were mushrooms. They were the largest set of fungi possibly in the entire galaxy. These had reached enormous heights and some even had shelves large enough for a shuttle to land on.

A'Den shifted the focus from the plant life to the tracks on the ground. As suspected, the tracks had started to fade from all of the moisture and the rain. There was still a little bit of an impression to follow and that would be good enough. To make things easier, the smuggler had left a trail of broken stalks, branches and disturbed plant life that anyone could follow blindfolded. He hadn't even bothered trying to hide his trail. It was as if a Nerf had stomped its way through here. With full resolution, the Mandalorian took off and followed the tracks deeper into the mushroom forest.

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Quintano wasn't sure if the meal that had been offered to him had settled properly or had even been cooked properly. The first portion had been a mushroom stew with a couple of deep fried mushrooms. He had rolled his eyes upon this and thought that it couldn't have been more unoriginal. Of course this was what the Felucians were going to eat. The stew was bland and desperately needed seasoning while the fried mushrooms had some flavor but had a strange texture that didn't sit right. The second course was blue bowl of an unidentifiable substance. The first bite only turned his stomach and once he recognized the "bowl" as a smaller version of the beetle that had attacked him, he had almost become violently sick. He really didn't want to have beetle guts for any meal.

The Felucian had pointed in the direction away from the farm, and his family, that was supposed to have a ship that could get him off the planet. This had been a journey that he had looked forward to, not only a chance to finally get to where he was going but also to get away from mushrooms and beetles as quickly as

he could. However, like the meal he had just eaten, this hope had also turned.

The journey that had been described as a “short distance” had been in relative terms to an individual that had not only was used to walking as his main mode of transportation, and was used to the land and environment, but had probably covered the interval several times and had been used to the distance traveled. On top of this, he was sure that the Felucian had wanted him to leave as quickly as possible so a “short distance” was to encourage him to move along.

Of course the encouragement of a short distance had worked and so was the incentive of not having to eat beetle again. He had hastened his journey and this had proven to be his downfall. His lack of being acclimatized to the environment had gotten to him. The heat and humidity had worn on his endurance that had already been reduced due to the food poisoning that he was sure that he had since his system wasn’t used to the food either. He had stopped twice to get sick and neither time had made him feel any better.

It wasn’t until the end of the day did he reach the area where he was told to go to and once he saw it, he knew that he had arrived. The large area had once been a field full of various plant life, and probably animal life as well. Now it was just a graveyard of broken down vehicles, crafts, troop transports, AT-ATs, AT-ST’s, speeders, X-Wings, Y-Wings, T.I.E. fighters and a dozen other ships and crafts that were unidentifiable.

There had been a huge battle here that had wiped out this portion of the planet and had left it scarred with deep furrows of impact sites, large craters where bombs had gone off, depression in the rock where explosion had devastated the area, and a large area that seemed to have been burned from fuel fire. Debris was everywhere and it was hard to tell where one ship had started and another had begun.

From the looks of things, the world was trying its best to reclaim the area. A few vines, small shrubs and various small fungi were clinging to everything in a desperate attempt to thrive. This was going to take some doing due to the chemicals, fuel, and decomposing computer and engine parts. Life was going to take a back seat for sometime before this place healed.

Upon seeing this, Quintano couldn't help but feel for the Felucian. He had every right to be upset and even more of a right to get him off of his planet as quickly as possible. The planet had been ravaged, in far too many places similar to this, and the farmer didn't want anything to do with the war any more. There probably had been hundreds of homes destroyed, thousands of families displaced and countless amounts of deceased that had been caught up in the war. Each side had promised safety and security from the other but in the end both sides had done enough damage to last several lifetimes. This planet would never be the same again.

It had been the same everywhere Quintano had gone. Every planet had been struck with disaster. Everyone had known someone who had been killed. Families had lost loved ones. Civilians had been caught in the crossfire. Death and destruction had destroyed everything that the war had touched. It was ugly and brutal and both the rebellion and the Empire were blaming the other, both were dismissing the destruction as "collateral damage" or the "horrible effects of war."

This was the reason that he had quit the rebellion and this mechanical graveyard of long lost forgotten ships had only reminded him of the fact. He just wanted out, and if he could make his drop then he could find a place, any place that hadn't been ravaged by war, and settle down.

Shaking his head to clear his mind, Quintano ignored the rumblings in his stomach and started his search. Everything looked like it had taken so much damage that he doubted if anything could fly. It was a long shot, but it was the only shot he

had. He wouldn't be welcomed anywhere else. He either had to find something that flew or put something together.

About an hour had passed before something caught his eye. It was an old A-24 Sleuth, a scout ship that required only one pilot with an option for an astromech. The ship wasn't in too bad of shape and after a short inspection, Quintano had made his evaluation.

"It seems like you only need a few couplings, a regulator and a few more minor components and you'll be ready to go." His words had been directed toward the ship as if it were a living creature that only needed comfort before it was space worthy. Despite the lack of response, Quintano continued his evaluation.

"Looks you have a busted old R2-0 unit. Its systems are fried and would take a lot of power just to put it back online and even then it would need a lot of parts. Sorry, I'm not familiar enough with R2 units to put you back together. I'll have to dig you out and toss you later, too heavy to do it now and I'm in a hurry to get off this planet. Now for me to find your parts and get you flying again."

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Night had fallen before the Mandalorian had come across the mushroom farm. The tracks had led to this spot and if the smuggler had made it this far than there was no reason for him to not have been seen. The residence of the home should have seen him and they were going to divulge that information or there would be repercussions. Of course, the Imperial general was paying for silence. That was part of the contract and that had to be honored.

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The knock on the door had surprised the Felucian family. Few individuals came to visit them, especially this time of the hour. The last time that knocks on the door this late had happened was



when the Empire came looking for rebels and before that it had been the rebellion looking for Imperials. Usually these came with families being drug out into the night, sometimes to never be seen again and sometimes simply shot.

The little Felucian girl sprang from her chair and ran into her mother's arms. Her body trembled in fear. She could still hear the gunshots from last year and the year before. The knock on the door had become her worst nightmare.

The mom did all she could to comfort the little one. The child had already learned to not cry, this would alert those outside that someone was present. It was best to keep quiet no matter what happened. She tried to wipe the little one's tears. Her heart broke when they wouldn't stop.

The farmer that had helped the visitor was now regretting that he had. It would have been better to have the beetle just eat him and be done with it. It would have been better to bash him over his head. He simply couldn't have done it though. He wasn't as strong as those who had the guns that had come through here last.

Now, he had the opportunity to show his family just how strong he could be. He would defend them or die trying. As the knock came again, he quickly made his way to the hoe that he had placed by the front door. He had become quite proficient with it against smaller animals that had tried to get into his crops. Now it was time to apply it to something much larger and more threatening.

The next knock had the farmer reaching for his door, but he never had the chance. The door burst open and almost knocked him down. Before he understood what had happened, a strange, armored individual had grabbed his hoe and gave it a slight twist. Not being ready, his body twisted with the impromptu weapon and was thrown to the ground. Almost immediately a blaster was shoved into his face.

A'Den had heard the Felucian behind the door and didn't know what to expect. It was best to take the initiative and sort things out later. It was after the farmer had been dispatched and pinned to the floor did the sound of the other occupants become clear. The cry of a little child had made the Mandalorian reach for the second blaster and aim it at its source.

"Please no! No! Not my family! Please! No! I beg of you! I'll give you anything you want. Please don't harm them."

The bounty hunter's attention had been brought back to the farmer on the ground.

"Where is he?"

"Who...?"

"Don't play games with me. I know he was here. Now, where is he? Don't make me ask again."

"The man, he was here, yes. But he left, I sent him away. He's gone far away, not here anymore."

"Where?"

The farmer stopped just shy of telling this intruder where he had sent the first individual. Yes, things would have been much simpler if he had just killed the first one, now trouble had followed. The problem now was, if he told the intruder, then there wouldn't be any need to be kept alive. He would no longer be useful.

"I asked you where he went. Do you want me to start shooting?"

"No, no please, don't," the farmer stated with complete terror. There was no way out of this; the Mandalorian was going to start shooting. "I sent him to the old battlefield, many crashed ships

there. He wanted a ship, I sent him there. Don't know if any can fly. That's where I sent him."

"Which direction? How far?"

"Not far, toward the setting sun, can't miss it. Very large, lots of ships, very big, can't miss..."

"If you are lying, if I have wasted my time and need to return..."

"No, no, please, I'm telling the truth, I swear. I sent him there to find a ship."

The memory of the general's full authorization to keep the mission silent came to mind. He was paying good money to make sure that no one knew about this bounty hunt. All evidence needed to be erased. On top of that, it was a matter of honor. There was a contract and it needed to be honored. If word got out that a contract was broken then offers would stop, payments would stop.

A'Den snapped both blasters back into their holsters and tossed a few coins upon the downed farmer. With that, the bounty hunter turned and left the family in shock. The bribe would have to be added to the expense of the bounty. The Mandalorian only added one more thing before leaving.

"I was never here."

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It had gotten too dark and it had become too late in the evening to continue to work on the ship. Even while rigging up a few make-shift lights from a few of the other ships, fatigue, exhaustion, exposure to the elements, and the last meal that he had eaten had finally done him in and Quintano had to stop for the night. At least the cockpit of the ship would keep him warm and dry.

Morning had come way too early. The smuggler's muscles still ached from the hike the day before and while the pilot's chair had been comfortable, it wasn't really made to be slept in. He was looking forward to actually getting a good night's rest and a decent meal.

This was the inspiration to get going and finish the job at hand. All it would take was a little more reconfiguring and the ship should be space worthy. Then there would be a matter of plotting the course and he would be off of this planet.

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A'Den moved to the top of the ridge that overlooked the valley below. As promised by the farmer, the area wasn't hard to find. It was, however, a lot further than a "short ways" away.

The night before had been uncomfortable at best. It had rained in buckets and the humidity had risen dramatically. There hadn't been a comfortable place to find to rest and the only thing that provided any form of shelter was a massive shelf fungus that at least provided some relief from the rain. The ground remained damp and uncomfortable.

"I'm really starting to hate this job." A'Den stated aloud knowing full well that the statement would never be heard.

The ridge had offered a great view and a good tactical location in case a fire fight insured. The only problem was that the area below was indeed vast. There were broken ships and personnel carriers everywhere. Shards of rusted, broken and twisted metal were strewn all over the place. The area looked more like a junkyard than the forest that it should have been. With all of the wreckage down below it was hard to see anything, and if the smuggler was still down there then finding him would be very difficult at best.

However, since this was the direction that the tracks had led to and since there hadn't been any ship that had taken off, the smuggler should still be down there. Difficult or not, that man was worth a fortune. No matter how long it took, that bounty was going to be brought in.

A'Den continued to scan through the area. There was just so much to look through and the area was so large that it almost seemed impossible. Then, suddenly, movement was spotted. There, off to the right, the Mandalorian could see the individual.

The bounty hunter adjusted the binoculars in the helmet and zoomed in on the individual. Sure enough, the person in question matched the photo in file that had come over from the general. It was a pleasure to finally meet the man that had upset the Empire so much. Now it was time to bring him in.

The small missile on the backpack was always an option. The would take out the ship that the smuggler was trying to fix and would keep him here, not able to run or leave the planet long enough to be brought in. The problem with this idea was the fact that the explosion could end up killing the rogue and the bounty would be worthless. The bounty was for the apprehension, not for the death, of the smuggler.

The jet pack was also an option. This would allow the Mandalorian to cross the distance between the two of them but this was also out. There would be too much time in the air without cover. The smuggler would see the approach and would be able to have enough time to get into the ship and leave or, if the smuggler was armed, he would be able to open fire. No, the prey had to be stopped or at least slowed down first, and quickly, before any approach could be made. This only left one option.

The Mandalorian reached for the EE-3 carbine rifle that was slung over the right shoulder. The two hand blasters were great for closer battles and were easier to handle. However, the EE-3 carbine rifle could fire three bursts at a longer distance. Normally the rifle wasn't as accurate as any other long range rifles, and

didn't necessarily hit with the strongest punch, but with the stock and the scope that had been added, and the days upon days of extensive practicing, A'Den Verda was sure that whatever target was aimed at would be hit with great accuracy.

The bounty hunter adjusted the scope of the rifle to zoom in on the its target. This, combined with the binoculars in the helmet, every part of the smuggler could be seen. The question was, how should he be hit?

A shot too far to one side or the other would make the smuggler bleed out and even if that didn't happen, he could still get into the ship and fly away. No, the risk was too great. Taking this individual in now was now out of the question. Too much time and distance had passed between the two of them. Besides, using a long range rifle as a sniper rifle was often frowned upon. Honor of the battle was more important than a kill. Still, sniper rifles had their purpose and could be used in other ways.

A'Den knew that this would have to be played out in more of a longer hunt than just a quick snag and grab. The smuggler couldn't be stopped, but he could at least be slowed down until this distance and time could be closed and there was one way to do that.

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Quintano tightened down the last bolt. Everything was in place and he was ready to leave. Everything was going to turn out just fine.

The blast of the rifle against the ship startled him into action. Immediately he rolled away from the ship and ducked for cover under a piece of wreckage nearby. He needed to keep his cover while trying to figure out where the shots were coming from and who was shooting at him.

"If that farmer decided that I was his next hunt or had turned me in, so help me I'll..."

He stopped. He really didn't know what he would do. Neither the Felucian farmer nor his family seemed like the individuals that would sell him out. A quick peek toward the ridge, where he suspected the shot had come from, told him all that he needed to know.

The armored individual upon the ridge wasn't a Felucian and wasn't a stormtrooper. The armor wasn't pure white and there was only one sniper and not a whole squad, so an Imperial stormtrooper seemed to be out of the question, although the armor did look similar to a trooper's armor. That only left one thought. It was a Mandalorian and if that was the case then ...

"So, you've placed a bounty on my head instead of coming after me yourself. Is that it, general? Well, this won't be the first time that I've eluded a bounty hunter."

Quintano's conversation with the Imperial general was more for his sake as he knew that General Brakin Fess was nowhere to be around to hear it.

The thought of firing back with the stolen stormtrooper blaster only briefly crossed Quintano's mind. However, the Mandalorian bounty hunter was too far away and had the higher ground. Any attempt to try to fire would only result in getting killed. There really was only one thing to do.

Quickly Quintano bolted to his left, away from the ship, rolled under one wing of an X-Wing, around the back side of a T.I.E. fighter, and slipped back around toward the front of the A-24 Sleuth. The entire process had been a series of ducks and twists, of rolls and backtracking. It had meant to confuse anyone that was trying to track his movements. Each path was expertly taken that hid his every movement and continued to give him cover. This allowed him to double back to where he wanted to go.

Without missing a beat, Quintano hopped into the cockpit of the Sleuth and brought the canopy down. With any luck, the

sniper was still looking for him in the wreckage and he had bought enough time. He didn't even bother going through the preflight sequence or punching in the coordinates. It was time to leave and either the ship was able to fly and was space worthy or he was a dead man.

Quintano flipped a few of the switches. The main engine turned on and rattled the whole ship. The computer console started to light up as the ship's functions started to come online. The craft came to life and lifted from the ground. It only stalled once before the thrusters kicked in and ship launched into space.

A'Den only smiled as the smuggler took off. The shot had been perfect and the man was playing right into the situation that had been planned for. Now, all that needed to be done, was to go pick him up.

The Mandalorian turned toward the direction of the Ebon Mortis. It would have been a long walk back. Now, however, the trip could be made with the jetpack. The jetpack couldn't be used to follow the smuggler's tracks out of fear of losing them and possibly giving away the bounty hunter's presence. Without these things to worry about, A'Den brought the pack to life.

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The blow seemed to come out of nowhere and knocked the Mandalorian out of the air. The bounty hunter's body bounced off of a couple of hardened branches of some massive mushroom that had towered over the floor below, before coming to rest on the forest ground. Sparks shot out from the jetpack from the damage and it was in obvious need of repair before it could be used again.

A'Den Verda groaned in pain. The Mandalorian armor had taken the brunt of the blow, yet the impact of the strike and the crash upon the hard ground had taken its toll. The bounty hunter was going to hurt for days.



The trip back to forest had been quick and effective. A lot of time had been made up and A'Den was looking forward to picking up the chase. It was probably this distraction that had allowed the beast to strike undetected. Of course the large, thick and dense vegetation also added to the creature's concealment.

A'Den rolled over to see what had struck and once the realization had hit, it was too late. The creature was striking again. The beast, about fifteen feet tall with a large single horn on the top of his head and a large rigid back was easily identifiable as a species of rancor native to this planet. It was the last thing that A'Den wanted to tangle with.

The rancor reached down toward the stunned bounty hunter, picked up the Mandalorian and started to slam the body into the ground over and over again, trying to crack open the armor as if it were some large nut. When that didn't work, the creature picked up the Mandalorian again and threw the form through the air.

A'Den bounced off another set of thick mushroom trunks before landing hard again upon the forest floor. The Mandalorian laid there stunned. Ribs had been cracked. If the offensive wasn't taken soon then death would come quickly. Something had to happen. But it was too late. The rancor was already in motion.

The beast took several large strides toward the downed prey and jumped high into the air. Its form sailed. Its body descended upon the the form that was too injured to move. Between its velocity and mass, it would splatter this intruder upon the ground until there was nothing but a smear of what used to be.

A'Den waited for the last second, and despite the fact that ribs might have been broken and it hurt like hell, the bounty hunter rolled out of the way. The creature landed with such a force that it felt like a small quake had hit this planet. Still ignoring the pain, A'Den followed through with the roll, sprang to a crouched position and opened fire with the twin blasters.

The blasts struck with precision and accuracy. The rancor was struck several times dead center. It would have decimated any other creature. The rancor wasn't even slowed. It was, however, more agitated than before.

'Oh great', A'Den thought. 'I've only managed to tick it off.'

Quicker than thought possible, the beast reached down and grabbed the bounty hunter again. A'Den knew that another throw across the forest would bring unconsciousness and that would only lead to death. That concern was replaced by the horrors of the creature opening its mouth to deliver a fatal, crushing, impaling blow.

A'Den reached into one of the many pockets of the military belt and pulled out a small orb. With a touch a few buttons, lights sprang to life, and as the Mandalorian came close to being bitten in two, the grenade was tossed into the creature's mouth.

The explosion rocked the forest. The sound reverberated off of the giant fungi mushrooms and sent many small animals scurrying in all directions. Bits and piece of the rancor's head was scattered in all directions and when the decapitated corpse fell, it took down two trees with it.

A'Den had been dropped from the creature's grasp and fell a considerable distance before landing unceremoniously upon the hard ground. The Mandalorian lay there in pain for a short time before getting up and limping toward the ship. A twisted ankle could now be added to the list of injuries. The jetpack was broken and would have to be fixed but that would wait until the ship was airborne. Both the grenade and the cost of the repair to the jetpack would be added to the fees collected.

"I'm really starting to hate this job," A'Den muttered as the ship's door opened for entry.

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As the Ebon Mortis took off, three humanoid creatures ran into the small clearing that had only recently been occupied by the ship. They were a little shorter than the Mandalorian in height and probably a little lighter in weight. Their grey skin had contrasting red markings that dominated their bodies. Each of them had two sets of arms, one set had a four digit webbing while the other set ended with a set of three fingers. The top of their heads were full of long tendrils. Their red eyes seemed to glow with hatred and anger.

The Jungle Felucians seemed out of breath as if they had run here with all of their strength and as quickly as their speed could carry them. The expressions on their faces seemed to announce their annoyance that they had just missed what they were hoping to catch. As the Ebon Mortis flew out of sight, the lead creature turned to the other two and spoke in a guttural language.

*“The master won’t be pleased that the Mandalorian escaped.”*

Another responded, shaking its head. *“No, it’s not our fault. The farmer assisted the Mandalorian. He should pay, not us.”*

*“Agreed,”* stated the third.

The first one gave this consideration before turning toward the edge of the jungle, the way that the Mandalorian had come from, and started to lead the others to extract the repercussions upon those that would oppose them and their new master.

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The Fury-class Imperial interceptor known as the Wraith cut through the thick clouds of Felucia’s atmosphere. Valas knew that this planet had a thick cloud cover and was prone to heavy rain, he had been here before. He knew the geography without even needing to see it and he already knew how to fly blindly through the cloud cover without any problems.

He had been sent here many times to help “persuade” the Felucians to see the benefits of joining the Empire. He had played the part of the “villain” and had terrorized many towns and villages. The Empire had offered protection against the “madman” that had been murdering individuals and setting farms on fire and towns ablaze. Valas doubted that many of the Felucians believed the story of “protection” but it didn’t matter, they understood the repercussions if they didn’t join.

That had been some time ago, yet he could still hear the screams in the night. The memory only brought a smile across his lips.

As soon as his ship cleared the thick clouds, Valas went to work. T.I.E. fighters had a unique signature between their ion trail and their computer frequency. Add this to the known mass of the ship and the material it was made out of and it was was easy to get a generalized location of any T.I.E. fighter. Of course he also knew that there were several major battles here on Felucia which left a good number of downed T.I.E. fighters. There was no guarantee that he would find the correct ship.

This seemingly problematic situation had corrected itself as soon as Valas found the recently crashed T.I.E. fighter deep in the jungle. The sensors picked up no life signs but that didn’t necessarily mean that smuggler had died, it just meant that he was no longer with the craft. Valas opened his sensors to find anything else unusual.

The burning farm on the outskirts of the jungle was easy enough to pick up on the computer. The infrared sensors of the intense heat set the event apart from any other target in the area.

The sensor reading only brought back memories of the time that he had spent here. He could see other farms, in his mind’s eye, going up in flames as well. He had lit every one of the farms and had watched them burn throughout the night. The screams of horror and terror, of pain and anguish echoed over and over. It was one of his best accomplishments.

The burning farm could just have been a coincidence, but Valas never believed in coincidences. Everything was connected somehow and he wondered if the bounty hunter had destroyed the farm and the family that lived there in repercussion for helping the smuggler. This was a possibility.

The assassin charted a course between the downed T.I.E. fighter and the burning farming. With any luck he would be able to see a pattern. If the downed T.I.E. fighter was from Quintano then he would need a new ship. Keeping this information in mind, all Valas had to do was to find the nearest major city or even...

His sensors picked up another possibility. There was a large quantity of metal a good distance away and after cross referencing the history logs of this planet, Valas could tell that there had been a major battle in that area. This would leave ships, or at least parts of ships.

The possibility of finding a space worthy ship was slim at best, but there was always two other options. The first was that enough parts could be salvaged to take to a major city and sell for a ship. Although this had some merit, the distance between the wreckage and the nearest city was a considerable hike and anything worth selling would be heavy and bulky.

The second option was that Quintano had found a ship that he could repair. Any ship would be better than the downed T.I.E. fighter. It would be able to get him off of this planet and he could hop from one world to the next if he had to.

Valas had to think about what he would do in the smuggler's position. After reading Quintano's record, the smuggler was a decent pilot and a fairly good engineer especially when it came to fixing spaceships. This scenario would correspond with the smuggler's character.

‘Yes, I would chance putting together a downed ship.’

Valas opened his link to the Imperial database again. He followed one link to another before he was able to access the satellite probes in the area. The Empire always had some probe in any given area. These collected data and transmitted them to various outposts where they could be discriminated later. Not many Imperial personnel knew about them and with the focus on the war, there wasn't a need to keep track of smaller ships this far out in the outer rim.

The Imperial satellite probes had picked up two ships; there was an A-24 Sleuth and an X-70b Phantom Class. The Phantom Class was too old to have been part of the recent battle on Felucia and records showed that it had arrived not too long ago. This was probably the bounty hunter's ship.

'That's an interesting choice for a ship,' Valas mused to himself.

Quickly Valas accessed the old database in relation to the Phantom Class style ship. He was able to download the ship's specs, weaponry, shielding, and maneuverability. If the ship had been kept up to date then the ship could rival his own. He would have to keep this in mind if he ever had to cross the bounty hunter.

The next ship wasn't that old and could have been used in the battle. This would make sense if Quintano had found enough parts to make it space worthy. This would mean that neither Quintano nor the bounty hunter were on Felucia anymore.

The next thought that crossed his mind was that if he could pull up these records then so could General Fess. The general may be incompetent but even incompetent individuals would have periodic moments of proficiency. Once the general found out what he had found out, then he would toss his presence in as well and that would complicate matters.

It was time to pay the Besalisk a visit.

## Book: In Pursuit

### Chapter: The Storm

“Damn it,” Quintano yelled as he smashed his hand onto the control panel of the ship. “Not the hyper drive again. Couldn’t you have hit something else? Really? I took you for a better shot... unless...oh, no.”

The realization that the bounty hunter had deliberately hit the hyper drive engine had finally sunk in. The shot had been perfect after all. Now he couldn’t get far and he couldn’t go very fast to get there. No, he would be overrun quickly enough. It had all been a ruse to get him into space and trap him here where he couldn’t hide and he would be left as a sitting target ready to be shot at or picked up at anyone’s discretion.

“Not if I can help it,” Quintano stated. “I’ve still got a few tricks up my sleeve. If you want me, come and get me.”

The smuggler went through the various systems aboard his ship. All of the torpedoes had been fired and the phaser array was misaligned and would never fire again. It would have to be replaced. This meant that weapons were completely offline.

“That’s alright. I’m still a great pilot; let’s see what we’ve got.”

Quintano opened navigations and flipped through the planets in the area. He needed to find one that he could get to and quickly. Anyone with hyper drive could easily outrun him if he tried for a further planet. A closer one would allow him to navigate through its atmosphere, find areas to hide, and possible allow him to get a ship with hyper drive. On top of this, he had to consider fuel.

“Jabiim. Fine. Let’s see how good you really are and how bad you really want me.”

The smuggler punched in the coordinates to Jabiim and pushed his thrusters to their maximum speed.

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A’Den called up the navigational star charts. Based upon the ship’s capabilities, lack of hyper drive, fuel expenditure and the fact that it might have a limited amount of fuel from previous leaks or even previous flights, there was only one planet that the Quintano could get to. That planet was Jabiim.

The bounty hunter punched in the coordinates and went to work on the damaged jetpack. It was going to be a while until arrival and every item had the possibility of being needed. It was best to be overly prepared instead of the converse and have the smuggler escape one again.

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As the sight of the planet Jabiim came into view, Quintano moved his ship toward the top of the planet’s northern pole and dropped slightly into the atmosphere. He knew that the strong electromagnetic field of the planet would hide his ship from sensors and if he stayed here long enough then there was a chance that the bounty hunter would give up, move on, and search somewhere else.

This wasn’t the first time that he had hidden in a planet’s electromagnetic field. He had pulled this stunt off twice before and had fooled the large Corellian Star Destroyers. He was sure that his appearance was only a ghost on the radar and with any luck the bounty hunter would dismiss the ghost as a glitch or technical error and leave.

Only after this had happened would he be able to drop to the surface of the planet and find a spaceport. There he would have



to find a spaceship with hyper drive and borrow it, and what he meant by that was he was going to steal it. He was a smuggler, a rogue, and that was what he did.

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A'Den came out of hyper drive. The smuggler had gotten a huge jump due to the time needed to get back to the Ebon Mortis and the delay of fighting the rancor. The hyper drive had made up that time. With any luck the smuggler's ship would still be around here somewhere.

The bounty hunter slowly skimmed across the top of the atmosphere. If Quintano had come here then he would have had to land at one of the spaceports. However, since he knew that he was being followed, he would try to find another landing spot. These would be the first places to scan.

A'Den moved the Ebon Mortis in an opposite rotation to the planet. This allowed for a quicker scan of each place that had the ability to port a ship. Of course, Quintano could have landed anywhere and could have ditched the ship, but that was unlikely. The planet was known for its torrential downpours, electrical storms and a thick muddy surface that could swallow ships whole. Any foot travel would be dangerous at best and downright suicidal at worst. The smuggler might be cocky, but A'Den doubted that he would be stupid.

Since major ports would be too much in the open and easily spotted, a ground landing was out of the question, and after several passes of the planet had told A'Den that the smuggler wasn't at any of the minor ports, that only left a few choices. The first was that A'Den hadn't arrived yet. This was a possibility, but highly doubtful. Even if A'Den had beat him here, he should have arrived by now. Second option was that he had found another planet, but that was also unlikely as he didn't have the fuel to take him there, even on a set of full fuel reserves.

A'Den smiled. There was still another place to check. It was an old trick, one quite well known and needed a lot of patience. It would work too, but not on this planet. Any other planet would have a strong electromagnetic field. This one, however, had one that became unstable and was very erratic. This was what had caused the electrical storms that ravaged the world. The smuggler might be able to hide, but not for long.

The Mandalorian pushed the Ebon Mortis higher, past the atmosphere and made to leave. A few adjustments brought the ship down toward the southern pole and started to slow as the first target area came into sensor range. Power was shifted to increase the sensors.

Everything was as was expected. There were fluctuations here and there and when they did happen, there wasn't anything new or different. A'Den pushed the craft north and started again.

At first, as the northern electromagnetic pole started coming into sensor range, the readings were the same as the southern pole. There were fluctuations from the electrical storms. Then it happened. As the electromagnetic field shifted again, there was a spot that didn't shift, something that remained constant. A'Den smiled and pushed the throttle of the Ebon Mortis.

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The blip came up on Quintano's radar. It had almost woken him from the short nap that he was trying to take. He had figured that as long as he stayed here, the bounty hunter would give up and go away. He was wrong. The Mandalorian had not only had been tenacious enough to stay and look for him, the bounty hunter had also figured out his hiding spot and was now closing in.

"Fine. You found me. Now, are you willing to follow?"

Quintano sprung into action and pushed the throttle forward. His ship lurched with the power that came through the thrusters

and Quintano went into a power dive. He was an expert pilot and it was time to see if his pursuer was one as well.

The two ships shot through the air, downward, in a death defying race toward the world's surface. The Ebon Mortis closed the gap between them; its speed clearly outmatched the smaller ship. Still the scout ship pushed on, screaming toward the ground below, closing the distance to certain death at a rapid speed.

At the last moment, Quintano pulled up and let his ship skim the top of the muddy surface of this planet. The momentum of his ship and the blast of his thrusters kicked up the mud on both sides, sending a wake a couple of meters high.

A'Den followed suite but pulled up sooner. The larger ship simply didn't have the maneuverability to take the hard pull up. This had put the Ebon Mortis on top and behind the smuggler's craft which in turned ended up being plastered in mud.

Yet A'Den did not relent. The smaller ship banked hard and gained distance, but the larger ship easily made it up on the straightaway. The smaller ship turned again and again in a desperate attempt to put more distance between them. The small ship was proving to be more maneuverable than the larger one, but the Ebon Mortis was more streamlined and aerodynamic. With this came overall speed and although the small ship was able to bank harder and make quicker turns, the Ebon Mortis made up the distance lost within no time.

Quintano checked his fuel. He had lost so much waiting for the bounty hunter to give up and now he was quickly losing more with each erratic turn. He had to shake the bounty hunter and soon or his ship would simply fall out of the sky and he would be caught. Yet, no matter what he did, he simply couldn't shake the Mandalorian for any length of time. He needed to find something to help him out. The canyon up ahead offered the solution.

The smuggler continued to weave back and forth continuing to look as if he was trying to lose his tail, instead he was trying to

entice the ship to follow him as he flew closer and closer to the towering columns of rock up ahead. The opening was small and the canyon beyond seemed to twist and turn. It would be a perfect solution.

Quintano focused as he came upon the rock cliffs. He kept his hand steady on the throttle and cleared the opening by only a little bit on each side of his ship. With careful precision, he kept the ship on its exact course. He turned hard once to avoid a bend and turned back again, swiping off an antenna. His ship continued to navigate through the canyon walls with the experience of the expert pilot.

As the Ebon Mortis flew toward the cliff walls, A'Den knew that there wasn't enough time to pull up nor did the ship have the capabilities to do so at this speed. There was not time. Instead, A'Den shoved the throttle to one side. The Ebon Mortis banked hard on its starboard and came into the canyon sideways.

A'Den continued to pilot the craft through the narrow passage. The ship just wasn't designed to fly sideways and didn't have the same response time as the ship ahead, yet the bounty hunter didn't relent. A'Den had only slowed down enough to continue piloting without losing the prey.

Quintano shook his head. The Mandalorian was either desperate for the bounty or was crazy, or both. He had hoped that the bounty hunter wouldn't have bothered to enter the ravine or had followed on top so he could reverse and backtrack. He had to think of something else. As the ravine started to come to a close by the towering wall at its end, Quintano pulled back hard on the throttle. His ship shot vertical into the air.

The end of the revenue came up too fast. A'Den pulled sideways to make the Ebon Mortis bank in a way that it wasn't designed to do. The craft spun up on its side and twisted. The maneuver scraped the bottom side of the ship against the hard, stony wall and damaged some of the hull. The entire incident jarred and rocked the ship to such a degree that A'Den was sure

that the ship's hull had been breached. This would have to be fixed and added to the expenses.

The bigger ship had to slow in the process and A'Den had almost lost the smaller craft and probably would have too, if the lightning storm hadn't lit up the sky, since the torrential rains would have kept the smuggler hidden. From the initial looks of things, Quintano was trying to leave the planet. However, that wasn't possible if his fuel was depleted as far as was expected. That meant he was trying to hide in the clouds. A'Den pushed the ship faster and started to make the vertical accession to catch up.

"Damn it," Quintano stated as he caught the blip on his radar. "Why must you be so persistent? Most individuals would have given up by now. What makes me worth all of this? Don't worry, if you haven't given up yet, I still have a couple of things left."

Quintano continued to push his ship into the thick lightning storm clouds. He watched as the bounty hunter continued to close. Once the ship was close enough, he banked hard and leveled out. As suspected, the fast and less maneuverable ship over passed him. He knew that this wasn't going to last long and sensors started telling him that the other ship was already making adjustments to follow him, although at a higher altitude.

Quintano changed his attention to another sensor and adjusted it. He could see the electrically charged ions start to build up all around him and it was no wonder. Their two ships, made of very conductive metal, were flying through the already agitated clouds. He watched as the readings started to climb, higher and higher. He could almost smell the ozone build within his ship, he could almost feel the static electricity start to take place as the hairs on his arms started to stand.

Quintano reversed his thrusters hard. His ship came to an almost standstill as the larger ship passed right over him at the very moment that the large lightning bolt struck. The flash lit up the sky and blinded the smuggler. The thunderous crack filled his ears and rattled the cockpit.

The Ebon Mortis's controls went off the charts. Electrical discharges flew across the control panel. Systems started to go offline. Navigations went down and the controls were sluggish. Emergency warning lights started to flash as the Ebon Mortis started to drop out of the sky.

A'Den manipulated the various buttons on the control dash. Nothing was responding. Several quick pulls on the throttle resulting in nothing. The ship was going down fast. The world spun as A'Den fought for control. It was no use. The ship was out of control in a deadly spin, hurling toward the planet's surface at a deadly speed. A'Den simply didn't have enough force to pull back the throttle.

The Mandalorian planted both boots upon the control panel, held on for dear life and fired up the recently fixed jetpack. A'Den's arms strained from the pressure. The ship groaned and the craft shook.

The Ebon Mortis straightened out moments before crashing into the surface. Its aerodynamic design carried its momentum before its body slammed into the mud, sending walls of the thick sludge in all directions. It slid out of control before coming to an abrupt stop.

A'Den slammed a fist into the control panel out of frustration. It would take hours to fix enough of the systems to get up and running again and by that time the smuggler would have another head start. The spare parts in the back would have to do and some would have to be taken from unimportant stations, so it wasn't an impossible task, it was just a frustrating delay.

Quintano looked at his fuel gauge one more time. There was barely enough to find a spaceport and land. Beyond that, he would have to refuel, fix the hyper drive, or find another ship. Either way he was going to have to...

The sky lit up again as another electrical blast struck through the air. His ship was hit and his gauges went wild. His craft started to lose control.

## Chapter: Jabiiim

Quintano started to fight for control of his ship as he started to spin out of control. Everything was cutting in and out. Nothing was responsive.

Suddenly the controls started to move by themselves. Power was being rerouted, electrical systems were being fixed. The throttle started to move on its own.

“What the...?” Quintano asked as he removed his hands from the throttle.

“Beep, bleep, tweet, squaak, sputter, zzzxx.”

Quintano couldn’t believe what he was hearing. If his memory had served him properly then most of those beeps and blurbs were coming from an astromech droid, but the only droid nearby was the one in the back that was...

The realization of what had happened had struck the smuggler just as the craft started to level out. The lightning bolt must have restarted the systems of the R2-0. The ship systems were coming back online. Flying was rough but the ship was making a controlled descent toward the small town up ahead.

“Beep, beep, zzck, buzz, tweet, woou,”

“You know, I’m perfectly capable of piloting this craft by myself thank you.”

“Woo, tweet, beep, peep.”

“Oh no, that doesn’t count. I had nothing to do with that and I was doing quite well before the lightning strike.”



“Beep, beep, tweet, zzxt, blup.”

“No, I’m not a crazy pilot, I was getting away from the Mandalorian. Just give me the controls.”

“Beep, beep, tweetx.”

“You know, you have quite the attitude for a droid,” Quintano said as he took control of the ship. “Now shut up and let me drive.”

“Woo.”

The droid made no other sounds as Quintano came in for a landing. There were several landing pads to choose from and the smuggler could guess why. The torrential rains and the continual thunderous storms that swept through here on a daily basis would keep anyone away.

Once Quintano got out of the cockpit, he went around the ship and started to inspect the damage. It was worse than he thought. There were many systems fried and this added to his need to get fuel and repair the hyper drive. On top of this, the electrical systems that were already compromised were getting soaked

“Bleep, burp, beep, bzzz.” The sputter of the R2-0 language continued to come from the droid as it activated its small thrusters and lifted itself out of the navigation department that was stationed in back of the cockpit.

“Yes, I can see that, and that and that. I’m not blind, I’m aware of the damage.”

“Beep, beep, bleep.”

“Yes, I’m also aware that I should get out of the rain, and as a matter of fact, that’s what I’m doing right now. And...there is no ‘we’ in that statement. There isn’t a ‘we’ at all. I don’t need an

astromech, I don't want an astromech, now leave me alone, I need to think."

Quintano had made his way to a covered station between the landing areas. Fortunately there weren't any security around to charge him for a docking fee. Unfortunately there weren't any mechanics looking for a job. He would have to find the nearest mechanic shop, if there was one, or even find the nearest tavern, which were probably one and the same.

The droid followed the smuggler under the eaves of the walkway and gave a series of sputters and splats as it started to shoot out streams of water from its system. Quintano only shook his head as he started to walk away. It really didn't matter what the droid did, as long as it did it on its own and away from him. He had enough problems to deal with, like getting off of this orb of mud. He was soaked to the bone, hungry, and needed a ship. The last thing he needed was a droid.

"Zxxt, burp, bleep, beep."

"I don't care if I've saved your life, I told you, I'm not looking for an astrodroid."

"Bleep bleep, twert, twiwl."

"Because they keep telling me what to do, where to go, and how to get there. I'm a competent pilot all by myself thank you and I think I've already mentioned that."

"Bleep bleep."

"No, no I don't need your help, now go away."

"Woooooo."

The final comment from the droid seemed to be filled with disappointment, as if the droid had felt the emotion of rejection. Quintano stopped mid-stride. He really didn't have time for this,

he didn't want to have to keep looking over his back to make sure that the droid was doing alright, and he didn't want a companion. He worked best alone. Still, he couldn't help but feel for the little R2-0 unit. It had probably lost its pilot during the war and had been left to rust and rot away on a remote planet.

"Bleep, bleep, beep, beep, whirl, zsstzx..."

"A ship? Really? Where?"

Quintano had asked the series of questions as he turned around toward the droid. What he saw had surprised him. The little astromech had taken the initiative to help locate a ship. It had extended a mechanical armature from its core and had accessed a control panel from one of the nearby computer terminals. The access portal twisted several times as the astromech continued to give a series of beeps and tweets.

"Zzzst, beep, burp."

"What do you mean it's a Miy'til Starfighter? Those need an astromech droid to navigate. Couldn't find something else? And...are you expecting me to just steal it?"

"Bleep bleep, zzepp, blurp."

"Fine, fine. But the first chance I get, I'm dropping you off. The last thing I need is a droid following me around. And I'm only going as far as Nar Shaddaa so if you want to go any further, you'll have to get another ride. I'm not shuttling you off all over the galaxy, do you hear me?"

"Bleep, bleep."

"Good. Now, where can we find this ship?"

The ship was on a different landing pad on the opposite side of town. The two of them had to transverse between one building and the next, often getting soaked by the continual torrential rain

that hadn't stopped since they had arrived. By the time Quintano arrived at the landing pad that had the starfighter, he was drenched from the rain and splattered by the mud.

Overall the ship seemed to be in good condition and Quintano was looking forward to actually achieving hyperspace. He simply had to get to Nar Shaddaa. All he had to do now was...

“Hey...that’s my ship.”

## Chapter: Kane

The thick, agitated voice behind Quintano made him turn around. The man that had vocalized it was massive. The larger man was easily a head taller than him and probably an extra one hundred pounds. The smuggler knew that he was now in the wrong place at the wrong time. A few minutes earlier and he would have seen the owner of the ship and wouldn't have bothered to approach it. A few minutes later and the bigger man would probably have found a tavern to get drunk. As it was, he was caught trying to climb into the cockpit. He had to think of something fast.

“Look, I’m sorry, I thought it was mine. Had a few too many. Don’t remember where I’ve parked is all. It’s all a big misunderstanding. I’ll be on my way and...”

The larger man reached for his blaster and had it pulled before Quintano could reach for his.

“I don’t like anyone touchin’ my stuff.”

“Ok, ok, I’m on my way, I’ll just...”

“Do you know who I am? I’m Koran Kane, the best runner the Hutts have and no one touches my ship, not the Imperials, not the rebels, and not even if you’re trying to claim the bounty on my head.”

“I’m not either of those, I’m just...”

“You’re dead!”

As Koran Kane brought his blaster up and readied himself to fire, the R2-0 droid opened a slot from its body and dropped an armature upon the wet, metal launch pad. Electricity flowed from

its body and shot across the platform. As the current struck the larger man, Kane went into a series of mild convulsions before his body collapsed.

Quintano was glad that he had been safe, a couple of steps up the ladder leading to the cockpit, and the astromech had used its jets just long enough to get up off of the platform. Yet the R2-0 unit could have at least said something before doing an attack like this. Still, he had to admit that it was effective.

The smuggler quickly got down and despite the tweets of warnings that came from the astromech, Quintano still had to make sure that Kane was still alive. He might be a smuggler, and the bigger man's death would have been out of self defense, but it still wouldn't have sat right if Kane had died. His fear was alleviated when he found the man's heartbeat.

"He's still alive, don't worry, you didn't kill him."

"Weet, woot, beep, tweet, burp."

"I don't care if it was your intention to just stun him, I'm letting you know...oh forget it."

Quintano was about to leave and take the ship, but stopped. When he was captured, the Imperials had taken his firearm and although he had a blaster from one of the stormtroopers, he still felt naked without something more powerful. A second weapon would rectify the situation. Kane had a T-6 Thunder heavy blaster which was far superior to the DH-17 blaster that he used to have. Within moments, Quintano had stripped Kane of his holster and weapon before climbing into the cockpit.

The R2-0 unit had already used its thrusters to launch itself into the air and drop into its station by the time Quintano had gotten himself ready. He had no idea how long Kane would be out, but he was sure that the Hutt runner would not be happy and he didn't want to stick around and wait for him to wake up. With

this in mind, he tried to get the thrusters online for an immediate take off.

“Doesn’t anything work in this galaxy?” Quintano had shouted as he slammed his fist into the control panel. The ship hadn’t even turned on, nothing was working.

“Beep, peep, woow.”

“Yes, I know I’m locked out. What good is a ship if its...”

“Tweet, whoot, blurp, Zxxt, woop, woop, woop.”

The bleeps and beeps from the R2-0 unit corresponded with the lights and controls of the craft coming to life. The astromech droid had used its appendage to access the ship’s computer and drop the security lock that Kane had put on it. Without saying another word, Quintano brought the ship up and took off into space.

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Fixing the blown fuses aboard the Ebon Mortis was an easy task, but it had been time consuming. It would have been so easy for the smuggler, Quintano, to fix his ship, refuel, and leave in the time allotted. On the other hand, Quintano could just be laying low until the search was given up before leaving. It was time to check the nearby spaceports to see if there had been anything to point to some clue to the smuggler’s whereabouts.

A’Den brought the communications and opened it to all bands in the area. If something was out there, it should be brought up. While the various transmissions were coming in, A’Den also tapped into the news feeds across the area. Someone knew something; it was just a matter of time before...

“...report of stolen starship on hanger bay 52...report of assault...see Koran Kane...spaceport...”

It was all A'Den Verda needed. First off, the name Koran Kane had rung a bell somewhere in a past memory and a quick look in the accessible data base from the nearby towns explained why. Kane was a runner for the Hutts and was well known for violence. No one had pressed charges for his behavior since this would upset the Hutts and no one wanted to do that.

Second, A'Den now knew that the smuggler had switched ships and where the swap had taken place. It was only a matter of leg work to get the ship's information. The final destination might be Nar Shaddaa but any other information was worth picking up before continuing the pursuit. With a couple of settings, the bounty hunter put the Ebon Mortis into flight to hanger 52.

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"If you think that you are taking me in, you are sadly mistaken. I've outsmarted, outgunned, and overpowered many greater than you. Do you know who I am?"

Koran Kane had immediately gone on the defense as soon as A'Den had shown up. It had been to no surprise, especially with the large bounty on his head. The bounty hunter had even thought about trying to take him in as well so that there would be two bounties collected instead of just one. That thought was quickly dismissed when the realization of how complicated and difficult it would be to keep the two separated since the mission with Quintano was supposed to be kept quiet. However, there was nothing keeping A'Den from coming back and collecting Koran after the fact.

"I really don't care who you are," A'Den lied, although there was some truth in that, the bounty hunter really didn't care at this time, another time maybe, but not this time.

"My name is Koran Kane and I'm the best runner for the Hutts, everyone hear me? The best runner for the Hutts."



Everyone had heard him. A small group had gathered to watch Koran throw his tantrum once he woke. When the local authorities had come, they weren't sure if they wanted to help him or not, so they were more at the group's edge simply trying to make sure that Koran didn't hurt anyone. Now that he had a small group to listen to him, he had no qualms about letting everyone know about his situation.

"I just want to know about the man that took your ship," A'Den continued as if not being interrupted by the man's outburst.

"No one touches my stuff! No one steals from me! He took my gun and my ship! No one takes my ship! My ship wasn't even fueled up yet. Who in their right mind takes a ship without fuel?"

A'Den was now glad for the timed arrival; Koran was divulging all the information needed. The smuggler was now armed and definitely had a new spaceship. The ship had limited fuel, but the next question was, how much was a limited amount and this was based on the ship's make and model.

"What kind of ship?"

"Guess you're not from around here. Everyone knows that my ship is a Miy'til Starfighter."

That ship needed an astromech. From the looks of things, Koran's own droid wasn't too far off to the runner's left hand side. If this was the case, then Quintano had managed to pick up another droid. This ship would also be heavily armed with two laser cannons and about a half dozen missiles. The scout ship that Quintano had left behind didn't have anywhere near this kind of firepower and what it did have had probably been used up during the battle that it had been in. The scout ship was also in much need of repair and it was doubtful that the weapons' system would work anyway. The converse was true with the Miy'til Starfighter. Koran had more than likely kept the weapons fully operational and with a full payload of missiles. A'Den knew that things could get very rough from here on out.

“Why are you still standing around for?” Koran continued. “Let’s find my ship; I’ve got a bone to pick with that...”

A’Den pulled a few credits and extended them toward the Hutt runner. This would be another added expense to the fees. “I don’t care about your ship; I’m searching for my bounty. Now, take this and do yourself some good, forget that I was ever here.”

Koran Kane closed the distance between the two of them and when he had; he swiped his hand through the air and sent the credits flying toward the soaking wet platform.

“I’m not taking your money. You can’t buy me and I don’t take orders from you. I’ll tell the whole galaxy about this pursuit if I want to. I’ll tell everyone how I went and got my ship back and tore the head off of that thief.”

“It’ll be very difficult to do that when you don’t even have a ship,” A’Den said calmly knowing very well where this conversation was going.

“I’m coming with you.”

“I’m going alone,” A’Den said firmly while giving a slight head shake.

Koran gritted his teeth in a final resolve. His voice was full of tension and aggression. “I’m either going with you or I’m taking your ship.”

Lightning flashed overhead, lighting up the whole sky. The thunder echoed as an ominous sign of what was about to happen. The rain, that had temporarily stopped, started up again and the deluge poured upon the two.

Again A’Den gave a slight head shake. “I’m not sure you heard me correctly, I said...”

Quicker than most had expected, Koran Kane had flipped out a dagger from a sheath behind his back. Its twelve inch blade was jagged on both edges to maximize damage from both an inward thrust and when he pulled it out of his dying victim. A wicked grin came over his face. Another would fall to the blade called “Carnage”.

Where most of the crowd had gasped at the violent action and at the size and design of the dagger, A'Den hadn't even wasted a moment. Within a heartbeat the Mandalorian had done a quick hop backwards while drawing both hand blasters simultaneously. The weapons would have had a direct shot upon Koran's center mass at nearly point blank if the bounty hunter so desired. The two laser sights upon Koran's chest only confirmed the runner's predicament.

“Looks like someone brought a knife to a gunfight,” A'Den said with a warning, the only one that Koran would get.

A'Den eye's shift through the helmet and looked toward the authorities. From the looks of things, they were staying out of the fight and it was no wonder why. None of them looked like they were capable of doing anything about the situation anyway.

Jaspar Vance, the senior officer to arrive, motioned to his troops to stand down. If the Mandalorian killed Koran then they would have one less problem on their hands. However, if the converse was true and the Mandalorian was killed, then they might be able to take Koran in on charges of murder. The charge probably wouldn't stick and the Hutts would probably pay for their runner's bail and release. However it would be upsetting to the Hutts and they would take it out on Koran for finally being too careless.

Koran just grinned. If the Mandalorian wasn't going to pull the trigger now, then the bounty hunter never would. It was time to settle this and prove to everyone around that he wasn't to be trifled with, ever.

“Oh, you’re so tough behind a blaster or two. Care to find out if you really have what it takes?”

A’Den sighed. The Mandalorian would like nothing better to do than to fill this individual with a few unnecessary and unhealthy holes. However, at this point in the fight it could be considered murder, and where that wasn’t a problem with A’Den’s conscious, it would be a delay with the local authorities that wasn’t worth having. On top of this there was an honor that needed to be upheld. If Koran wanted a knife fight then so be it, it would tie up one more loose end.

The Mandalorian tossed the two blasters to one side and then tossed the rifle to add to the pile. Finally, a dagger was pulled from a side sheath. Like Koran’s, this one had a blade about a foot long. Unlike Koran’s, the dagger wasn’t jagged; it was slick and sharp on both edges. Down the middle ran an empty fuller, creating an open space in the middle of the blade making it look like two blades.

Koran smiled and launched into an attack. He drew a quick jab forward to try to draw the Mandalorian out. After a couple of attempts, he went into an all out frontal assault.

A’Den waited for the man to make his mistake and when it happened, it was immediately taken advantage of. A’Den spun out of the way, reversed the grip on the dagger, and struck the dagger’s pommel upon the back of Koran head. The blow sent the man spiraling down into the wet landing bay.

Koran sprang back up and made another charge. As he did, A’Den stepped forward and brought both arms forward, and locked Koran’s arm in place. A quick movement of the Mandalorian’s and A’Den’s fist hit Koran in the face twice before the hold was released.

The smuggler staggered back but then came on again. This time his arms went wide to try to keep the Mandalorian from blocking

them both. At the last minute he planted his right foot and pivoted bringing his blade around quickly.

A'Den had taken a sudden step back and turned on the jetpack, giving it just a sudden burst. The pack sent the Mandalorian up, over, and around the attack and by the time the smuggler came out of his, A'Den was nowhere to be seen. The bounty hunter's strike upon Koran's skull, again with the pummel of the dagger, sent Koran sprawling.

"No fair flying around," Koran stated as he pulled his soaking form up off the ground. "Hold still so I can cut you down."

Koran came forward again, this time slower. His fast, overpowering attacks hadn't worked against the Mandalorian. It was time to change tactics. He made a few more quick jabs to draw out the bounty hunter.

A'Den knew that this fight was drawing on far too long. It was time to put Koran into the proper position to finish it. Quickly, the bounty hunter moved forward and turned the dagger sideways. Koran's blade went through the cutout fuller of A'Den's dagger. A sudden twist of the wrist brought the two locked daggers into the wrong angle.

Koran's wrist burst into pain and his dagger flew from his grasp. Before he knew what had happened, the Mandalorian's fist hit him squarely in the face. The blow was so hard that he staggered back and was stunned for just a moment, and that moment was all that was needed.

A'Den took two running steps as the jetpack came to life. The momentum threw the bounty hunter forward, and as A'Den did a leaping kick, the blow was augmented by the power of the jets. Koran went flying backwards and landed right near the pile of...

Koran rolled with the flying hit. It had hurt a great deal, but the landing had been fortuitous. As he came up, he grabbed one of

the bounty hunter's blasters. His aim leveled toward the center mass of the Mandalorian as he stood.

"You may have qualms against shooting an individual with just a dagger, but I don't. It looks like you are the one that brought a knife to a gunfight..."

Without missing a beat, the Mandalorian turned, spun and let the dagger fly. A'Den's aim was perfect and the dagger flew true. It struck Kane in the center of his throat, stopping him mid-sentence. The runner dropped the blaster, gasped a couple of times while trying to reach for the dagger and finally fell over dead upon the soaked landing bay.

A'Den hadn't waited for a response from those that had gathered. Everyone witnessed the fact that Koran had pulled a blaster, there would be no charges. Of course no one knew that the safeties were locked and that Koran Kane would not have been able to fire any of them. It didn't take long to gather the firearms and the dagger. Now that they had been used, there was a valid reason for hazard pay to be added to fee that was to be collected.

The Mandalorian turned to the crowd. "Did anyone else see a smuggler come through here?"

Silence came over the crowd. A'Den was sure that no one had really seen Quintano Roo, except for Koran and he was now dead. There was only one more question to maintain crowd control.

"Did anyone else see me come through here?"

Again the crowd remained silent.

"Good, I think we have come to an agreement."

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“What’s your designation?” Quintano asked the droid in the copilot slot behind him. His voice carried over the ship’s com system, directly to the astromech that had plugged itself into the navigations.

“Bleep, beep, woow.”

“Yes, I know that you are an R2-0 unit, but don’t you have some kind of name? If we’re going to be working together, even for a short bit, I’ll need to call you something. What name should I use?”

“Tweet, beep, beep, blurp.”

“Well then let me give you one, How about Aro?”

“Zsxxt!”

“Well, it’s too late. Aro it is. Now plot a course to Nar Shaddaa, Aro, we’ve got...”

“Bleer, beep, weep, trxt, zurp.”

“What? What do you mean ‘We’re almost out of fuel?’ You picked a ship that was out of fuel and hadn’t refueled yet?”

“Woo, twirp, boop, boop.”

“Oh, no, don’t give me that, you deliberately found a ship that needed an astromech so you could catch a ride. You manipulating piece of junk! You rusted bucket of bolts! I should have left you back in that rusty old junk pile and let your inners waste away. I should eject you into space right now and let your tin can body float around on its own. If I didn’t need an astromech for the navigations of *this* ship, I would do just that in a heartbeat. Don’t you see? This is exactly why I don’t have astromechs. Oh no, first opportunity I get, I’m dropping you off and we are parting ways. Do you understand?”

“Wooo.”

The last comment from the R2-0 unit seemed to one of disappointment, regret, or even sadness and Quintano couldn't help but feel that he had hurt the droid's feelings.

“Alright, look, I can understand that you want to get to a more civilized planet, or even back to the rebellion and you're stuck with someone that doesn't even want you around. However, just don't manipulate me again, ok?”

“Woot, we, woot.”

“Fine, now let's figure out how far we can get ... Hmmm, here we go, set coordinates to the Spice Mines of Kessel, I know an old friend there. He'll get us set up with the fuel we need to make it to Nar Shaddaa. You can catch a shuttle or hook up with anyone you want from there, but that's as far as I'm going.”

“Beep, boop, weep, trzzt, frpt.”

“Yes, we can trust him,” Quintano stated, although his words were more meant to comfort both him and the droid since he wasn't so sure about that.

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As soon as A'Den broke orbit from Jabiiim, the information and specs of the Miy'til Starfighter was placed into the computer and the navigation system was accessed. Based upon the fuel supply of the starfighter minus the records from the landing bay stating how much fuel was going to be purchased, left how much fuel the ship had left to run on. This gave a maximum radius where the ship could have flown. Although there was a chance that Quintano could have doubled back, there was no reason for him to believe that he was still being followed. Following the suspected route to Nar Shaddaa, this only left a couple of possibilities.



A'Den then cross referenced Quintano Roo's file. If memory served correctly then Quintano had a contact on Kessel. This fit with the flight plan and was still within flying distance. A'Den punched in the coordinates to Kessel.

## Chapter: Kessel

“Spice mine K-13, Captain Quintano Roo requesting a landing.”

Quintano hadn't gone by “captain” in such a long time and he would rather not ever go by it again, for as long as he lived. It reminded him of his time in the rebellion and that was something he would rather forget. However, the title still held weight in some places and this was one of them.

The spice mines of Kessel were controlled by a criminal cartel that often worked with the Hutts. Many criminals, violent or even political, were sent here, especially if they were a threat to the Empire and the cartel would pay handsomely for them. These individuals would be sent to work as slave labor and would be driven until they were worked to death. The labor was harsh and conditions were worse. Life expectancy was low once individual was put to work here.

The rebellion had always wanted to shut down the process, but they were still fighting a war with the Empire who were supplying Kessel with the slave trade and buying up the precious spices. This meant that a captain from the rebellion wouldn't be welcomed, even if he was no longer part of the insurrection, his past association would still be unwelcomed. However, Quintano knew one of the managers to spice mine K-13 and if he was still there, and if they were still on speaking terms, then his presence wouldn't just be tolerated, it would be welcomed.

“Well, well, well, I see you've gotten yourself a promotion,” the voice came over the static of the comm. system.

“Victor ol’ pal, good to hear you’ve still alive and kicking. The promotion came some time ago, but I’m not running with the rebellion anymore.”

“What brings you back to these parts?”

“I was just in the neighborhood...”

“You’re never ‘just in the neighborhood’. Let me guess, you have some ‘Imperial’ entanglements. So, what is it this time?”

“Well...things. Let’s talk it over with some rotgut.”

“I’ll tell you what, if you can still manage to land whatever bucket of bolts that you flying on platform 8, I’ll see what I can do.”

Quintano smiled and went through the motions, with his A2-0 unit, to navigate toward platform 8. The preliminary communications went well enough and he hadn’t been shot down yet, these were always a good sign. However, how Victor would react upon arrival would have to remain to be seen.

Victor Starr wasn’t the real Besalisk’s name; it was just a name that he thought had suited him. His actual name was too difficult for most individuals to pronounce and he was too tired of correcting the mispronunciation. Besides, his name actually translated into something that everyone else had found hilarious and it was time for a change anyway.

As Quintano’s ship came into the planet’s atmosphere, the world’s environment came into view. Since the approach had come in from the northern hemisphere, the perspective was one of desert, rocky flatlands, devoid of vegetation. Periodically there were pillars of stone buttresses that jaunted up from the ground, but these were far and few between. What dominated the scene more were the large pits that had been dug.

The pits were created to dig down into the areas that were needed to get to the spices that this world had to offer. The spice mining was achieved by the use of these pits along with mine shafts. The raw material would then be transported to massive refineries that would process the haul and purify it into something that could be sold on the market.

Alongside the massive pits were the large refineries. Pillars of smoke rose from the large metal structures which only made them look like large beasts breathing their fumes into the air. These would be filled with massive machinery that would create worse working conditions than down in the mines. It wasn't uncommon that at least one "accident" would happen where someone would be crushed, ripped, shredded, or "smashed into who-knows-what".

Quintano circled around the processing and refinery plant until he found the landing bay that he was looking for. There on the far side of the landing bay, stood the Besalisk waiting for his arrival. As he made the necessary landing procedure and descended, he sent a message back to his astrodroid.

"Stay with the ship Aro."

"Wheet, wooto, wooto."

"Yes, I know, but Kessel isn't very droid friendly. If you want to live for any length of time on this planet, may I suggest staying with the ship, it's safer. Come to think about it, we may have to make a quick getaway and make do with what little fuel we have left."

As soon as the ship landed, Quintano made his way out. It was only then did the Besalisk start making his way toward the smuggler and from the looks of things, he wasn't all too happy. Then again, Quintano couldn't remember when Victor was ever happy.

"Victor, Victor how are you ol buddy?"

Victor wasn't having any of the smuggler's warm welcoming. The seven and a half foot tall Besalisk towered over Quintano with ease. His large mouth that took up most of his face was turned into a frown and only added to the imposing look that he gave. His body was mostly bulk with his thick arms and legs. His brown skin seemed to match the color of the dirt of the planet and with his bony head crest he could have been mistaken as one of the rock columns on this desert planet.

Quintano couldn't help but feel the heat. It was a dry heat that felt good after the two rainy planets that he had been on. However, he knew that long exposure to this heat would be fatal. Even if the prisoners in the mines were able to escape, there was nothing out here except certain death.

"You have some nerve coming here," Victor stated as he crossed his two lower arms. His upper right hand was holding a cigar that the Besalisk continued to put to his wide mouth and smoke. His upper left arm had been lost and was ended above the elbow with a metal cap.

"It good to see you too, Vic."

"Ok, so what really brings you here?"

"Like I said, I was just in the neighborhood and thought I would drop by and talk about old times."

Victor squinted his one good eye. His left eye had a patch over it since he had lost it some time ago.

"Don't you give me that. You wouldn't be dropping by here unless you needed credits or you're in trouble, so what is it."

"Victor, you wound me, I thought you knew me better."

The Besalisk didn't look impressed.

“Ok, ok, I need fuel.” Quintano was going to add that a bounty hunter might be after him, but decided against it. Victor was the kind of individual that would turn in his own mother for a bounty, and the smuggler was sure that he already had.

“Of course you do.”

“I’m good for it.”

“You were good for it last time and the time before that, and I’m still waiting.”

“I’ve got this great job...”

“Let me guess, this one will pan out. You told me that last time, and the time before and yet I’m still waiting.”

Quintano had to think of something fast. By the looks of things, he had burned his bridges with Victor some time ago and the Besalisk was trying to decide rather or not to send him down into the mines to pay off his debt. The idea of actually do an honest job wasn’t very appealing, the alternative, however, was less so.

“Is there a job I can do for fuel?”

Vincent rubbed his chin with his upper right arm as he let his cigar hand from his lips. Things must have been pretty bad if the smuggler actually wanted to do an honest job. Actually, come to think about it, there was a job that Quintano could do, but was he worth trusting this time? The problem was, he really didn’t have much of a choice.

“Perhaps,” Vincent stated dryly.

“You know that I’m the best pilot there is.”

“Not anymore,” the Besalisk said shaking his head. “Rumor has it there’s a better pilot, he’s done a pretty good Kessel Run.”

“I know who you’re talking about and rumor has it that he’s been captured by the Hutts. That makes me the best.”

“The craziest, perhaps, but not necessarily the best. However, you’re the only one I have.”

“Then we have a deal?”

“That depends; do you want fuel for *that* ship?” Vincent had asked pointing his two free hands toward the Miy’til Starfighter. “Isn’t that Koran Kane’s ship?”

“Oh, that piece of junk? I just picked it up...”

“Uh, hum. Well, that’s funny; it just so happens that Koran is dead.”

“What? Last I saw him, he was still alive, stunned perhaps, but still alive. We...”

“So it is his ship then. Interesting thing, he was on his way here to do a job and now he’s dead. Imagine my surprise that you wind up here in his ship. It seems to me that I have two options here. I can either have you arrested and tossed into the mines for sabotaging the Hutts’ spice run, or I can send you out on the shipment run with all of the consequences that come along with it if you don’t deliver or don’t deliver right away.”

Sweat started to break out upon the smuggler’s forehead and he knew that it had nothing to do with the heat. He swore that he would never work for the Hutts again. The last time that he worked for them ended up being a fiasco and the clan was never too keen on forgiveness. And even if his last escapade could be overlooked, there was still the fact that if this shipment wasn’t delivered on time or even at all, then there would be no where in the galaxy that he could hide. He already had one bounty hunter on his head, he didn’t need another. There really was only one course of action.

“I’ll take the job.”

“Good, good, I just knew that you would come around and see things my way.” The Besalisk had advanced toward Quintano as he spoke. By the time he got to the smuggler, he wrapped his two right arms around Quintano’s side and started to lead him toward the entrance door to the factory. “Now, why don’t we finish talking while I get you refueled and loaded up with the spice? The Hutts want it delivered yesterday.”

Quintano couldn’t help but notice the security guards and more than a few droids that were guarding the area. This place was guarded like a vault and the security systems that were in place only amplified the feeling. The walls were thick, there were security cameras everywhere and there were security codes that needed to be put in to get from one hall to another.

They walked past several control rooms where different species were monitoring the spice productions, the refineries, and even parts of the mines. Some were running the massive machinery, some were controlling the environmental controls that kept this part of the operation cool, some were operating communications, others had radar, and a few were controlling the heavy weapons that were strategically stationed around the factory and processing plant.

Vincent’s room was a total disaster. It seemed that the Besalisk hadn’t cleaned in weeks if at all. There were dirty dishes scattered about, dirty clothes tossed everywhere, the furniture seemed to be arranged haphazardly and didn’t match, and a thick layer of dust lay everywhere. There was a large monitor that took up the majority of one wall and Quintano was sure that Vincent could use it for anything between catching some entertainment to communications to watching any part of the mines or plants that were under his control.

Vincent found his stash of rotgut and was able to dig out a couple of glasses. With a wipe of his dirty and grimy shirt upon the two, the Besalisk poured the two of them a drink. Quintano



knew that the beverage would be nasty, he also knew better and he accepted it without complaint. Hopefully food would follow to help wash away the poor taste.

## Chapter: Kessel Spice Mines

It was an hour later before the two of them emerged from Vincent's den and back out onto the landing bay. The sun was still high as it would be for quite some time. The heat was still overbearing and no other shade was to be found. Despite the dramatic change from the last couple of planets, it was going to be a wonderful experience to get off of this rock.

"So, how much are you paying me?" Quintano asked as they stated walked back toward his newly acquired ship.

"Well, it's the usual fee, minus the inconvenience due to having Koran killed and delaying the whole shipment in the first place, I would say that the payment in full would be for me to give you just enough fuel to make it to Nar Kreeta and not haul you down into the mines. If you don't like the payment arrangements, you can always bring it up with the Hutts once you deliver the spice."

Quintano smiled. "You always did have a dark sense of humor and a way with words." Although he knew right off that Vincent was joking at all.

"I'll tell you what," the Besalisk stated. "I'll give you a good price on that droid. I'll even throw in an advanced nav. system for its replacement. I can always use a good droid in the mines, they cost less, last longer, and once they finally break down, I can always smash them down and sell them as parts. What do you say?"

Quintano looked over toward the astromech sitting behind the pilot seat. The offer was tempting and he would be rid of the annoying droid, but he had to shake his head. He knew exactly what would happen to Aro if he left him here and that was a fate that he didn't want to wish anyone, including this droid that was actually starting to grow on him.

“No, sorry, that droid’s not for sale. Perhaps if I run into an R2 unit or maybe a protocol droid...”

Quintano never got a chance to finish his statement. The X-70b Phantom Class ship seemed to come out of nowhere. The smuggler understood that it must have used the rocky pillars as cover and stayed low under the radar. The heat from the hot dirt from the planet would have given further cover to the heat of the ship. This was a tactic that Quintano would have used himself if he wanted to get to the station without being spotted, and although that would have gotten him here undetected, it wouldn’t have gotten him fuel.

“Damn it, not only is that bounty hunter persistent, but he’s a good pilot as well.”

“Wait...you have a bounty on your head?”

“I’ll tell you later, right now I have to...”

The ship opened fire with a strafing run. The blasts shot across the landing bay in a parallel pattern that sent pieces of the platform flying away in hot shards of metal. Guards started to duck and cover as the strafing came across the landing bay and into the factory’s wall putting holes where there weren’t supposed to be.

Quintano knew that this was only a warning shot. The bounty hunter had already demonstrated that he was to be taken alive. This was only meant for him to give up or at least for Vincent to give him up. Quintano also knew that Vincent would give him up if he had the chance to do so, but he would only do it if he could collect a fee. Threatening him with a strafing run was only going to get him upset.

As Vincent started to dash back into the compound, probably to fetch reinforcements, retarget the laser cannons, or to even fetch his own personal firearms to return fire, Quintano ran in the

opposite direction. He was becoming to understand that the best thing to do was to get to the air. Staying here with Vincent, no matter how well protected, would only mean a possibility of capture and with the persistence of the bounty hunter, this wasn't just a possibility a high probability. The Mandalorian just wasn't giving up and he doubted that a few security guards and heavy laser turrets were going to stop him.

By the time the X-70b Phantom Class ship had finished the warning strafing run and had flipped back around, Quintano had already made his way into the Miy'til Starfighter. As the Mandalorian's ship started another strafing run, Quintano hurried through the launch sequence. He didn't have the time for Aro to make the coordinates through hyperspace before their ship was hit and he would be stuck here. This meant that he had to buy the astromech some time. He knew what he had to do. With the X-70b's shots striking the landing bay and coming closer by the moment, Quintano lifted his ship into the air and took to the sky.

As the Miy'til Starfighter took off, A'Den smashed a fist onto the control console. This wasn't supposed to happen. The smuggler was supposed to feel trapped and stay on the ground. Now it was another ship chase, something that was dangerous enough and one slip meant that the smuggler could end up being dead, the bounty wouldn't be collected and the time and expenses would be for nothing.

Quintano pulled back on the throttle as the engines roared to life. He banked hard, remembering that his craft had greater maneuverability. He simply had to stay away from any straightforward chases. The first opportunity presented itself.

“Weep,tweet, twerp, beep, peep, twerp.”

“No, no, leave it to me. You concentrate on navigating us to the Maw.”

“Kzzt, brweep.”

“Yes, I said The Maw. If I can’t lose this bounty hunter here, I’m going to have to lose him somewhere else.”

“Bleep, burp, burp, burp.”

“It’s not my take on a vacation either, but if you have another idea then I would love to hear it. “

There was a moment of silence while Quintano continued to zigzag his flying route toward the rocky pillars up ahead. These would buy him some time so he could pull ahead and execute yet another plan. It was going to take Aro quite some time to figure out the coordinates and he needed to buy that time for him.

As Quintano came upon the pillars, he expertly put his fighter between the two towers of stone. He then gave another hard bank and came back around. Another zigzag put some distance between him and the Mandalorian. As suspected, the bounty wasn’t giving up so easily. The Mandalorian had banked the Ebon Mortis and came in between the pillars sideways, then came up and back down without following the erratic flying pattern that he was utilizing. The ship wasn’t as far behind him as he had hoped, but it was enough.

As Quintano came up and over the massive mine pit, he plunged the throttle downward. The ship took a nosedive deep into crevasse. He carefully navigated between the scaffolding, the pipes, the walkways, and the braces of the factory that overlooked the abyss below. He twisted and turned, and yet, despite his best attempts, he still managed to knock into a set of scaffolding.

The collision hadn’t done anything to his flight pattern, but the metallic structure had become mangled and collapsed under the impact. The metal bars fell upon the next set of scaffolding that fell upon a piece of bracing. Pipes burst open and sent steam in all directions.

A'Den had brought the Ebon Mortis up before dropping into the abyss below, the larger ship just couldn't make the tight turn and distance had been lost in doing so. The Mandalorian piloted the craft as well as could be managed in such tight quarters and was afraid of knocking pieces of the factory off that could send both ships spiraling out of control. This fear became a reality when the smaller craft struck the structures and sent the scrap metal twisting and turning as it fell. The debris and the steam temporarily hid the smaller ship and A'Den couldn't help but think that Quintano had done the risky move deliberately. By the time A'Den caught sight of the smaller ship, the smuggler had maneuvered into one of the smaller spice tunnels.

A'Den banked hard. This ship wasn't meant to do this kind of maneuvering. The engines whined out of protest and the wings scraped against the sides of the tunnel. But this was of no concern. A'Den had come too far and wasn't about to give up on the chase, not when the target was this close.

Quintano couldn't believe it. Either the Mandalorian was stupid or was desperate. Either way, the bounty hunter was bound to get them both killed; one wrong move with that massive ship and this entire tunnel could come down. Even if he did survive a cave-in, he doubted that Vincent would take the time to unbury him and would consider him a loss.

These tunnels didn't stay wide for long and, where he could easily lose the much larger ship; his ship would end up being stuck as well. However, if his memory served him correctly then there was a fairly large cavern up ahead and that would give him just enough room to reverse trajectory and with any luck, lose the bounty hunter once and for all.

The workers, security guards, enforcers and slaves all ran for their lives. Droids that weren't fast enough were mowed down and parts were blasted in all directions. Scaffolding and braces were destroyed and scattered. Metal was strewn about in pieces and shards. Chaos erupted everywhere.

The Miy'til Starfighter shot out of the tunnel and into the large cavern. Quintano pulled back hard on the throttle and forced the smaller ship into a steep climb. As the Phantom Class ship came into the cavern to join him, he continued his pull on the throttle until his ship came up and over the larger one. Once he started to make his descent, Quintano cranked the throttle hard and pivoted until he was now facing the other way. Before the Phantom Class ship knew what had happened, Quintano's craft was flying in the opposite direction.

A'Den's eyes went wide. The smaller ship had blocked the view of the cavern and once the Ebon Mortis had entered, it was too late. The back side of the cavern was closing too fast.

A'Den's hand went through the motions of shutting down the primary engines, applying reverse maneuvering thrusters, and cranking on the throttle simultaneously. The ship groaned out of protest. The hull was stressed from the contradicting pressure from the momentum and the thrusters. Engines whined. Fuses blew. Something from the engine gave a loud bang and smoke came up from the back of the ship.

The Ebon Mortis spun on its axis as it continued its momentum. As A'Den came out of the spin, the process was reversed. The maneuvering thrusters were disengaged and the main engine was put back online. Turbines cranked and moved from one direction to another and back again. Another gear broke and more smoke came from the engine room.

The momentum of the Ebon Mortis continued to push the ship in the initial direction that it was headed, but now backwards. Its back rear thrusters struck against the cavern wall as the engines came back to life. Metal scraped against rock, thrusters pushed against stone, and the Ebon Mortis pushed forward with only a small amount of damage.

A'Den could only give a shake of the head while pushing the throttle forward. The expenses of fixing the damage would have to be added to the expenses to be collected. This only made the

aspiration to capture Quintano that much more desired. There was already too much expenses, time, and energy invested in the chase to simply give up.

“Woot, weet, woot, woot, bleep, bleep.”

“What? What do you mean...oh no.”

Quintano took a look at his radar to confirm Aro’s evaluation of the situation. Sure enough, somehow the larger vessel had turned back around and had avoided a collision with the backside of the cavern. There was only one thing left to do, something he couldn’t do until now, now that he had this fully armed fighter complete with heavy lasers and missiles.

“Take the controls Aro.”

The smuggler gave a quick shift on his controls as he powered down the main engine and reverted to reverse thrusters. This made his ship spin on its axis. He was now facing the oncoming Ebon Mortis. For one moment the ship stalled before it took off backwards. Aro’s ability to navigate the ship in reverse was what Quintano needed.

Quintano knew that he didn’t have a whole lot of time. The larger ship was closing in fast and if he didn’t shoot first then he ran the risk of the bounty hunter hitting his ship and putting it out of commission. Without even bothering with the targeting system, Quintano fired two of his missiles.

Just as the missiles fired, Aro made a quick adjust to avoid striking hanging debris. The ship jolted and sent the missiles flying off course. Instead of striking the Ebon Mortis, the missiles blasted the ceiling of the cave tunnel.

The explosion rocked the whole tunnel and sent a seismic shockwave rippling through the area. Rock and stone fell with a vengeance as the ceiling started to cave in. Tons of boulders and debris continued to plummet and started to fill the tunnel.



This was exactly what Quintano didn't want. He had hoped that he could strike the Phantom Class ship and end this chase once and for all. Instead, he was now being caught in a cave-in.

The smuggler took the controls of the Miy'til Starfighter and reversed the process of the engines. The maneuvering thrusters went offline as he spun the ship back around. Once he was facing the right way again, he punched the main engine back online. With as much speed as he could muster from the engines, Quintano darted back and forth between the falling rock, stone, and metal debris of the walkways, support beams, and scaffolding that was collapsing with the tunnel. He weaved his ship between the cascading items, each threatening to smash through his cockpit window.

“...Three...two...one...”

Quintano pulled back hard on the throttle. The falling rock had kicked up enough debris that he was slowly losing his bearings and the dirt was starting to cover his cockpit. He could barely see much beyond the front of his ship. He was going to have to rely upon his instincts. If his count had been correct then he had just exited the tunnel. If it wasn't then this was going to be a very short ride.

The Miy'til Starfighter shot out of the tunnel and back into the pit that led into it with a trail of dust and dirt following behind it. Quintano looked at his scanner, nothing had followed him out, and although that didn't necessarily mean that the pursuit was over. If this bounty hunter was anything, he was relentless and if the Mandalorian wasn't buried under the tons of rock, then the pursuit would likely resume.

Not knowing how much time or distance he had gained, Quintano plugged in the coordinates that Aro had finished calculating and continued to push his ship vertically skyward. The g-force pushed against him, the ship started to rattle. His

craft really wasn't designed for such an emergent and forceful takeoff from a planet.

“Hold together, hold together.”

As soon as the starfighter left orbit, Quintano engaged his hyper drive. He had to get to the Maw, not just for the delivery sake, but just in case the tunnel collapse didn't finish off the bounty hunter. Only a few were crazy enough to enter.

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Rock, stone, and metal debris continued to pound against the Ebon Mortis. A'Den considered pushing the craft to go faster but it was already too hazardous. Navigation was a nightmare and visibility was almost nil. The best that the bounty hunter could hope for was a speedy exit before the entire tunnel collapsed.

The sudden drop of tons of stone up ahead was what A'Den had feared would happen. A wall of rock filled the passage in front and blocked any further progress.

A'Den was already in process with the thought that this could happen at any time. The main engine was shut off and the maneuvering thrusters were applied. All power was directed toward the thrusters in a hurried and desperate attempt to stop the forward momentum. More rocks pounded the ship. Another set of fuses blew. The engines whined and the whole framed groaned under the stress. The ship's nose stopped just inches from the cave-in.

It took some time to land the Ebon Mortis since power had to be rerouted and several of the fuses had been blown. Only then was A'Den able to exit and see the full extent of the barrage of stones and debris that had fallen and would have crushed the ship had it been going any faster. It was worse than expected. The rocks had filled the entire passage all the way to the top.

“Damn, damn, damn...” A’Den’s explicative echoed off of the tunnel walls. “Every time I get close, that slime ball gets away.”

A’Den’s anger had built to the point that something needed to be blown up just to relieve stress. Anything would have done. It was then that the thought crossed the Mandalorian’s mind was able to see the solution.

A’Den took another look at the cave-in. What was needed was exactly that, an explosion. The Ebon Mortis could clear the barricade; however the explosion would be too great and wouldn’t be as precise. What was needed was a strike at an exact spot to clear the right amount of rubble to get started. This led to only one option.

The bounty hunter dropped to one knee for support and balance. The image of the target sight came across the Mandalorian’s target array system that was built into the helmet. There was a brief moment as A’Den shifted from one area to another. Then, the firing mechanism was activated.

The rocket that was attached to A’Den’s backpack fired and flew with pinpoint accuracy. It cruised through the air and struck its target with devastating effects. Rock and stone flew in all directions. Debris was scattered everywhere and when the dust settled there was a good sized hole near the top of the pile.

A’Den nodded. This would have to do for now. Some of the rest of the rubble would be moved by hand, some by a couple more grenades and the rest could be moved by the Ebon Mortis. It was take some time, but access would eventually be granted to the outside world. Of course, the use of the rocket and the grenades would have to also be added to the expense that was to be collected.

There were two things that would have to be considered next. One was information about the destination of the smuggler and the other was the defenses that were in place to prevent that

information from getting out. Both of these would have to be dealt with in a certain fashion.

A'Den still had a good idea of Quintano's ultimate destination, but where the smuggler might go between here and there was still unclear. It would be easier to capture Quintano before he had a chance to slip into the major city population of Nar Shaddaa. The city planet would make tracking difficult and then there was trying to deal with the Hutts. They had their own law there and it wasn't worth crossing them. No, it would be far easier to find the smuggler before then. The question was, where was he going? The answer would only come from one individual, Quintano's contact, the Besalisk named Vincent Starr. The Ebon Mortis would be able to pull the floor plans of the base and the quickest route to Vincent's room would be found.

The defenses that the Besalisk had in place were the next thing to consider. There would be the anti-spacecraft turrets that were spotted when the initial strafing run was made. Next, there would be the guards. Neither of these would stand in the way from getting the information that was needed.

Then there was the matter of erasing all data concerning any indication that the smuggler was even here. The contract had to be followed and all witnesses had to be silenced. A deal was a deal and that was what A'Den was getting paid for.

## Chapter: Kessel Conflict

Vincent had watched the underground chase through his network of cameras that were placed around the mining tunnels and wondered if either of the ships were going to crash. They were already doing enough damage to set the production back a long time and a crash would send them back even further. As much as he would have loved to have seen that, he still had a job to do and these two were making it more difficult with each passing moment.

It was a bittersweet feeling that came over the Besalisk as he watched the Miy'til Starfighter come back out of the tunnel. Yes, there was at least one spaceship that had made it through and the damage to the mines would now stop, at least that's what he thought at first. Then, he became aware of the cave-in and he knew that all of his profits for the past year was going to go into fixing and repairing the mine just to get it back up and operational again.

Someone was going to have to pay for all of this and Vincent was ready to take it out of Quintano's hide if he ever saw him again. However, this idea was quickly dashed aside once the mining tunnel's cameras came back online. The Ebon Mortis was caught and its pilot, a Mandalorian, was still alive. This was the individual that had brought conflict to his spice plant; this was the individual that was going to get his full wrath.

“Get the anti-craft turrets up and running! Mobilize every guard that we have available! I want that Mandalorian dead!”

Vincent started barking orders to get his troops, security guards and personnel. Turrets came to life, doors were sealed, troops were armed and the emergency lights all kicked on. Vincent smiled as the thought of going to go to war with the Mandalorian

filled his mind. He had never had the chance to put his defenses to the test, now they at least had target practice.

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The Ebon Mortis flew out of the tunnel with a vengeance. Its sleek design cut through the dust and debris as it quickly rose out of the mining shaft. Its engines rumbled with a fury, its laser cannons were powered and crackled with energy. It was time to see what this ship could really do.

Immediately upon leaving the mining pit, A'Den spun the controls, banked hard, and rolled the ship. The Ebon Mortis spun as it climbed. The maneuver made it difficult to track with any targeting system and even more difficult to hit. A'Den figured that anyone in Vincent's position would open fire at the first opportunity. The suspension had been accurate.

Turret blasts exploded all around the sleek ship as it cut through the air. The expert navigation of the craft kept it from being hit. Another roll sent the ship spiraling away from another barrage. Another spin put the Ebon Mortis out range of another set of turret fire.

A'Den banked hard again and spun almost in place. The ship pivoted on its axis as the Mandalorian opened fire. Its ship's twin lasers shot in tandem and struck the first turret. The explosion rocked the area and sent shards of superheated hot metal flying in all direction.

A'Den quickly brought on the reverse thrusters and brought the Ebon Mortis backwards. More shots were fired across the bow in anticipation of hitting the ship while it was moving forward. However, the blasts only caught air.

The ship spun again and took the station where the turret had been. The anti-craft weapon had been placed strategically with the others to work in tandem with each other. But now that it was

destroyed, there was a blind spot. A'Den was going to take advantage of this.

Keeping low and mostly out of the angle of fire from the other turrets, A'Den spun the ship and opened fire. The twin laser cannons devastated everything that it hit. Dirt, rock and stone flew with blasted and twisted metal. Explosions rattled the area. Small fires broke out as turrets were blown into flying debris. Smoke rose from the mangled and deformed pieces, and fragments that used to be the spice plant's defense system were strewn about the desert floor.

A'Den gave yet another turn. As the ship came around toward the plant's main door, the bounty hunter followed up with several maneuvers simultaneously. Each was programmed with a slight delay. Then, when the Mandalorian was satisfied, there was a dash toward the ship's exit door.

Suddenly everything went into an automated function. The Ebon Mortis started to go into a landing pattern just as its door started to open. This allowed A'Den to jump through the ship's opening door and activate the jetpack to soften the landing. At the same time, the Ebon Mortis opened fire at the preprogrammed target.

The front door to the main complex was blasted apart by the barrage of laser fire that was shot at it. Metal flew in all directions. Explosions went off. Sirens blared. The guards that were trying to rush through to stop the Mandalorian were cut down. By the time the bounty hunter had hit the ground and had started a run toward the door, the Ebon Mortis had landed and had stopped shooting. All that was left was wreckage and carnage.

A'Den walked with purpose toward the wreckage that had been wrought. Both hand held blasters were drawn with deliberation and purpose to be used on anyone and anything that got in the way. The bounty hunter found plenty of targets.

The guards that were able to duck back into the main building to protect themselves and were fortunate enough to live through the Ebon Mortis's barrage came out of the portal in droves. Each had their choice of weapon rather it was a heavy blaster or rifle. They had every intention of stopping the Mandalorian from advancing any further. They took aim and opened fire.

A'Den activated the jetpack again and flew sideways and up. Laser blasts flew past where the Mandalorian used to stand. With the maneuverability of the jetpack, A'Den was difficult to get a bead on, let alone hit. The guards couldn't say the same.

As the Mandalorian weaved back and forth, a bombardment of suppressive laser fire was returned. Screams of pain were issued as one guard after another was blasted with expert precision. One was shot dead center in the middle of his chest. Another was hit in his head. Shot after shot was fired while A'Den continued to move slightly up, down, left or right each time the guards started to even come close.

The bounty hunter continued to close in on what was left of the door while cutting down everyone that came near it. It was when A'Den came close enough did the troops finally realize that they were sitting womp rats. They scurried inside and found refuge behind anything they could find. It was time to make their last stand, their last effort to keep the intruder out and take him down. The moment the Mandalorian came through the door would be the last thing that the bounty hunter ever did.

Time passed and nothing happened. The bounty hunter wasn't seen or heard from. There was neither hide nor hare that the Mandalorian was even coming in through this door.

One of the lead Gamorrean guards signaled to a few of the others. They gave him a look of "you've got to be kidding" that translated in any language. The verbal response and the axe that was turned on them by their leader was enough to send the four of them heading for the door to check up on the missing Mandalorian.



As the four guards came out, A'Den stepped out from behind the side of the door and opened fire. The first guard went down and as return fire came back toward the Mandalorian, A'Den activated the jetpack again. This time the bounty hunter went up and around, following the curvature of the portal while firing down the hall. The wall continued to give A'Den the protection from those inside and the height gave the Mandalorian the upper ground. By the time the shooting had stopped, all four Gamorrean guards were dead and A'Den was on the other side of the door.

The lead Gamorrean heard the blaster fire and watched as his troops fell one by one. And, although he couldn't see the Mandalorian, the bounty hunter's effects could clearly be seen. He waited for the last shot and was sure that the Mandalorian would rush in. He was wrong. What he got instead was a small round orb that was tossed inside and rolled toward him.

The Gamorrean tried to yell something but was drowned out by the explosion of the tossed grenade. The sound alone echoed throughout the hall and into the heart of the factory. The concussion could be felt for rooms beyond. The fiery blast filled the hall and came back out into the desert before succeeding. When it was over, there was nothing left of the troops that had tried to hold the portal.

"More hazard pay and another grenade to add to the list of expenses," A'Den said, although there was no one else around to hear the comment.

With both blasters leading the way, A'Den stepped into the hall. Bodies were strewn everywhere and the carnage was complete. Boxes, barrels, and pieces of hallway that the guards and troops were hiding behind were now nothing but debris that was scattered about.

The sound of footsteps up ahead warned A'Den of more guards approaching. Without even missing a stride the Mandalorian opened fire and caught three guards square in the chest as they

rounded the corner. By the time their bodies fell, A'Den had walked past them and turned down the hall that they came from.

A Gamorrean came around a connecting hallway only to be shot without A'Den even slowing down. Two more came from behind which only made A'Den spin, duck, and get off two shots killing them both. Another tried to ambush the Mandalorian by dropping from the ceiling. A'Den was able to not only sidestep the surprise attack, but was able to get off several punches and a kick that sent the guard flying backwards. This gave A'Den enough time and distance to sent two blasts into the guard's skull.

A'Den continued to transverse from one hall to the next, blasting one guard at a time. Sometimes it was shots from the blasters, sometimes it was a grenade down a hall. A few times it was a hand to hand combat that sent guards flying over a railing to disappear somewhere down in the long tunnel shaft that opened up here in the factory. Twice A'Den had to activate the jetpack to get the higher ground and stay away from the rapid fire and each time the Mandalorian was able to fly circles around the troops where A'Den was able to peg them off fairly quickly. None of the encounters had distracted or even slowed down the bounty hunter.

One of the hallways eventually led to the monitoring station. The place looked like a warzone and A'Den hadn't even started. No, that was true, this had happened when the Ebon Mortis had taken down all of the turrets and the main door. There had also been a few times that equipment had been blown apart by grenades, fallen Gamorreans, and blaster fire. Then there was the cave-in and the all of the crashes into the various structures along the way. This room had received the backlash off all of these events.

The stations all had scorch marks from exploding fuses where electricity had danced across the panels. A few of the monitors had been blown and had sent shards of glass all over the floor. Lights were flickering, warning alarms were going off, and the controls that did work were showing their gauges in the red,

danger area. Steam was venting from two of the environmental controls and two pipes had burst.

The administration personnel were in the process of trying to get their systems back online. A few were trying to shut off the steaming vents while a few others were trying to put out small fires. Everyone seemed to be in panic mode during the chaos. That was until A'Den walked in. Suddenly everyone noticed the Mandalorian and stopped what they were doing. They only stood there and stared. None of them had any weapons training. None of them knew how to fight. None of them were even armed. They were all dead and they already knew it.

“Get out. Now.” The Mandalorian said while nodded toward the door.

The admin personnel only waited momentarily to see if the bounty hunter was actually letting them go or if this was some sort of bad joke and that the Mandalorian was going to shoot them anyway. When the blasts didn't immediately come, the workers bolted for their lives. It was best to put this experience as far behind them as possible. Perhaps there was work at one of the other mines; this one was going to be shut down, probably for a good amount of time.

Once the others had cleared, the bounty hunter prepared for anything. There was only one individual left and that would be the one named Vincent Starr. He was now out of guards, cornered and had nowhere to run or hide. He was trapped, and like any wild animal, this made him dangerous. He would also be furious over the destruction of his base. A'Den doubted that the Besalisk would just simply indulge the information that was needed. However, it was worth a try.

“Vincent,” the Mandalorian called out. “Vincent Starr. I know you're back there, in the back room. All I want is information and I'll go. But I'm not going without it. Now we can do this the easy way or we can...”

The Besalisk rounded the corner that lead from his personal room. His three hands each contained a blaster and he wasn't just willing to use them, he had every intention of using them against the one person who seemed to single handedly take down his entire base of operations and wipe out all of his guards. With full determination, Vincent opened fire.

A'Den was already in motion as the Besalisk came around the corner. The Mandalorian might have had high hopes, but was no fool. The dodge had been just in time to let the poorly aimed blasters fire past the spot that was previously occupied.

Without missing a beat, A'Den's roll put the bounty hunter in a position to kick off from the computer consoles that lined the side of the room. The little kick, added with the jetpack, put A'Den into the air heading back into the direction where the Mandalorian had come from, except this time in a higher position.

Vincent attempted to follow and track the bounty hunter. He continued to shoot but the Mandalorian was too fast. Laser blasts continued to shoot across the room and missed the flying bounty hunter.

'Why does it always have to be the hard way?' A'Den mused.

A'Den took a couple of quick shots out of instinct and reflexes, but these were just to get Vincent's attention and to drive the Besalisk into a more defensive position. None of the shots were meant to hit the Besalisk, A'Den wanted the information that Vincent had and dead Besalisks didn't talk. The shots fired struck around Vincent's feet and did the trick admirably. With each shot, Vincent continued to move back until he had retreated back into his room.

Vincent continued to exchange fire while retreating. If only the blasted Mandalorian would stop flying about then maybe he could get a decent shot. As it was, he was only doing more damage to his computers than what had been done before. But at

least now he would be able to have cover. The furniture throughout the room was a perfect opportunity to find barriers while he pegged off the Mandalorian.

The Besalisk dove into his room and made a quick dash to his right. He let his body fly over the couch as he pulled it down with him. He angled his body to get the clearest shot for when the Mandalorian would come through the door. With all three guns pointed at a small opening, he was sure that at least one of them would hit the bounty hunter.

A'Den knew that the smaller room would reduce the area of flight, would provide a home advantage since Vincent would know more of the layout of the room, and would it provide better cover for the Besalisk. However, there was one thing that A'Den had that Vincent didn't have and that was experience. Well, that and...

Vincent kept an eye out for the doorway. He was sure that the Mandalorian would enter any moment now. All he had to do was wait. Then, suddenly he saw it. The sphere came sailing through the air. He recognized it at once, a grenade that could decimate the entire room. As quickly as he could, he jumped to one side and rolled. He curled his body into as tight as a ball as possible and hoped that the explosion didn't kill him.

Second passed and the explosion didn't come. The orb struck the ground and still the explosion didn't come. Vincent gave a slight peek and...

The Mandalorian's hand reached out and grabbed Vincent by the nape of his shirt. With the help of the jetpack, A'Den flew into the air and shoved Vincent's body hard against the ceiling. Then, before the Besalisk could catch his breath, he was thrown start to the ground.

Vincent's body slammed hard, bounced and came down again. The impact had made him lose two of his blasters somewhere in the mess that he called home. It was only now that he regretted

not cleaning more often. If he had, then he would probably be able to find the two weapons and stand a better chance against the Mandalorian. But as it was, he still had one and all he had to do was turn around and start blasting. That never happened.

A'Den was on top of Vincent before he had a chance to turn around. A'Den brought an elbow down hard, jarring the Besalisk's arm enough to force him to drop his last weapon. The Mandalorian then braced two feet against a cabinet, grabbed the Besalisk and engaged the jetpacks once again. The surge of strength and power tossed Vincent across the room to bounce off of the far wall.

As Vincent went to stand, A'Den was already in place, flying to the tactical spot that was needed. As A'Den flew through the air, the Mandalorian dagger was pulled and by the time Vincent had come to a standing position, A'Den had the dagger hard pressed against his throat.

"Where is he going?"

"I'm not telling you anything, and you can't ..."

A'Den grabbed the Besalisk and pivoted to the right. Vincent flew over the Mandalorian's form and went sailing through the room. Another jetpack burst and A'Den was right back on top of Vincent. A quick yank and the Besalisk was back on his feet and before he realized what had happened, the Mandalorian delivered a well placed knee to his groin. Pain shot through Vincent's body and if it wasn't for the Mandalorian hanging on to him, he would have fallen over.

"Now tell me where is Quintano Roo going? What is his route?"

"Why...why should I tell you anything, Mandalorian scum?"

“Because if you don’t tell me I’ll rip off your three good arms and beat you over the head with them until you do. Now, I won’t ask again, where is he going?”

“Fine. But it won’t do you any good; he’s got a plenty good jump on you as is. He’s going to Nar Kreeta and, since the Hutts want their spice yesterday, Quintano would have to pilot through the Maw. He’s good, but I doubt that he’s that good. I doubt that he will make it to Nar Kreeta. Even if he does, the Hutts will kill him off, especially once they realize that his cargo bays are empty.”

“You see, they want to make him an example for killing off Koran Kane. At first they were just going to let me have him, put him down into the spice mines and work him to death. However his connections to the rebellion and a rumored recent connection with the Empire made things more complicated. It would be easier if he just vanished. Of course, if he does make it into Hutt space, then they will do to him as they see fit. Neither the rebellion nor the Empire can save him there. Either way, he’s a dead man and I’ve been given a fair amount of compensation to send him on his way.”

“I hate to tell you this,” A’Den stated flatly. “But he didn’t kill Koran Kane, I did.”

“Well, it really doesn’t matter. Quintano will still be dead anyway. The only difference is that once the Hutts hear how you’ve killed their favorite runner, they will put a price on your head and you will be next.”

“And do pray tell who is going to tell them?”

“Why, me of course, and there’s nothing you can do...” Vincent’s eyes went wide as soon as he had said that. It was at that moment that he realized that his big mouth had just condemned him to death. The blaster shot hurt like hell, but the pain didn’t last long. His body was dead before he hit the ground.

It took a bit for A'Den to search all of the databases that could be found. Most of the computers were highly damaged and those that were functional were having problems with the network. Once the network was found, the Mandalorian was able to erase every piece of evidence of every event during the past day. With any luck, anyone who wanted to access this data would chalk it up to the malfunctions of the computers or perhaps to some pirate raid.

When all was satisfied, the bounty hunter went back to the Ebon Mortis. If Quintano wanted to get to Nar Kreeta quickly, then the Besalisk was correct, there was only one way to go. It was a route through the black hole region that most tried to avoid. With this in mind, A'Den set course for the Maw.



## Chapter: Kessel Investigation

The Fury Class T.I.E. Interceptor cut through the atmosphere of Kessel. Its presence loomed over the planet like its namesake, a wraith, or at least like some bird of prey looking for its next meal. Its shadow was cast over the planet's desolate desert.

Small mammals darted away and hid in nearby caves or dug deeper into the hard sand. Every beast fled in terror and fear of the arrival of the harbinger that was arriving. This ship may not be the storm that was coming or the destruction that was going to shake up the galaxy, but it was the first sign that it was about to happen. None of the beasts understood this, but they felt it. The ship's ominous approach only inspired fear.

This fear carried over to the more intelligent species on the planet. Several spice mines seemed to halt their production for just a moment before resuming their operations. But it was the security checkpoints that seemed to feel the full brunt of the paranoia.

All scheduled flights, rather coming or going, were already known ahead of time. There were regularly arranged shipments and if a ship didn't meet the timetable, then there would be a warning sent out to the incoming ship to turn around or face immediate destruction. These outposts were paid by the wealthy in the southern hemisphere to keep the peace, security, and secrecy of the imports and exports that the world had to offer.

The last ship that was seen coming in was a Miy'til Starfighter. This was Kane's ship and was scheduled to come in, although it was a little early. Its departure was also planned and noted. What wasn't expected was the appearance of the second ship leaving. There was no record of the second ship's arrival in the first place. Somehow a ship had gotten past their radar and security systems.

Since the second ship had left near the spice mine known as K-13, a call had gone to Vincent Starr. When nothing but static came back, even after several attempts to reach the Besalisk, it was time to pay closer attention to all traffic. If the rich class in the southern hemisphere ever found out that they were lacking and had allowed a ship to come in under their radar of their security checkpoints, then the whole crew would be forced to work in the mines.

“This is security checkpoint 29. Unidentified spacecraft state your designation and purpose of visit or you will be shot down by order of...”

“Security checkpoint 29,” the voice on the other end of the comm. stated, interrupting the forthcoming threat. “This is of the highest Imperial priority. You will find my security codes to be in order. Now, you will stand down or will be fired upon with all due haste, with all due prejudice and necessary force, and finally with all due authority.”

Valas felt like shooting them anyway. No one was going to stand in his way during an assignment and he had killed for less. However, this time he wasn’t paid to shoot down any obstacles, so their lives would probably be spared, at least as long as they didn’t start anything first. Perhaps during another time when he was out this way again he might just take up some target practicing.

The guard scoffed at the arrogance of the pilot on the other end of the comm. Who in this galaxy did he think that he was? There were only a few individuals that could even make such a claim and this pilot...

The guard looked down on his readout as the codes came across his station and gasped. His blood drained from his face. These codes went clear up the Imperial chain of command. Any hesitation in compliance from the orders given by those with these codes would be considered as traitors and would be dealt

with appropriately. The guard didn't know who this guy was, or why he was here, but he did know that it was best to not ask any questions and to forget that this conversation ever happened.

“Err..um...unidentified craft...you have full clearance for...well... anything you want..You'll have full cooperation with everyone here at checkpoint 29.”

Valas didn't even bother answering back as his ship passed over the small building surrounded by anti-aircraft heavy laser cannons. There was nothing further to say at this point, but it was good to know that if he needed any information then he would be able to receive their fullest collaboration. However, this would mean that he would have to kill them since they would now know what he looked like.

A smile came across Valas's face. That was all the excuse that he needed. Yes, he just might do that.

The Wraith continued its trajectory over the hard desert and rocky barren landscape. Its thrusters and momentum kicked up sand wherever it went and it continued to have a presence about it as if it were a harbinger of something worse to come.

The view of Spice mine K-13 came into sight. Its destruction had been complete. The main structure had been collapsed in upon itself, the processing plant had exploded and debris was everywhere, and the mines had caved-in and had become nothing but dirt and rubble. Smoke was coming out of several places, many small fires were still raging, and bodies were strewn everywhere. There were gun blast marks and heavy ship blast marks.

Valas was sure that the bounty hunter had attacked the mining outpost in an attempt to look for Quintano. This meant that the Mandalorian was not only very determined and was as much an expert at getting information as he was, but was also not afraid to use as much deadly force was needed to achieve the bounty. This

made A'Den Verda Fett a formidable foe and one that should never be taken for granted.

The next question was, where did they go? Valas was certain that Quintano wasn't captured yet, or else he would have received a call by now to terminate his mission. Nar Shaddaa was still his primary consideration, but he wanted more information before he trotted into Hutt space for no apparent reason. He might have political pull in most of the outer rim, but the Hutts had final say in their own space.

Valas gave a few more taps on his computer and accessed the Imperial satellite probes in the area. With any luck, they would have picked up any incoming and outgoing ships. This would further validate that the smuggler that he was looking had actually come here.

The results gave him more than he expected. He hadn't seen an arrival of an A-24 Sleuth but had noticed the Phantom Class entering the planet's atmosphere. This was curious and led the Imperial agent to shift his search backwards through the database. The ship that had come prior to the Phantom Class was a Miy'til Starfighter.

Valas thought a moment and then looked out into destruction that lay in the desert wasteland before him. If the starfighter had come here, then there would be records of its arrival. However, the records here, at this spice mine, were inaccessible. It would take a considerable amount of time to clear any rubble to gain access to the computers, and that was if there was anything that could be downloaded. Of course, the power was shot, so anything he did find, he would have to download on a data pad, transfer to his ship and sort through for anything valuable.

There was another method to collect data and that was from the very checkpoint that had volunteered anything that he needed. Yes, he was sure that they would volunteer everything, and he did mean everything, that they knew. They would give up every bit of information of every ship, every captain, every payload,

every transaction, and from whom they were receiving their orders from. Then, they would volunteer their very lives.

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The Wraith took off from the desert landscape. Its form was silhouetted against the burning building that used to be known as security checkpoint 29. The small building that used to be surrounded by anti-aircraft heavy laser cannons was in complete ruin. Its sides and roof had been caved in and all that remained was rubble.

Valas smiled as he punched in the last bit of information into the navigation system. All had gone well, at least for him. The starfighter had come from a smuggler known as Koran Kane and was last known to be on the planet Jabiiim. That was until he was reported as being killed. The initial report of who had killed him was a little fuzzy and had mentioned Quintano as the one responsible, and then it was later changed to a Mandalorian being the culprit. The report also said that Kane had mentioned something about his ship being stolen. This ship was a Miy'til Starfighter, the same typed that was seen coming here to Kessel and leaving shortly thereafter with the Phantom Class ship chasing it.

Quintano must have switched ships in a desperate attempt of throwing off the bounty hunter. This had not only failed, but it had gotten Koran Kane killed as well. Now the smuggler was flying in a well known spacecraft and was still being followed.

Valas had also been able to retrieve the fact that Koran Kane, had he survived, had a flight plan to Nar Kreeta. This was one step closer to the suspected destination of Nar Shaddaa. Quintano would probably continue to use Kane's ship as a way to get through Hutt space.

It was no longer known if Quintano had been able to pick up his package or not. It could have been on Jabiiim or even with the Besalisk named Vincent Starr. Even if he didn't have it yet, time

was running out and it was best to catch him before the bounty hunter did.

This prompted Valas to push down on the throttle and engage the hyper drive. He needed to make up some time.

## Chapter: The Maw

As the Maw came into view, Quintano couldn't help but gasp at the scene before him. Every time that he came out this way, the sight always took his breath away and this time was no different. There was nothing like this in all of known space and because of this fact, it was considered one of Wonders of the Galaxy.

The vast majority of the Maw was the massive Maw Nebulae. Here, ionized gases that were shaped by gravitation and radiation were abundant. Some of these gases, under the stress of the gravitation, had become streams of plasma. Swirls of multiple colors of reds, greens, blues, and purples were abundant. Jets of superheated gases, plasma vents, danced across the area as if they living creatures swimming about in a sea of colored stars. These red and orange and yellow streams were the fires of life.

Like any other nebulae, this was the place of life. This was where stars were born. This was the protoplasm of what was to be.

However, unlike all other nebulae, this was not only a place of life; it was a place of death. It wasn't just a place for beginnings; it was a place of ultimate endings. This was the place of singularities, of black holes. These singularities were in dense groups and no one knew why. Their strong gravitational pull didn't allow any science ship to stay long enough to gather data and only the foolhardy or suicidal would even consider venturing here.

Usually, singularities were only visible by the lack of starlight that surrounded them since not even light was able to escape the gravitational pull of the black hole up to the event horizon. The big massive black spot of seemingly nothing was usually a dead give away to its presence. However, this wasn't the case here in

the nebulae. Here the gases of the nebulae swirled in patterns around various event horizons. The colored gases and streams of plasma were pulled into pools of various hues and mixed together as they were swallowed by the singularities, the hungry beasts that ate everything within their reach. They made for a kaleidoscope of colors that danced, swirled, twirled, ebbed and flowed with patches of complete and utter darkness that destroyed all that they touched.

The spice run from Kessel to the Hutt-controlled space ran around this Maw. That was the safest route but not the quickest. The quickest route was through here. This was the route of the desperate, the hunted, the smugglers, and the criminals. This was the route for those that would rather risk their lives than be caught, or perhaps this was their best shot at not being killed. Any captain that got too close to any of these singularities could only watch helplessly as their ship started to pull apart in pieces until there was nothing left.

The gravitational pull, the constant motion of the gases and the perpetual streams of plasma made navigation difficult. Ghosts would appear on the navigation system. Solid objects would come and go, communications would be full of nothing but static, controls would be sluggish at best, and if one got too close to the ionized particles scattered about the Maw, then electrical controls were likely to fry. There were electrical magnetic anomalies that could destroy any electrical system aboard just about any ship. However, anyone that could manage these would find themselves well into Hutt space in a considerable less time than it took to go around.

Quintano never thought of himself as being suicidal, but he was definitely foolhardy and was considerably in a hurry. He had no idea if the Mandalorian was buried for good or would be able to get out of the cave-in. The best thing to do was to make it through the Maw and put as much distance between himself and that very persistent bounty hunter as he could. On top of that, the faster that he could get into Hutt territory then the safer he would be. The Mandalorian, if still alive, would have to think twice



before upsetting the Hutts and collecting a bounty in their territory.

Then there was the matter of the cargo that he was carrying. Since Koran Kane was now dead and he was one of the Hutts' newest favored smuggler, it would be best to get the cargo to the Hutts as quickly as possible. This would help smooth over everything between them and him, even if he didn't kill Kane himself. It would also give him the excuse needed to cross into Hutt space without needing a bribe. There was also a chance that he could get on their good side and be a "favored" smuggler which did have its perks, although this position didn't seem to last long and did seem to have a high mortality rate.

Finally there was the Mandalorian. If, for whatever reason, the bounty hunter was able to get out of the cave-in, this would be the last place that anyone would ever start to look for him. Only a few individuals had even dared travel through here and that was because there were only a few routes known to be fairly safe. No one would ever think about going in here for any reason which was why it was perfect. This, on top of the fact that radar would be useless, there was no way that he was going to be tracked.

"Bleep, bleep, bleep, woo, woo." The announcement from the astromech came on more like a warning of an emergency system ready to explode.

"Yes, we are going in there."

"Frzzt, blorp, mmweep,"

"Yes, apparently I am still alive, thank you very much, or we wouldn't be having this conversation."

"Zxxt, bureep, flop, flop, burp"

"No I don't want or need your help leave the controls to me, I know what I'm doing, I've done this before."

“Wooo.”

“I’ll ignore that comment, thank you. Now sit back and relax, this is what I do best.”

Quintano ignored the next couple of protests from the astromech as he shut off his radar and turned off his cockpit lights. The ambient light sources coming from the controls would give him enough illumination to fly by but not enough to distract his eyesight.

Although most of the singularities could be seen eating parts of the nebulae, there were many others that weren’t easily noted. These were drifting on their own and could only be seen, at least in part, by watching how light from other stars were slightly distorted or even blocked out. This slight distortion could easily be missed by a greater illuminance. With the cockpit darkened, he had a greater chance of seeing these distortions.

Quintano gave a sigh of resolution before pushing forward on the throttle and entering the Maw. Almost immediately his sensors went haywire. His radar and navigation system went down and left him basically flying blind. This was where his piloting skills were going to come in handy.

The ship shook shortly after he entered. This was the first warning that he had traveled too close to a singularity. He wouldn’t get another. His ship would simply be pulled into the black hole, never to be seen again. With a slight adjustment, the smuggler nudged the ship slightly to starboard.

The first gaseous cloud came toward him as he continued to guide his craft. Quintano made a direct approach for this and used this as his guide. Any singularity would eat up one of these and that would give the black hole away. His best trajectory through this maze of death was to go through these clouds.

Star dust of blue and green, of yellow and purple, danced before Quintano’s cockpit. Various gases swirled before him.

Flashes of small explosions and flares of colored lights dazzled his view. If it wasn't for the dangers that the nebulae had to offer, then this would have been one of the best visual flights to take throughout the whole galaxy.

His ship shook again. The cloud had its own hazards. There were still gravitational anomalies as well as...

The ship shook one more time, this time with a greater amount of force. A stream of plasma struck the ship. Controls became sluggish, life support waxed and waned, thrusters became unresponsive, and the console lights flickered.

The instant swirl to Quintano's left caught his attention immediately. It seemed that some vortex had opened. The gasses started to spiral and circulate. Its rotation was becoming faster and faster.

Suddenly there was a large, brilliant flash of light. Quintano had to throw his arm over his face in a desperate attempt to block out the illumination, but it was to no avail. The brilliance was blinding and overcame his senses. He felt as if the light penetrated his whole body and shot through his soul. Nausea overcame him and it was everything that he could do to not become violently ill.

Almost simultaneously with the incredible burst came the massive concussive wave. The small Miy'til Starfighter was thrown to one side and sent careening off course. Its thrusters took too much force upon them and their fuel mixture became off balance, shutting them off immediately.

Quintano started to move the controls in a panic. Nothing was coming back online. Everything that he tried was simply a useless act. His ship was dead, drifting in space, going in the wrong direction, and heading off into unknown territories of the Maw. He feared that any singularity in this direction could pick him up and swallow him whole. That fear became a reality.

The brilliant light quickly faded and disappeared. In its place was the one thing that he had hoped to avoid. The ebony black sphere took up the majority of the space where the brilliant flash had come from.

Gasses around the singularity's event horizon started to swirl. It twirled and spun while the parts closest to the black hole's surrounding started to be sucked into the void. Streams of gas, plasma, stardust, and ice all were pulled toward the gravitational monster that had been created. Their presence whipped around the event horizon until they reached their zenith and was pulled inward, disappearing from existence.

Quintano could feel the pull of the black hole against his ship. His momentum stopped drifting in one direction and started to move toward oblivion.

Lights started to flicker and controls started to move. The illumination of the console came back and Quintano could see several ship functions start to come online.

Aro moved its appendages to various places around the back end of the ship. Circuits were repaired, wiring was fixed and power was rerouted. The fuel mixture was reset and the thrusters came to life.

Without questioning the opportunity presented before him, Quintano started to push the engine against the pull of the singularity. He was still in the outer reaches of the gravitational pull of the black hole and it wouldn't be until he hit the event horizon would all hope be lost, however the attraction to oblivion was still great even this far out.

Gases of different colors streamed past him in a desperate attempt to hurl themselves into nothingness. Chunks of ice and flurries of stardust struck against him while they raced each other to be the first to be smashed into an inconceivably dense object. The cockpit of the Miy'til Starfighter echoed with the space debris pelting it continually.

Quintano ignored the thunderous racket and the chaos that was forming outside of his ship. He focused all of his attention at the gauges and controls. He moved the ship's throttle slightly back and forth to try to catch some momentum.

The large hunk of space rock and ice came flying at him with incredible speed. Its velocity continued to increase as the singularity continued to pull upon its mass. One hit from this meteorite would send the ship flying backwards and all of the forward momentum would be lost and the ship and its occupants would be destroyed.

Quintano waited until the last moment and pulled the throttle to one side. He could feel the singularity start to pull the ship's front nose in an attempt to swing the ship around and suck it in front first. The smuggler pushed against the gravitational field and tried to swing back.

The meteorite struck the underside of the Miy'til Starfighter and rattled the whole ship. Quintano was jarred from his position and his heart raced out of terror and fear. For one moment he thought that the ship's hull had been compromised and breached.

The moment that the meteorite cleared the ship, Quintano went to work. He used the momentum caused by the meteorite to swing towards its backside. As soon as the smuggler realized that he had just barely surpassed the large rock, he used its mass to hide behind to give him cover from the gravitational pull. He knew that it wouldn't last long, only a moment or so, but that was all that he needed.

With expert piloting, Quintano maneuvered his ship so that his aft thrusters pushed against the meteorite. Immediately he pushed the ship's throttle as far as it would go and pushed his engines to their maximum. For one moment, the ship faltered and hesitated as it was caught between the pull of the singularity and the push of the engines against the meteorite. A slight adjustment was all that was needed.

The Miy'til Starfighter flew through the gas cloud nebula like a shot. Its engines sped the ship along at incredible speeds, pushing their boundaries and their gauges into the red. Emergency lights flashed while warnings came over the interior comms.

As soon as Quintano cleared the nebula, he eased off on the throttle. The engines started to cool and the ship was brought back to a manageable speed. The warnings stopped coming at him and the emergency lights stopped blinking. The gauges dropped back to normal. He was still a long way from getting out of the Maw, but he was sure that he could make it.

This made the smuggler start to reconsider his passenger. The droid had initiated repairs from the initial plasma blast and rerouted power. Without its intervention, the ship would have been sucked into the newly formed singularity at the very beginning. Without the astromech, he would be dead. Perhaps the little droid had some worth after all.

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A'Den maneuvered the Ebon Mortis toward the entrance of the Maw. The bounty hunter had to admit that the view was probably the most incredible displays of arrays and hues of colors that could be seen in the entire galaxy. If there was time then this would be the place to sit and watch the ever changing view of its entire splendor.

However, there wasn't time for luxury, there wasn't even time to slow down and admire the scenery for even a moment. A'Den's arrival was just in time to watch Quintano disappear from view into the Maw. Without hesitation, A'Den pushed the Ebon Mortis forward into the massive nebulae that loomed before the ship.

Although A'Den couldn't see the Miy'til Starfighter anymore, there was still evidence of its presence. The ship had left behind a wake of disturbed gases that swirled and flowed from its

slipstream. As long as A'Den could kept the Ebon Mortis back far enough to not be spotted and yet close enough to follow the path left by the ship ahead, then hopefully, Quintano would make it through without any difficulties.

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The large Fury Class Interceptor moved toward the great galactic wonder known as the Maw. Its pilot had shaken his head when he noticed that his radar showed both ships entering the expanse. He had seen some of the stupidest things in his life and this had to be one of the top on his list. Very few had lived through this experience and those that did rarely did it twice.

Valas was sure that the smuggler had done this before; he had only stopped long enough to adjust his course before moving in with confidence. The bounty hunter, on the other hand, was only following his prey. This meant that the odds of either ship, let alone both of them, coming out of there alive were slim to none. It wasn't worth the risk to follow them inward to prove himself right, only to have himself killed as well. He did consider himself a good pilot, but he wasn't suicidal. There was crazy and then there was stupid.

If the smuggler died in the Maw, then there was nothing that he could do about it. He would expect to get paid for the amount of time that he spent and he would call it good.

There was another option, however, one that his professionalism commanded that he follow. There was always an off chance that the smuggler could make it through. This meant that he would have to travel all the way around the great expanse. This would be very time consuming but would be worth it. Provided that Quintano did make it, he would have a huge lead. But, since Valas already knew that the smuggler's next stop would be Nar Kreeta, and he had a full description of the ship, it would be simple enough to pick up the trail again, add this to a few questions to the local inhabitants of the planets on the other

side and a few computer data breaches, and he would be able to hone in on the smuggler in no time.

Valas put in his coordinates to go around the Maw. Once they were set, he put his engines to their maximum velocity and pushed forward on the throttle. The engines came to life; the ship shook for just a brief moment and then disappeared into hyperspace.



## Chapter: Nar Kreeta

As the streaks of light from the nearby stars stopped being beams and rays and became their regular points of lights in space, Quintano's ship came out of hyperspace. His coordinates had brought him right where he wanted to be, near the planet Nar Kreeta. Now he had one less bounty hunter to worry about and he was one step closer to Nar Shaddaa.

Quintano pushed the throttle forward and let his ship enter the planet's atmosphere. His comms were already picking up the communications of the various cities relaying messages to the incoming and outgoing traffic. Although this wasn't the busiest world in the Hutt controlled system, it still provided a larger form of civilization than the last few planets he had been on.

The planet was mostly known for its mountain ranges with rocky landscapes and massive deserts. Large canyons split through the jagged peaks and deep valleys snaked through the desolate wastelands. This world wasn't high on the main tourist list for many visitors, and was probably why the Hutts had liked it so much.

However, the planet did offer a fair amount of brightly colored aquamarine seas that often took the breath away from almost any observer. The sunsets were gorgeous as this system's star's last rays of the day reflected off of the high concentration of phytoplankton in the ocean.

But Quintano hadn't come here for the sunset, he had cargo to drop off and the sooner that he did, the sooner that he could get to Nar Shaddaa. He turned his course toward one of the sea coast cities named Aeon. This was one of the major cities here on Nar Kreeta and it was his drop off point.

Nar Kreeta was one of the first major drop-off points here in the outer section of Hutt space. It was the first and last place to do commerce. It was the first and last place to get fuel. It was the first and last place to “socialize” and Aeon was the center of it all.

There wasn’t anything that wasn’t bought or sold here. Anything that was meant to be kept off of the records was done here first and then filtered either deeper into Hutt space or into further regions of space under the guise of regular trading.

Aeon boasted a large spaceport with many shops, brothels, bars, and gambling parlors, all willing to quickly take the hard earned money of any traveler that had come their way. All promised a full welcome to all travelers that had come a long distance or were about to take on a great destination. This was the last respite.

“Aeon flight control, this is Captain Quintano Roo coming in from Kessel Spice Mine K-13. Victor Starr sends his regards.”

Quintano knew that this would be understood as having cargo coming directly from the spice mines of Kessel, from which mine it was coming from, what the shipment would be as in what spices he was carrying, and the name of Victor was to authenticate his load. There would be no real cargo manifest to record since this could be faked anyway and any record keeping could be copied and cargo could then be tracked. No, it was best if individuals just gave a brief code.

“Captain Quintano Roo, this is Aeon flight control, welcome to Aeon. Proceed to landing bay eight. Your arrival and your cargo has been expected.”

“Will do.”

Quintano turned off his communications with the flight control and flipped them on to his astromech. “See, I told you that there was nothing to worry about.”

“Wooo.” The tone from Aro was still worrisome as the little droid still had its doubts.

The flight into Aeon was uneventful with only a few ships that crossed his path. The evening of this side of the planet was starting to set and many ships had already docked or taken off.

The view of the city opened up before the smuggler and he couldn't help but smile. The city sat perched on several rocky bluffs that looked out over the ocean. Its lights were like stars against the fading, dark sky and were a warm welcome after such an arduous trip.

Towers of commerce and pleasure centers helped define the cityscape. All of these were lit up to show that each level was occupied and carrying on their business well into the night. Smaller building of gambling halls, resorts, taverns, marketplaces, and brothels all continued to come into view.

Off to the left, toward the setting sun, the hues of the sunset seemed to set the ocean on fire. The reds, oranges, and yellows reflected off of the sparkling sea to paint a surreal picture.

Quintano made one pass around the city as he continued his descent until he found the spaceport and the landing bay that he was looking for. The port was near the outskirts of the city, further back from the ocean view and closer to the rocky desert east of the city. There were many storage containers that Quintano was sure was full with strange and exotic contents from far away. There were many repair bays with droids and mechanics that came and went to fix ships before or after their long journeys. Freight carriers were coming and going carrying unloaded cargo to various destinations throughout the city. Finally there were small shuttle taxis that ferried pilots from the port to the heart of the metropolis.

The smuggler brought his ship in for a landing and was instantly greeted by many who were peddling their wares. Some

wanted to fix his ship or at least fine tune it while others were selling trinkets from small droids carrying their items for them. There were prostitutes asking for a good time and street urchins asking for handouts. Representatives of tourist attractions were trying to show off the local sites at the cheapest rates.

After Quintano had shooed away the initial group, he was approached by a second, more serious group. These were the ground's crew who would look over his ship and unload his cargo. They already knew where it was going and all they had to do was move it.

The smuggler waited for Aro to catch up before moving along to one of the taxis that was waiting for their next fare. It was going to be nice to stretch his legs and take in the sights. There was some time to kill before his ship was unloaded and refueled and a night on the town was in order.

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As the taxi containing the smuggler and the astromech drove off, the Zabrack named Captain Duran Tardun stepped out from behind the side of one of the maintenance buildings. When he was satisfied that Quintano couldn't see him, he summoned the four Gamorrean guards to follow. They had things to do before they met up with Quintano.

As a Zabrack, Captain Duran had a set of horns upon his head in the shape of crown. His pure white skin was a rarity among his race and made his purple eyes that much more noticeable. His dress was in a military style, sharply pressed and very clean. He had taken pride in his station as security officer, although it didn't have any real military value, and he wanted to show his dedication and commitment to his station.

The captain turned to two of his guards. "Follow that taxi but stay far enough back to not be seen. Stay in communication, I want to know where he goes."

After the first two Gamorreans took off, Captain Duran led the two other guards toward the newly arrived ship with almost drill like precision. He had been waiting for it to arrive and now that it had, he was ready to follow through with the task that had been set before him.

“You, what are you doing?” The captain’s tone was rough and pointed toward the ground’s crew.

“We’re...we’re unloading...”

The lead crewman was trying to explain that they were going to unload the ship as per their original instructions. However, he never finished. He had been so intimidated by the presence of the Zabrack and the Gamorreans that he had lost his ability to finish his sentence. At this point Captain Duran had lost his patience, interrupted, and gave him new orders.

“Don’t bother, there’s nothing aboard anyway. Lock this ship down, secure it with restraining clamps and surround it with guards until further notice. Do you understand me?”

The nod from the crewmen signaled that they understood.

“Good. We are off to take the ship’s pilot to see Oja Hutt. If this ship leaves the ground then you will take his place.”

This made the crewmen turn pale with fear. They had no desire to talk to Oja at any time in their lifetime, no one really did. He had a sadistic, nasty temper, even with those he liked. If they were to be summoned to his presence under such unfavorable circumstances then their lives were to be forfeited in such an agonizing way that they would rather toss themselves from the cliffs to the rocky shore far below to ensure a faster and less painful demise.

Captain Duran turned to the two remaining guards “You two come with me. We have a certain captain to meet.”

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The taxi stopped at a random spot downtown, a spot that Quintano was sure was several blocks further than what was needed in order to get a slightly higher fair. Either that or the taxi driver had been bribed by the local businesses to drop of clients at their doorstep in hopes that they would be the first to be seen.

The stores were all lit up with their neon signs which brought enough light to see by even though the sunlight had faded and the night had come. Arrows were pointing everywhere to show the nearest “entertainment” that could be found for the evening. Animated signs depicted what could be found and where.

Taverns blasted their music out their doors and, standing on the street corner Quintano could hear about a half dozen of them playing. Patrons walked in and out of them searching for a good time from one to another. Some were half drunk; others were on their way of becoming so.

Weapons shops, stimulant shops, exotic pets, brothels, gambling halls and shopping malls were all open for business and all were full of patrons. The area was alive with merchants and tourists, buyers and sellers, partiers and hustlers. It seemed that this, the cooler part of the day, was the busiest that the city would become.

Quintano walked through the streets as his eyes took in the scenery. Aliens from all over the galaxy were found here. Most he had known, but there were a few that he had never seen before.

Exotic scents of spices and perfumes filled the air. Taxies that drove by left their own scent as well, but that quickly faded. All of this mixed with scent of salt from the ocean that lapped at the cliff walls.

When the smuggler had taken in as much of the sights that he had wanted to see, he turned his attention to finding a tavern. It

would do him good to find a place to have a nice drink or two before finding a place to sleep for the night. The only question was, which tavern did he want? There was so many to choose from.

One had gotten his attention until a fight broke out and two of the patrons were tossed from the front door. Another looked too dark with characters a bit too shady for him. One had partiers that were dancing and having a blast. While any of these would have sufficed at their own time, he really wasn't in the mood. He was looking for something more like...

The Four Mirrors seemed to offer what he was looking for. It had a more relaxed atmosphere and calmer clientele. This was the place where he could sit back, relax and enjoy his drink in peace.

The tavern was small and quaint compared to some of the others that he had passed. There was a bar along one side of the large room where the bartender tended to the drinks of those who sat at the stools or walked up to order. Behind him were bottles of different kinds of liquors and alcohol from all over the known galaxy. Underneath the top of the bar were the glasses where the bartender would expertly snatch, flip through the air to entertain his guests and then proceed to mix the right amount of ingredients for each order.

Around the room of the tavern were many circular tables with several chairs sitting around each one. Many of the tables were full of patrons, laughing and having a good time. Their tone was fairly low as if the crowd was either just starting or was winding down for the evening. This had created an easy, laid back atmosphere that was enjoyable and relaxing.

Over on the other side of the tavern was a small stage for the musicians that were playing. Quintano could tell that there were various races playing different instruments, but it was hard to tell what race they were exactly since the lights were turned down low in that section of the room. Their tone was mellow with an

easy beat. Their soft music filled the room and relaxed the souls of all who listened.

“Arctic Breeze.”

Quintano’s order was well received as he sat upon a barstool up next to the bar. The bartender nodded and pulled a bottle of pale blue liquid and poured the drink into the glass until it was about a quarter full. Then he poured a second, frosty white liquid into the glass as well until the glass was half full with a color that now resembled a light blue color of snow. When he was finished, he gave the shot glass a flick of his hand and sent it sailing down the counter to its awaiting customer.

The smuggler smiled. It had been a long time since he had one of these and he was looking forward to having one. He had been through a lot lately and now that he was in the final stretch it was time to celebrate. With eager anticipation he rose the glass to his lips and...

The tap on his shoulder made him stop before he ever had a chance to enjoy the beverage. Whatever the individual wanted, it was going to have to wait. Now was not the time.

“Buzz off. I’m not in the mood.”

“Woot, woot.” Aro’s comments seemed to echo those of the smuggler.

“Quintano Roo, by order of Oja the Hutt himself, you have been invited to his presence immediately.”

“And if I don’t feel like coming with you or meeting with...”

Quintano’s question was asked as he turned his stool to meet with the individual that had disturbed his drink, which had disturbed his evening, and had spoiled his mood. He never did finish as the sight before him told him what would happen if he



didn't change his mind and quickly. The four Gamorrean guards already had their blasters drawn and pointed at him.

The tweets and bleeps from Aro told the smuggler that the little astromech was ready for a fight but Quintano realized that it wasn't worth it. He might be able to take down one or two and with the help of Aro, possibly three, but he doubted that they could take down all five especially since they were blocking the only escape. It was best to go along with them for now.

“We would be more than delighted to go see Oja.”

Quintano wanted to make sure that he used the correct pronoun to include the astromech. If anything went wrong, he hoped that the little droid would be able to bail him out. Besides, he still needed Aro to co-pilot the ship.

“Hey, who's payin' for the drink?” The protest came from the bartender at the further end of the bar.

“Take that up with Oja,” Captain Duran snapped back.

This had shaken the bartender. He didn't want anything to do with Oja the Hutt; he had no desire to meet him, no one did. And now, he pitied the man that was being escorted away to do that very thing

## Chapter: Oja the Hutt

The ride in the back of the large, troop carrier speeder was uneventful. The guards that sat with him had nothing to say and he doubted that they even understood common. They only spoke in some guttural language that Quintano wasn't sure if they were actually trying to communicate or if they had phlegm stuck in their nasal cavities and were trying to clear their throats.

Quintano tried his best to ease the emotions of the astromech who seemed to give a few "woo"s of discouragement and unrest. He felt the droid's tension but now wasn't the time to try anything. Even if they did manage to get away, they would still need to make it back to their ship and take off.

The smuggler needed time to formulate a plan and watch for an opportunity to implement it if needed. The guards had taken his blaster so unless he could wrestle one from the guards, shooting his way out of here wasn't on his agenda. Perhaps he could always try to reason with Oja or maybe pull off a job for him just to get on the Hutt's good side.

The transport speeder stooped with a sudden jolt that made everyone lurch forward and nearly threw the smuggler into the guard to his left. This only resulted in the Gamorrean shoving him back again.

"Alright, out."

The doors had opened to bring the sight of the captain of this troop who had disappeared to ride in front. Now he was here to supervise the expected obedience to follow his every command, every step of the way. With a signal, he motioned to Quintano to exit the speeder.

Quintano had heard of Oja the Hutt, but only in passing. He wasn't on the top of the Hutt cartel, yet his name still inspired fear and respect. Now, the smuggler understood why. From what he could tell, his situation had gone from bad to worse.

They had arrived in a walled off courtyard, an entry yard to the palace itself. There were several militarized speeders scattered about, a few small AT-STs off to one side, and even a couple of old enforcer walkers. From the looks of things, Oja had a good sized amount of ground attack vehicles to accommodate a small army.

On the far side of the complex, Quintano could see the top outline of a major building that was built into the high cliff overlooking most of the city. If his hunch was correct, this would be the personal hangar bay for Oja's smaller ships. Larger ones were either at the spaceport or already in orbit over the planet.

The palace itself was very large with many towers along its multi-level building. Its sandstone color blended well into the surrounding area while the dark windows, to filter the sunlight, were in direct contrast. Quintano couldn't see the overall size of the palace toward the back side, but from what he could see, the building was massive.

Above the hangar bay, overlooking the city and the sea, was probably the biggest room that Quintano could see. This had large, darkened bay windows that wrapped around the whole room. If Quintano wanted a room in this palace, this would be it and as such he suspected that this was Oja's personal room.

All around the courtyard, Quintano could see troops training. They were firing at makeshift targets or practicing hand to hand combat. Along the tops of the walls were more guards and the shadows that moved in some of the upper towers suggested even more. There were even a few battle droids that patrolled the area. This place was well fortified and was able to extend Oja's hand and influence across whatever region that he wanted.

Both Quintano and Aro were led through the massive double entry doors of the palace that were also fortified with guards. Inside, the halls were decorated with large area rugs on the floor and paintings upon the walls. Showcases of acquired artifacts were periodically placed. Plush furniture and ornate cabinets could be seen. But despite the rich interior and pricy items on display, none of them matched. It was more of a tacky display of wealth and acquisitions than a display of taste.

Quintano continued to be led through the corridors while being flanked by two guards in front of him and two more behind. His hopes of leaving anytime soon were fading fast and this looked more and more like a kidnapping than a meeting. His mind continued to think over every scenario and none of them led to a positive outcome.

As they came upon another set of closed, massive, ornate, double doors, Captain Duran turned to the smuggler and gave him a stern warning. “You are not to speak unless spoken to. You will be respectful at all times and you will never, under any circumstance bring up Jabba’s name.”

Quintano knew about Jabba the Hutt’s reputation. He was well known throughout this part of the galaxy and no one messed him and lived. The last he heard was that the big slug was on Tatooine or some other planet far enough away from here that no one really had to worry about him. With Jabba so far away, Quintano wondered why there would be such a problem bringing up his name. Sure, the Hutts didn’t really get along with each other, and barely tolerated each other when they did, but he wondered what Jabba had done to irritate another Hutt this far away.

“If you don’t mind me asking, what did the mighty Jabba do this time?”

Quintano was fishing for something that he could use later, if the opportunity arose. If there was some way to pit Jabba against Oja then he would use it and hopefully the two of them would focus on each other and he would be able to slip away.

“He died,” Captain Duran said flatly.

“What do you mean Jabba is dead? When did that happen? How did it happen?”

“Very recently and...You don’t want to know. Anyway, Oja’s pretty upset about the whole thing.”

“I’m sorry to hear that. Were they close?”

“What?! No, no. They hated each other and were rivals. They would have killed each other, given the chance. It’s just that Jabba’s assets were distributed before Oja could get his hands upon anything. He really missed out on quite a bit of Jabba’s activities and profits.”

The news was a blow to Quintano. This path had led him nowhere and he had to now think of yet another angle to get out of his situation.

The double doors opened and Quintano was able to see inside Oja’s personal room. This had proven to not only be no better in design than the hallways and side rooms that he had seen, but it was messy and disorganized as well.

Large, mismatched area rugs covered the floor. What designs they used to have on them or what color they used to be was no longer visible. They were all covered with a slimy coating that probably came from Oja himself. It was hard to believe that the large slug would invest so much money into an expensive rug only to then just ruin it.

Off to one side of the room was a small band playing live music, well at least somewhat live. Their movements seemed forced and their tone was flat. It was as if they were doing their best to not play their worst. It only took a moment for Quintano to realize why. They were each wearing a shock collar. One

wrong move and either one of them, or perhaps all of them, would feel Oja's wrath.

There were a few statues in each corner and Quintano had to wonder if these were actual individuals frozen in carbonite and displayed for all to see or if they had some other meaning. Either way, Quintano didn't want to become one of Oja's trophies. If there was anything that he could do to prevent that, then he would try to find a way to do it.

Large screens were on one section of a wall to give information to the large slug. From the looks of things, these screens flashed from one gambling hall to another, from one brothel to another, and finally to a few fighting pits where the occupants were fighting to the death. Occasionally these screens would flash to scenes on the street, probably just to spy on those who entered his domain.

Several guards stood around the room at various places. They were different races, all mercenaries by the looks of them. They all came well armed with blaster pistols and rifles. Quintano had no doubt that these individuals would open fire at anyone or anything as long as they got paid.

Finally up against the far wall, against the furthest bay window, above the doors to the hangar bay, overlooking the city and the sea was the fat slug himself. Oja the Hutt lay up a large couch full of pillows to prop up with massive bulk. Near his head stood a protocol droid that was either there to give a translation of the slug that refused to speak anything but Huttese or was there to have its arms ripped off if the situation didn't go his way.

The droid bowed down and listened to a whispered comment from Oja then stood and spoke. When he did, it was impersonal and unemotional and Quintano had to wonder if the droid's personality chip had been removed.

"The Great Oja says that he does not appreciate murderers in his presence."

Not sure how he should respond to that, Quintano turned to Captain Duran and whispered. "Then he shouldn't keep the company that he does. Besides, he invited me here; I didn't want to be here in the first ..."

The elbow to his ribs from the captain made him stop his sentence short.

"Hey...", Quintano blurted out. "Now wait a second. You mean me? I'm not a murderer."

Again, another shot to the ribs made him stop talking.

"The Great Oja states that his beloved runner Koran Kane is dead. He was like a son to the great and caring Oja and you were the one that killed him."

Again, Quintano turned to the captain and spoke to him first. "I didn't realize that Hutts could have beloved children. How do they...?"

Another elbow to his ribs made him buckle his knees in pain. He really should stop mouthing off to the captain. This was getting him nowhere fast, except maybe a broken rib. When the pain subsided enough to speak, the smuggler finally spoke to the protocol droid in hopes that it would translate properly, however, he was sure that Oja understood common well enough.

"Tell the great Oja that if Koran Kane was killed, then I wasn't the one who killed him. When I left him, he was unconscious and still breathing. Yes, I took his ship, but he was still alive when I left. If he's dead, then this is news to me and someone else did the job after I was there."

Oja didn't even bother to answer and it was then that Quintano realized that whatever was said from here on out wouldn't matter. The slug had already made up its mind and didn't want to be bothered with any other detail except for what he already had in

his head, rather it was right or wrong; rather it was real or made up his decision was already decided. However, the slug would go through the process to show his troops that he was a “fair and reasonable” employer.

“The deeply troubled Oja states that his beloved spice processor, Vincent Starr is also dead. He was like a son to the great and might Oja and you were the one that killed him.”

“Now wait just one second...”

Another shot to his ribs took his breath away.

“Please tell the great and mighty Oja that I didn’t kill Vincent Starr either. He and I go way back. I left him very much alive. As a matter of fact, when I left we had our hands full with...”

It was right then and there that it all dawned upon the smuggler. He had finally come to realize that it had been the bounty hunter that must have killed both Kane and Vincent. The Mandalorian was taking care of loose ends and was proving more of a problem than initially thought.

“Look, Oja, you have the wrong person. The person you want is a Mandalorian bounty hunter. It seems that there’s a price on my head and...”

The protocol droid cut him off before he could finish. It hadn’t even consulted the large slug; it merely spoke as if Oja had implanted the thought into its head.

“The great and unforgiving Oja says that you’ve left a very messy trail and a very expensive one. The great and just Oja the Hutt has decided that you shall die a painful and excruciating death. Since you have harmed his trade with Kessel, you are sentenced to work the spice mine factory until it is rebuilt and will then work in the mines themselves to make up for the damage that you have caused until said time that it kills you. The transport ship will leave tomorrow morning.



“Look, I’m sure that this is just a misunderstanding.”

“The great and wise Oja the Hutt does not misunderstand anything. The mighty Oja wants to know if you are referring to him as lacking intelligence.”

Quintano shook his head. That statement didn’t go over well. Maybe he could appease to the Hutt’s greed.

“Perhaps I can make him a deal with the mighty Oja.”

“Oh, no, you don’t understand,” the droid continued. “The great and wealthy Oja doesn’t want your credits. This isn’t personal or business. This is for entertainment purposes only and he revels in knowing that you will suffer for his benefit. His monitors will watch your every instant of pain and suffering, and it will bring him joy.”

This brought a slight chuckle from the giant slug who had said nothing aloud up to this point. His whole body shook with the process and Quintano felt as if the sight would make him become violently ill. It was a sight that he couldn’t “un-see”.

The protocol droid’s attention shifted to Captain Duran. “Take him to the holding cells. He will remain there until his transport leaves in the morning.”

## Chapter: Escape

A'Den punched in the last few commands for the ship and the Ebon Mortis came out of hyper drive. The streaks of lights reduced themselves to pinpoints in the sky. The planet that the bounty hunter had been aiming for had come into view.

The round orb looked like just another rocky planet to the Mandalorian. This was just another place that would come and go and the memory would be long forgotten within a short amount of time. The less time spent here, the better and that meant quickly grabbing the smuggler and leaving to collect the bounty as soon as possible.

The question was, where to look for him? There were several major cities on this rocky outlet and he could be anywhere. However, there was a possible answer to that.

A'Den tapped in a few commands into the computer and brought up the data that was collected on Kessel. If there was a connection between Vincent Starr and this planet, then that would be the first place to start looking.

The last entry had given the results that were needed. Vincent was sending out a shipment to Oja the Hutt. Since Koran Kane had also worked for Oja the Hutt. Oja's palace would be the second place to look for him. The first place would be the spaceport at Aeon, the city that was under Oja's shadow, to see if his ship was even there.

A'Den pushed the throttle forward and descended further into the atmosphere. The landscape started to unfold as the ship made its way toward the surface and the city of Aeon started to come into view, its silhouette was back dropped against the ocean behind it.

Even though the sun had set, Aeon was still alight with the glow of shop signs, street lights, and various other forms of illumination. Its tall buildings and shops could be made out as well as its spaceport on its far side toward the desert. This was where A'Den navigated the Ebon Mortis.

A low pass across the spaceport revealed what A'Den was looking for. Quintano's ship was indeed in port, however, there was another new discovery that wasn't expected. The scans of the ship revealed that the smuggler's craft had been secured with cables to ensure that the ship would never be able to take off. There were also several guards surrounding the ship to ensure that no one would be able to remove the tie-down cables without proper authorization.

A'Den realized that this would all be very beneficial. If, for some reason that Quintano was able to slip away, there was no way that he could lift off. The smuggler was trapped here. All that was needed was to go pick him up. Oja's palace would be the next stop.

It was easy to find Oja's palace, it was the largest building, on the highest cliff, with the largest amount of guards. From this height it was also easy to survey the complex without being noticed. The hard part would be to descend, land, and obtain Quintano.

The amount of guards was going to be a problem. There weren't just a good number of them, but they were heavily armed, well organized, and well trained. They also had very heavy armored vehicles that could do considerable damage to the Ebon Mortis, let alone to any individual that was hit by them. Coming in hard and strong wasn't necessarily the first or best option.

Trying to be stealthy was another option. A'Den knew that a landing far enough away from the palace would enable an opportunity to come upon the compound unnoticed. However,

this would take time and time wasn't necessarily something that was a lot of.

There was no way of telling if Oja the Hutt was going to release the bounty hunter anytime soon, kill him now, or kill him later. The only thing that was known was that if action wasn't taken immediately then the prize would be dead or at least buried so deep in the slug's dungeon that retrieval would no longer be an option. That really left one of two ways. The first was the initial option and that was to go blasting through the corridors and searching every room and crevasse while defending against Oja's troops. While this was feasible, it wasn't the best use of time or effort and Quintano could end up getting shot.

The second option was to offer Oja the Hutt a nice reward and tack it onto the bounty fee that was going to be paid. This option was the most feasible and easiest. With this in mind, A'Den turned on the communications and dialed the frequency until the troops from down below could be heard taking orders from a higher ranking officer. Quickly, A'Den lowered the altitude of the Ebon Mortis so it could be readily seen, even if it meant to be an easier target if anything went wrong. After a few more adjustments, A'Den opened up the comm. link and spoke.

"This is A'Den Verda Fett and I am here to collect the bounty on the head of one Quintano Roo. I believe that you are holding him. I am willing to pay a handsome reward for your efforts on his apprehension and an additional fee to remove all records that he even existed."

A'Den waited for a response; however, there was a great doubt that any Hutt would be cooperative in any fashion. Figuring that this might get messy, the bounty hunter started to punch in targets into the targeting system. The screen lit up with green dots, there were so many to choose from.

The voice that came over the comm. link wasn't the guttural Hutttese language that had been expected. Instead it was a

mechanical voice, a droid that was answering for the large slug. Its response was unemotional and without inflection.

“The wealthy Oja isn’t interested in your ‘handsome reward’.”

“Is there anything that can be traded for the smuggler?”

“The content Oja has all that he desires.”

This brought frustration to the Mandalorian. There had been too much time, effort, energy and credits already invested in this bounty to turn back now. Having the smuggler locked up in some Hutt’s dungeon wasn’t an option. On top of this, the droid had made the entire conversation feel as though the Hutt himself wouldn’t waste his time with the conversation. It was time to get a little more aggressive.

“Then, thank you for capturing my bounty for me, now if you would kindly hand him over.”

There was no mistaken the Mandalorian’s tone and A’Den had hoped that everyone who was listening understand the impatience that was building.

“The ruthless Oja has decided to keep the one named Quintano Roo for his entertainment purposes. The impatient Oja has finalized this conversation.”

“Don’t make me come down there. Now we can either do this the easy way or the...”

The guards that had been training in the courtyard had stopped what they were doing as soon as they saw the Ebon Mortis. They continued to wait for instructions on what to do and by their battle stance and their weapons in their ready positions it would have seemed that they already knew what orders would be given. They were correct.

The blaster fire started to strike the Ebon Mortis from multiple directions. A'Den knew that the small blasters wouldn't do much damage against the large ship and the suspicions were confirmed as the blaster fire started to ricochet off of the ship's hull. However, it only a matter of time before one of them got a lucky shot and hit something vulnerable. To add to this, the heavy armored vehicles were starting to maneuver to get into place and open fire while the battle droids were starting to warm up. Things were about to get very interesting very quickly.

“Why is it always the hard way?” A'Den asked aloud.

The bounty hunter pushed the firing mechanism. The heavy blasters shot back at those that dared take a shot. The fire power cut through the crowd and blasted guards left and right. Small explosions covered the ground on a strafing run, blasting everything that it struck.

Several of the armored vehicles were hit. Their frames exploded into towering infernos of fire while their debris shot through the area. Hot metal pierced bodies of those that hadn't scattered. Screams of pain echoed through the courtyard and blaster shots lit up the night.

A'Den hit the automatic pilot and made sure that the ship continued to slowly turn while continuing the barrage of firepower upon the small army below. Once the ship made about a quarter turn, it would then start all over in the opposite direction. This would give the bounty hunter the cover that was needed. It would have been easier if someone was here to pilot the ship and hit specific targets, but until A'Den found anyone that could be trusted and was at least a competent pilot, this was going to have to do.

As the ship continued its bombardment, A'Den moved to the hatch of the ship. A quick flick of the controls opened the portal and A'Den stepped out, into open air, with both hand held blasters firing.

The bounty hunter free fell for a short time while the blasters started to cut down one guard after another. One by one the mercenaries fell under the expert shot of the Mandalorian.

Before A'Den hit the ground, the jetpack was initiated. A'Den's body flew upward and spiraled to give a full view of the battle. Although many guards had fallen and a large number of their vehicles were destroyed and a few fires had broken out in several places, the guards hadn't lost their morale. They continued to fight on as if death was preferable over the punishment from Oja the Hutt if they deserted the battle.

As the guards were still busy trying to take cover and trying to get out of the way of the ship's continual barrage, A'Den made for the prominent bay windows of what was expected to be Oja's personal room. A'Den knew that one quick and sudden appearance and the fat slug would quickly change his mind, attitude, and reasoning. A'Den had a way with changing someone else's mind for them and the blasters usually played a great deal in that conversation.

The blow upon the jetpack seemed to come out of nowhere. Rather it was a calculated shot in the middle of all of this chaos upon a moving target only lit up by the random displacement of blaster fire or it was just a lucky shot, A'Den would never know. All that was important was that fact that gravity was taking over. The jetpack sputtered twice before completely giving up.

A'Den's body slammed against the hard ground. The blow sent pain through the bounty hunter's ribs. The loud snap told A'Den that the jetpack was out of commission. It would have to be repaired again back on the Ebon Mortis and that cost would be added to the fee that was to be collected.

A'Den looked up at the large bay windows. The plan to fly through the Hutt's window was now out of the question. It was time to show these mercenaries, up close and personal, what a Mandalorian could do.

The Mandalorian came up blasting. Bolts of energy flew through the air. A guard to the bounty hunter's left was hit, gave a scream of pain and fell over dead before hitting the ground. Another guard to the right ducked for cover. Now was the time.

A'Den rushed for the main door with guns blazing. The blasts struck the portal with a vengeance until it gave way due to its lack of integrity. The Mandalorian's body slam finished what the blaster bolts had started.

Quickly A'Den ducked and spun to the right. Two shots were sent from the blasters almost out of instinct. The two guards that had rounded the corner were struck dead before they even realized what had happened.

The hall lights went dim and were replaced by flashing emergency red ones. A warning announcement echoed across the walls telling of an intruder in the complex. The distraction outside was no longer going to be a useful tool. The guards inside the complex were now fully away of the Mandalorian's presence and they knew the layout better. A'Den knew that everything must be done to keep from being pinned in a dead end hallway or surrounded by a crossfire at an intersection. On top of this, there was still the task of erasing all of the data that Oja had collected. A'Den was right, things just got interesting.

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The warning had startled the security detail and it was Captain Duran that had stopped first. He had trained himself to be ready for anything and the alarm stating that they had an intruder wasn't something that he had been prepared for. The blow just under his ribs was the second thing that he hadn't been prepared for.

Quintano was already looking for a means for escape, any opportunity would do. He would have to include getting the restraining bolt off of Aro in the process and help the astromech



escape as well if he wanted to pilot the ship off of this planet. The sudden alarm had brought about that opportunity.

After the quick blow to the captain, Quintano quickly grabbed his blaster, swung behind the Zabrack and used him as a shield. By the time the two Gamorrean guards had figured out what was going on, the smuggler got off two shots, right between the eyes of both of them. A slap over the back of the head of the Zabrack took the fight out of him and a rapid shot made sure that the captain stayed down permanently.

Quintano searched the Zabrack and found the tool to remove the restraining bolt from the R2-0 astromech. It didn't take long to free the droid and despite the fact that Quintano wanted this to be as quiet as possible, Aro continued to send out a stream of tweets and beeps that echoed off of the hallway. The last thing that he wanted was to alarm any more guards to their presence. It was too late.

The sounds of multiple footsteps of incoming guards from both directions of the hall caught Quintano's attention. He ducked behind the R2-0 unit and took two shots toward the first direction and hit the first guard to round the corner. This made the others stop and use the corner as a cover. Without missing a beat, the smuggler turned back around and sent down two more shots, A couple more guards fell from that direction and stopped the others from advancing, at least for now.

Quintano knew that he was now caught in the middle of the hall between a crossfire. There was nowhere to go except through one of the sets of guards and he would be cut down by the other side the moment that he turned his back. He had to find another way.

The window up ahead caught his attention. Although he knew that he was on at least the second floor, he didn't know how far down the drop was. It could have led to a ravine or even right off the cliff face. It could have even dropped into the courtyard full of awaiting guards. Then again, it could lead to freedom. There

was only one way to find out and it was his only chance at survival.

“Aro, through the window, now!”

The astromech gave a few tweets of protest but once Quintano gave it a shove forward, it got the hint. It rolled forward with all of its speed, engaged its small thrusters and hit the window hard. Glass shattered in all directions and showered the floor.

Quintano moved forward with as much speed as he could muster. He took a few more shots in the first direction to make the guards take cover again and a few more in the reverse direction to do the same. When he was sure that he had a few seconds of relief, he jumped out of the window after the astromech.

The smuggler free fell for a short distance until his body slammed into the R2-0 unit. Its thrusters were slowly guiding the droid downward but with the sudden added weight, its form descended faster than the both of them desired. The crash landing on the hard packed dirt wasn't as bad as they thought.

Quintano spun around and shot toward the window in anticipation of being followed. His instincts had proven to be corrected and two guards were hit. Both lost their balance and fell unceremoniously to the ground below. This gave him the reprieve that he needed.

Both Aro and Quintano took off as quickly as they could. The smuggler had no idea which way they were heading, but it didn't matter until they cleared the compound. Once they were far enough away, he would figure out where they were and try to circle around to the spaceport. His night of luxury was going to have to wait.

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A'Den kicked the door open and sent in a barrage of blaster fire. Bolts struck the crewmen operating their stations. Machinery exploded and sent debris in all directions. Computers sent showers of electrical sparks. The two guards that attempted to reach for their weapons were cut down and died before hitting the ground.

The bounty hunter made a clean sweep of the room before snapping both blasters back into their holsters. This was the room that was being sought after. If Oja's private room was the heart of the mansion compound, then this was the brain center. Computer terminals were upon desks in the middle of the room while servers were lined up against the walls. Everything that went through a computer moved through this room.

This part of the mission had already become a fiasco. Every security camera had caught both the predator and the prey and A'Den knew it. Plus there were records of Quintano's arrival and what was going to happen to him. All of these needed to be erased and any further recordings needed to be shut down before the smuggler could be secured.

A'Den first found the alarm system and shut it off. The flashing lights and blaring warning was becoming annoying and it was difficult to think. Relief and reprieve came when the lights stopped flashing and noise quit blaring.

The Mandalorian then found the database storage units. There was a brief delay in accessing the material, but once in A'Den was able to erase everything throughout the past day. The blaster shot to the server made sure that nothing else could be stored on it ever again.

A'Den now had to find the smuggler in this maze of a complex. Fortunately, with all of the camera feeds from all around the compound, the Mandalorian knew that it was only a matter of time before Quintano crossed at least one of them. Of course the next problem would be to get to that area, plan where he would go next, and extract the smuggler without too much opposition.

There, on the screen to the right, was the image that was sought. The smuggler was pinned down between two groups and it was only a matter of time before he was caught in the crossfire and was killed. A'Den was sure that Oja would cut his losses on his entertainment and kill Quintano rather than have him escape. This meant that they were going to shoot Quintano and be done with him. To make matters worse, there was no way to get to him in time, let alone be able to blast through the small army that had him surrounded before he was killed.

It was then that Quintano made his escape and all A'Den could do was give a shake of the head. The smuggler seemed to be one step ahead of everyone and was able to find a way out of every situation. It was too bad that he had to be brought in. Still, he would be alive and the bounty would make it worth it all. Now all A'Den had to do was get out of the compound and...

The sound of footsteps near the door caught A'Den's attention. There had been too much time taken in this room and now the only way out was blocked by incoming guards. A few shots came from their blasters as they hid from around the corners of the doorway.

A'Den ducked and rolled as the blaster shots hit the computers and sent more showers of sparks everywhere. Metal debris flew into the air. Bolts of energy crossed through the room. A chair was hit and was blasted apart. A server was struck and blew into bits. Another was hit and fell over.

The small desk that A'Den had picked for cover wasn't going to last long. The random shots being sent through the doorway may not have been very accurate, but they would eventually strike everything in the room and that included this very weak and feeble piece of wood. There was only one way out.

A'Den reached for two orbs stashed in the side pockets of the Mandalorian armor. A few buttons were pushed and the orbs started to hum with power. The use of the two grenades would be

added to the bill. Now, it was only a matter of tossing them in the right direction.

A'Den tossed the first orb over the table and toward the doorway. It bounced twice before exploding with a burst of destruction that leveled the area. A huge fireball blew down the parallel corridor and back into the room. The concussion could be felt throughout the whole compound like a ripple or a small quake that affected everything. Fragments of nearby walls and pieces of the ceiling caved in. Dust and debris was blown in all directions.

The Mandalorian knew that the blast would kill a good portion of the small army that had amassed outside, but wouldn't necessarily kill them all. Even a second blast wouldn't do the trick; more would come from all directions. No, the escape route wouldn't be through the halls and the first grenade wasn't meant to kill, only to hold any further attacks at bay, even if only for a short time.

The second grenade was tossed to the wall behind the Mandalorian. The layout of the compound had this room as part of the outer wall. One good placement of the grenade would be all it would take.

Again the room shook with a huge explosion. Dust, dirt and debris shot through the air. What few servers that were still standing, collapsed and smashed to the ground. The wall was blown open and all that was left was a hole large enough for the Mandalorian to fit through. A'Den never looked back.

The courtyard was littered with debris of vehicles and dead bodies that were strewn upon the ground. Pieces of the wall had blown out and had landed upon everything. There was nothing but destruction in all directions that A'Den could see.

The Ebon Mortis still continued to turn left and then right while laying a barrage of devastation to the courtyard. Heavy blasts continued to tear into compound and into the debris of turned

over and destroyed vehicles. Explosions filled the area with each passing moment.

A'Den could see that the heavy turrets aboard the ship were starting to superheat under their constant usage. Again, this was another indication that a pilot was needed if A'Den was going to continue this line of work. A second person would have not only stopped the turrets by now, but would have also swung around and blasted several other parts of the compound, including Oja's room if needed, and would have landed the Ebon Mortis and provide back up.

With the jetpack out of commission and in need of repair, the bounty hunter aimed and fired the built in grappling hook. A hasty activation brought the Mandalorian back into the ship and a few moments later the continued bombardment stopped. The power coils to the weapons were completely overheated. It was best to not use them again for awhile and to let them cool.

After a few adjustments to redirect power away from the weapons systems, A'Den set course to the spaceport. Quintano would want to put as much distance between him and Oja as quickly as possible and that meant getting back to his ship. With any luck, the smuggler could be cut off and intercepted before that happened.

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The "borrowed" speeder cut through the desert landscape as quickly as Quintano could push it. Its engines were already whining in protest and the gauges were already pushing into the red. Something had already blown in the engine and there was smoke coming out of it, signaling his arrival. The engine threatened to blow any moment now and with the smoke signaling his arrival toward the spaceport, Quintano continued to push the outdated piece of junk even faster. The quicker that he could get to his destination, the sooner he could dump the speeder, hopefully before it either blew or it drew every guard from every station to his location.

Quintano waited for the last moment before signaling to the astromech to make a jump for it. Both he and the droid flew from the craft as the speeder continued to barrel its way into the entrance of the spaceport. There was nothing that anyone could do to stop the runaway, speeding craft.

The speeder hit the front gate with incredible force and blew the entryway wide open. Guards dove for cover and came up blasting with their weapons. Bolts of energy flew through the air and struck the already overheated and tasked speeder.

The resulting explosion rocked the courtyard sending more guards into hiding. The fire lit up the sky. The smoke filled the air.

As the guards started to recover or even started to move toward the devastated vehicle, Quintano signaled toward the astromech. They used the distraction, the chaos that it had caused, and the shadows that it had created, to pick their way around the area. It wasn't difficult to move from one set of crates, to a docked ship, to another speeder, and then behind an auxiliary building to finally come upon the Miy'til Starfighter.

"Damn, they have it locked down. Aro, you're going to have to..."

"Hey, you're not supposed to be here."

The interruption caught Quintano by surprise and stopped him mid-sentence. He whipped around to see the source of the communication only to see a handful of guards coming around to secure the area. His blaster followed suit and shots were immediately fired.

Two guards went down while several ducked for cover. Two called for reinforcements while the others returned fire upon the intruder. It was hard to pinpoint the trespasser with the darkness

of the night and the distracting illumination of the speeder that was still on fire.

Quintano rolled to one side and found a crate to hide behind and use for cover. He put down a suppressive fire to scare the guards off before he rolled to another side to find another place to hide. He hoped that he could continue to misdirect and distract the guards while Aro did the task that he hoped that the astromech had figured out before they were fired upon. If the R2-0 unit couldn't take the initiative at this point, then he would have to verbally tell the droid and that would give away his location. He needed to stay on the move and keep using the darkness to cover him for a shot or two before he moved again.

Despite the fact that the astromech wanted to help out in the firefight and make a grand announcement as it did it, Aro did just the opposite. It kept its tweets and beeps to itself. It even powered down as many lights as possible. It understood the need for stealth. Any attempt to help Quintano at this point would only get them both killed. The only way to help them both was to free the ship and get it ready for takeoff.

As the blaster fire continued to build, Aro knew that time was running out for the both of them. As soon as it came upon the lockdown restraints, the astromech immediately went to work. Quickly and quietly, the little droid extended its arm into the holding locks and gave each one a twist. There was a slight delay with each lock before they released and allowed the droid to move on to the next one.

Once all of the locks were dealt with, Aro used its thrusters to launch itself up and into the copilot position. Again its appendage spun in the connecting input until access was gained to the computer. It was then that the power turned on. The engine roared, the ship came alive, and it was ready for anything.

Aro spun the Miy'til Starfighter where it stood. A sudden spin of its arm brought the targeting system online and another spin brought the heavy cannons to life.



Bolts of heavy fire power shot through the spaceport and tore through the night. Their impact blew up ships and vehicles, speeders and crates, battle droids that had just arrived to subdue the intrusion and everything else that stood in their way. Explosions lit up the area. Blasts blew metal debris in all directions and every guard ran for their lives in search of cover or something that hadn't been blasted in a desperate attempt to retake the spaceport.

Quintano knew an opportunity when he saw one and he wouldn't get another chance. He turned and ran for the Miy'til Starfighter. As he approached, the cockpit door opened for his arrival.

The smuggler jumped inside and pushed the throttle forward. Aro was already making the calculations to their next stop, but Quintano didn't wait for them to be entered. He merely brought the ship off the ground and took to the skies.

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The protocol droid turned toward the massive slug that was lounging on the large couch where he usually was. He was sure that Oja wasn't going to be please about the reports that were coming in, but it didn't really matter. It had no feelings toward the slug; it only did its job.

“Great and powerful Oja, reports from the spaceport have confirmed that the smuggler named Quintano has escaped. Also, the ship known as the Ebon Mortis from the bounty hunter that called himself A'Den Verda Fett was also seen in the area immediately afterwards and left in the direction of the smuggler, the very same Mandalorian that had threatened your existence and tore through your compound.”

For the first time in a long time, Oja the Hutt spoke and when he did it was with a loud, guttural voice that shook the room and brought fear to all within earshot.

“Oto du che copah hoohah. Koose yunada ta je. Keepuna du Ebon Mortis.”

The protocol droid turned back toward the transmissions that were coming in and interrupted them.

“The great and vengeful Oja the Hutt has spoken. Bring us their heads and shoot down the Ebon Mortis.”

---

The Fury-class Imperial Interceptor known as the Wraith eased its approach to the spaceport of Aeon on Nar Kreeta. Valas had turned off all of the external lights and with the pitch black color of the ship; none had seen its approach. Valas had wanted to gather as much information as possible without being seen. It was best if no one knew that he was here. If he was right then he would be able to see either the Miy’til Starfighter or the Phantom Class or at least some hint that they were here. He found the “hint” that he was looking for.

The spaceport was in complete ruins. Buildings were destroyed and were on fire. Ships were blown to pieces. Dead bodies littered the ground. The things that were missing were the Miy’til Starfighter and the Phantom Class ship.

It seemed to Valas that wherever he looked for these two, there was nothing but death and destruction in their wake. If he didn’t catch them fast then they would end up killing each other and that just wouldn’t do. It also seemed that he was still one step behind the both of them and he continued to arrive too late.

Valas turned on his comms and listened to the communications’ traffic that came on. There was the usual activity and most of it didn’t sound important until he heard the protocol droid make its announcement.

“The great Oja the Hutt has spoken. Bring us their heads and shoot down the Ebon Mortis.”

This revealed two things. There was another player in this hunt and Oja would pay a good deal of credits to the first to catch either of these two. This would make things a little bit more complicated. The second thing it revealed was the fact that Quintano was no longer on this planet. He wouldn't be stupid enough to stay here with a very angry Oja looking for him. No, he would want to get off and fast.

This still left the question of where he was going. Valas's initial suspicion of heading to Nar Shaddaa seemed to still hold true. He could hide under the shadow of a couple more Hutts while picking up his package or even making his contact. Valas knew that he had to get there before the smuggler did.

With this in mind, Valas punched in the coordinates to Nar Shaddaa. He knew several high ranking individuals there and had many contacts. None knew who he really was, but they knew that he carried authority codes well above their pay grade and that was all that they needed to know. With a few calls, Valas would be able to tie up the spaceport before either of the other two ships arrived and would be able to get there before they did. A push on the throttle and Valas navigated his ship toward Nar Shaddaa.

## **Book: Nar Shaddaa**

### **Chapter: Mee Naga**

"Proceed to landing bay 72."

The command that was sent over the communications link had to be amplified to cut through the static. The problem with this was that the other communications to the various other ships that were trying to coordinate with the traffic control tower between taking off and landing was also coming in. Various other pilots were trying to negotiate or even bribe their way into a landing bay and were trying their best to get the attendant's attention.

"One thousand credits for the next landing bay."

"Negative on that offer. The trade federation has complete authority..."

"This is the Imperial shuttle Centurion. We have full authority for this landing, all others must clear..."

The chatter continued as Quintano continued to maneuver his ship to the appropriate landing spot. He was glad that he hadn't been escorted by the Hutt security here on Nar Shaddaa. He was sure that news about escaping from Oja's custody and about Koran Kane's death would have reached Nar Shaddaa by now, however he wasn't sure how that information would be received. The Hutts didn't necessarily get along with each other and the misfortune of one could benefit another. Then again, the Hutts didn't become the largest syndicate in the galaxy by warring against each other. It was still hard to tell if he was being allowed easy access on friendly terms or just to make sure he landed in the appropriate jail cell.

It was a slight trepidation that came over Quintano when he watched the ground crew come toward his ship. Normally the crew would refuel the ship and even unload any cargo, at a fee of course. Other paid services would include recharging laser battery cells, fixing and repairing minor damage, giving the ship a new coat of paint or even giving the ship a new shine. They would also do a thorough scan to see if any space viruses were picked up along the way. However, it wasn't uncommon to hide armed troops along with the ground crew to pick up any unwanted and undesirable guests. No troops were spotted.

"Just recharge the battery cells and refuel. I'm not sure if I'm going to be keeping it, so if you have a list of potential buyers then I'll take that as well."

The Ugnaught gave a deep squeaky, chirpy and half barking noise that constituted as its language. Its hand reached out for the appropriate payment and when it was received, he started barking orders in its native language to other Ugnaughts in the area. Within moments, the bunch of them was in the process of doing the job at hand.

Quintano took a look around. Not much had changed here at Nar Shaddaa. The spaceport here at Mee Naga, one of the larger cities on the planet, was bustling with activity. Countless ships were taking off and landing and it was a surprise to Quintano that none of them crashed. Many other ships were being loaded and unloaded and, although this seemed to be haphazardly, somehow the cargo shipments didn't get confused with one another.

Troops were moving from one ship to another, some were getting off with others were getting on. Droids were going about taking inventory or pulling cargo. Ship pilots were discussing their needs with deck hands.

Aro used its jets to remove itself from the back co-pilot position and hurried up to catch up to Quintano. Its multiple bleeps and tweets seemed to express joy at its arrival to civilization. Although Nar Kreeta had a major city, Nar Shaddaa was a

bustling, thriving metropolis that seemed to be the hub of every transaction in the galaxy. Anything that was moved from one point to another usually wound up here. Anything and everything could be found here.

"Oh, no, no, no, no." Quintano stated turned to the astromech. "We had a deal. I was going to take you to Nar Shaddaa and now that we are here, we're parting our ways. I told you that I don't need an astromech, and I meant it. Anyway, this is as far as I'm going. I'm just going to make one last deal and retire, not much of a life for an astromech."

"Wooo." The tone of the droid had come across as being sad.

"Oh, no, don't give me that. I'm sure that there are plenty of pilots out there that need a good astromech and are willing to pay a decent price for one. You could do them a service and a favor by offering your services to one of them. I'm sure that you can find someone that you can get along with just fine."

"Woooo." Again the tone from Aro came across as lonely and rejected.

"Nope. Not this time. See ya around Aro, take care."

The astromech could only stand there and watch as Quintano Roo walked away and disappeared into the crowd.

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The taxi pad was packed with individuals waiting for a speeder to take them to the various places around the city. Again, there were supplies that was being trafficking, troops trying to get from one place to another, and officials going about their business. A couple of individuals had set up small shops to sell their trinkets or goods of stims, minor weapons, drugs, spices, and a few other odds and ends. Three Gamorrean guards, each in uniform, had cornered an individual and had him confiscated on his knees. Quintano only gave a slight thought about the captured outlaw.

He wondered if he would be shot here and now, taken out to some out-of-the-way location and shot, or taken to a Hutt and probably shot. Either way this person's fate was probably already sealed.

Mee Naga had grown to a conglomerate set of towering buildings that rose high above the ground. The massive skyscrapers dominated the area and Quintano doubted that anyone had ever seen the ground level during their lifetime. Even "ground level" wasn't a term that was used since just about every building had several levels below where the ground used to be.

"State your designation," the humanoid droid stated while reaching out its hand.

"Red light district," Quintano said as he passed a few credits to the droid.

The android accepted the fee and deposited the coins into a slot in its form that would hold the fees until its master would show up and remove them. Once the fee was accepted, it turned to the small speeder that was attached to the extended dock and programmed it to the appropriate area. This was to ensure that the passengers would be able to make it to their destination without getting lost, crash into other speeders, or even fly off with the craft.

Quintano hopped aboard and hit the "engage" button. It was only then did the small craft take off to its designated destination on its pre programmed route. He only hoped that the droid hadn't sent the speeder to a different location or on a roundabout route. Many taxi stations were known to do this, just to confuse the passenger and make him pay a greater fee.

The smuggler took in the scene that stretched as far as he could see. Large neon signs were displayed across almost every portion of the buildings. There were signs for some of the seedier, yet more popular taverns, a few signs for the floating gambling palace, several signs calling for the citizens to elect a new

governor, and many others in languages that Quintano couldn't read. Neon blue, red, green, orange and yellow flashed continually, words that took up several floors of the buildings changed periodically, products were displayed, and exotic dancers were showcased.

With the perpetual light constantly flashing as big as the signs were, nighttime was no longer relevant. Darkness would only reach the lowest levels of the city. This was truly a metropolis that never slept.

Speeders of various types flew from one destination to another. There were rows and rows of traffic at several levels above and below the course that Quintano was currently on. Each was going in different directions that only gave full credence to the fact that this city never slept. Every speeder was expertly piloted and programmed to not hit or run into another speeder as even a minor collision at this elevation would be fatal.

The speeder twisted and turned, following the traffic, between the tall, massive buildings. It was after several kilometers did the speeder drop in elevation. Here it merged and followed another row of traffic.

After several more minutes of travel, the speeder turned off from the main traffic route. It dropped a little bit more before it landed on another taxi landing pad that jaunted out from the building; Quintano's destination. .

Quintano dismounted the speeder, ignored the greeting from the droid welcoming him to this section, ignored the dirty looks from the passengers who were waiting for this taxi to arrive and made his way through the landing bay. A few droids were displaying holograms of exotic dancers who would be performing at local cantinas, others showed menus where drinks and meals could be ordered ahead of time and have readied by the time an individual arrived at the tavern, and a few showing holograms of wanted rogues with bounties on their heads.



The smuggler moved beyond all of these and continued into the building proper. He knew exactly where he was going and it had nothing to do with any of the droids out here. Only the more well-known businesses would invest in one of these advertising droids, an investment that could be damaged, reprogrammed or even stolen. No, the tavern that he was seeking didn't have that kind of funds to invest in these droids and wasn't well known, as a matter of fact, its best asset was the fact that it wasn't publicized.

The halls in the main building were all laid out in a similar design as a typical street might have been on any other planet. The buildings raised many levels on each side, each with front doors and windows. The halls between each were big enough for several personal speeders to pass by each other, as they often did. There were even sections between the lanes of the hallways that resembled places of rest with benches and holo-trees. The only difference between here and a regular city was the fact that the "sky" was sealed off by the floor of the next level that only repeated the process.

Quintano passed by several individual speeders along the way. Not only were the streets wide enough for them the distance between one side of the building to the other was a very large distance and could be several kilometers. Then there was the fact that many of the levels connected to each other through a series of ramps. It could end up taking a large amount of time to travel from one place to another and so the speeders were often important.

But the streets weren't just filled with periodic speeders. There were droids of various shapes and sizes. Some were pulling carts of equipment from one place to another. Some droids were working on speeders, others were trying to entice individuals into various shops, and some were patrolling the streets for either the Hutts or some other cartel.

Then there were the different species. There were Twi'leks with their long twin head appendages, the Nautolans with their

multiple head appendages, and Togrutas with their exotic colorations. A few Mon Calamari could be seen as well as a couple of Wookies. Ugnaughts weren't uncommon, Gamorreans were hired as muscle or body guards, and even a Kel Dor could be found. The list went on and on with each block.

There were many businesses here. There were the usual stim sellers, junk hawkers, and parts dealers. Most of these had carts or temporary lean-tos or even a makeshift shelter from old canvas or discarded bolts of cloth. Most of the shops, though, were part of the massive building that held this small metropolis. There were tons of taverns and bars. There were raves and dance halls. There were places that were seedy and places that were high scale and places that had lines, patrolled by bouncers, waiting to get in.

Large neon signs pointed in all directions. Flashing lights and moving videos tried to capture the attention of anyone who walked by. Every business tried to compete with all the others with a new deal, a new form of entertainment, or the promise of a few holo-dancers.

Music boomed out of almost all of the shops, rather they were taverns or not. Some shops might sell incense while others sold clothing and others sold household items. It didn't matter, if a shop wanted to compete down here in the red-light district, then one had to do everything possible to attract a customer.

Prostitutes lined the streets. Male and female companions alike tried their best to gain their customers with scantily clad bodies and a promise of a great time for a cheap price. Yet, despite the obviously over abundance of these individuals, there weren't any disputes of clients or location. Each one had his or her own corner and didn't deviate knowing full well that this would cause trouble from the Hutts.

A few homeless could be found begging from the passersby. These were the unfortunate that had been displaced by gang wars or had come here under the promise of a better life and found

nothing more than what they had left behind. There were a few that tried to hustle rare stimulants that promised to enhance various aspects of one's life but would only turn to addition. There were gang members that stayed together who checked out every possible angle for a better way of life without running into another gang or by upsetting the local authorities. Down one alleyway a shadow turned and disappeared from view.

Smells of all kinds wafted down the street. The smell of personal speeders mixed with the scents of different alien species. Perfume was mixed with sweat. Incense mixed with gear lube from the droids.

Despite the attempt to make individuals feel as if they were outside with the facades of the shops and taverns, the widths of the streets, and the holo-trees, there were still some items that made it obvious that this was still indoors. There were large fans that could periodically be seen. These were slowly turning, but it was just enough to help circulate the air that was already stale. There were also large vents here and there that would allow the air to be heated or cooled when necessary. Nar Shaddaa prided itself with one of the best and probably the largest artificial atmospheric control systems in the galaxy.

Large pipes ran up and down some of the walls. These helped move water, gases, and even electrical conduits about. Access points along the way allowed for manual or electrical shut off or to help divert or regulate the flow of each. A few droids were working on one such outlet in an attempt to reroute power from a tripped relay.

While all of this would have amazed any first time tourist to the point of near madness with the chaos and the constant bombardment of stimulation and activity, Quintano ignored it all. He had been here many times and had gotten used to the feel of the ebbs and flows of the area. Nothing much surprised him anymore.

The smuggler continued his walk past one place after another. Tavern and bars came and went and none appealed to him. He knew what he was looking for and when he saw it, a relief of all of tension of the past several experiences was released. This may not have been his home, but it was a haven.

## Chapter: The Maidenhead Tavern

The Maidenhead Tavern was Quintano's kind of place. It was low key and not well known. It catered to only a certain type of clientele and the smuggler was one of them. Anything could happen here and there were no questions asked. As long as the fighting was kept to nil or at least to a minimum, the waitresses were well tipped, the food was ordered and everyone remained in a fairly happy mood then the establishment welcomed every patron. It wasn't one of those seedy places where fights broke out all the time, nor one that ran other "businesses" behind closed doors, nor was it one of the high class taverns that could be found on the floating palisade. It was somewhere in between with decent food at a decent price and because of its low profile, Quintano could conduct his business without raising any concerns.

One large main room took up the majority of the tavern with several smaller rooms connecting to it. Taking up the space of one of the walls at the back was a small stage that could accommodate a small band to perform live music. Currently the stage was empty that suggested that the band had either moved on to bigger and better gigs, that they were on break for a while, or more than likely, the tavern had run out of credits to pay for them and a new, cheaper band had to be considered.

Near the stage was a music box. For a few credits the machine could play a selection of pre recorded music. Currently it was playing some almost forgotten tune from long ago that reminded Quintano of a better time in his youth. The music box only had these older tunes since the establishment hadn't taken the time, and probably didn't have the funds to update its music selection and Quintano hoped that they never would.

Circular tables were placed around the tavern with several circular stools. The majority of these were taken up by patrons of

various races, each enjoying some odd concoction of drinks or some plate of off worldly food. The atmosphere was low key and enjoyable.

Several patrons had brought their small computers, data pads, sensors, or even had their smaller droids. These were all connected to a large server that allowed each one to access the network so they could conduct their business while enjoying their meal. This was one of the attractions to the tavern.

In the center of the room was a circular bar staffed by the bartender. Bottles of various drinks were stashed above and under the bar area, well within reach of bartender. Many occupied stools had been pulled up and the Nautolan was busy keeping all of the customers satisfied with their orders.

With the exception of the kitchen area, the other open smaller rooms were more private parts of the tavern. Here patrons could feel more secluded and these spaces were often reserved in advance.

Waitresses and service droids continued to come in and out of the kitchen area and with them came the aroma of the grilled food that permeated the room. Despite the chaos that seemed to be conducted, there was really a slightly organized dance, just shy of a frenzy, with the coming and going of so many individuals and droids. The clanging of pots and pans mixed with the sound of chopping and sizzling food had an added sound of a dish being dropped periodically followed by a series of profanities. The voices from inside the kitchen could be overheard even from the far end of the tavern and even over the voices of the patrons.

"Order up."

"What do you mean he doesn't like it? It supposed to taste this way."

"One order of mush, extra runny."

“Yes, it’s supposed to still be moving. How else would it be served?”

In each corner was a smaller stage where a holo-dancer was entertaining guests. Several individuals had pulled up chairs to watch the holo dancers and electronically tip them. They were able to dance in some backroom privately, have their dance projected through the holograms, and then turn off the hologram projections when they needed a break without having to walk through the tavern. This was to protect the dancers from any physical or verbal unwanted or unsolicited activities while providing the patrons with the entertainment that they came for.

"Go sit your butt down."

The voice of the female hostess that was greeting patrons had brought Quintano out of his reverie. This informal behavior was another thing that appealed to him. The place was so very laid back that it was comfortable, a warm welcome from the perils that he had recently faced and endured.

But despite the invitation to have a seat and kick his feet up, Quintano shook his head. "I'm here to meet up with someone."

The smuggler's eyes took in the room and his ears took in the sounds. The individual that he was looking for was somewhere in this chaos. All he had to do was find her. Between the hustle and bustle of the patrons, he couldn't help but overhear some of their conversations.

“...Oh chee wa nah, moy cuchi wani...”

“...and then I turned to him and said...that’s not my protocol droid, that’s my wife...”

“...yes the shipment is ready for departure...”

"...shhh, lower your voice, someone might hear you..."

"...gruup, muwi, nochutoo..."

"...and on page 153 paragraph four subsection two you will see that this constitutes as a natural crit..."

It was when he continued his scan did he see her near one of the back corners serving the patrons a round of drinks. The Twi'lek was how he remembered her. She was slightly shorter than he was. She wore a deep rich purple top and a matching long skirt with high slits that accentuated her light blue skin. He had to admit that she looked just a good now as when she did when he last saw her.

"Jessa, how good to see you," Quintano stated as he slipped his arm around her waist.

The Twi'lek immediately spun on her heel, turned and slapped Quintano hard across his face.

"Yes, yes I know I deserved that and I'm really sorry about last time, Jessa"

"I'm not Jessa, I'm Tessa."

At first the name had meant nothing and he was ready to apologize for having the wrong Twi'lek. He had to admit that most of them looked the same, especially at a distance. But he was sure that he had the correct individual. She was not only working here at The Maidenhead Tavern as a waitress, but she was wearing Jessa's clothing. Then it dawned on him.

"Ah, yes, I remember now. She had mentioned your name, you're her twin sister. I'm sorry about that. Well, it's not entirely my fault; you two do look the same. Can you tell me where she is? I'm kind of looking for her. She was supposed to receive a package..."

"She's dead."



The cold response hit him hard. He and Jessa had been close and he had hoped that she would join him once he retired. They could both leave this place behind and find somewhere nice where they could live. Now, that was shattered and his heart broke.

"I'm ... I'm so sorry. When ... how ...?" The words came out awkwardly.

"Look," Tessa stated. "It's quitting time for me. We can talk in a few minutes. Let me check out."

Quintano gave a mournful nod and made his way back toward the door where he came in from. Here, he waited patiently for Tessa. It didn't take long before the two of them walked out, side by side.

They walked for a while not saying a word. It was hard to know where to begin. Their emotions were dark and mixed and awkward, but it was Quintano who pushed through it and broke the silence.

"How did she die?"

Tessa gave a mournful sigh. "Her body was found in the lower levels of the slums. She was hacked into several pieces and her organs were missing. The authorities believe that a group of organ thieves had gotten ahold of her. They..." The words just wouldn't come out.

"What in the world was she doing down there?"

Tessa shook her head. "No one knows. She went down there shortly after she received her package from you. What did you send her? What was so important about that package? What did you get her involved with?"

"It was just something I found, a trinket that I picked up. She was just supposed to hold it for me. I was going to sell it and be

done with it. I didn't know...if I knew that this was that important, I would never...Tessa you have to believe me. I would never put her life in danger. That thing has been nothing but trouble ever since I picked it up. The sooner I get rid of the better."

"Not to change the subject or to act coldly toward your loose, her death, but do you know where the package is? I don't want anyone else to wind up..." His words were cut short. He didn't want to hurt Tessa any further than the emotional scars that she already had.

Tessa stopped and looked at him. She evaluated his stance and body language to verify if he was speaking the truth or not. She seemed it didn't really matter. The sooner he was gone the better.

They had walked down the street, past many of the rival taverns, until they had arrived at a set of apartment complexes. From the looks of things, it was dump. Vagrants were hanging around outside, garbage was scattered about, large swaths of graffiti was painted on many of the buildings, and a few windows were broken and replaced with sheets of metal. There were even a few who were strung out on some stim addiction.

Tessa produced a key and opened the main door to the complex. Here she led him through the corridor and past several of the other apartments before she came to hers. Again, she used her key to get in.

Her apartment was rather small. From what Quintano could tell, the loft was basically two rooms where the kitchen, dining room, and living room was one of them. This meant that the couch probably folded out to be a bed. The second room had the restroom facilities. The main room has sparsely furnished with a couch and a small dresser. There was a tiny cooking apparatus in one corner, but it looked outdated and Quintano doubted that it worked. There wasn't any place for food storage.

When Tessa made sure that they weren't being followed, she closed the door to the apartment. "I don't have the package."

"Do you know where..."

"Shhh...Look I don't want any trouble. Whatever it is that you have gotten yourself into, I want no part of it. As soon as I found the odd package, I knew it was trouble so I mailed it off to Gamorr."

"Why? What's on Gamorr?"

She shrugged her shoulders. "I don't know. I just found the first shuttle that I could find down at the landing bay and asked him to drop it off. He was heading to Gamorr. That's all I know."

"You gave the package to a complete stranger? Why would you...? Quintano was never able to finish his statement."

## Chapter: Complications

Tessa's eyes grew wide with surprise. Her body exploded in pain. The dagger that had been thrust through her back had also penetrated through her chest. Her blood started to drip onto the ground before her knees finally gave way and her body collapsed. Her eyes closed and darkness came over her.

Quintano looked beyond the fallen Twi'lek and his eyes went wide. The Kel Dor that had come up behind her had pulled his knife from her body and was already wiping it clean. Beside him, two more Kel Dor had also come into the room, each drawing blasters. Quintano was now trapped, outnumbered and outgunned.

"Where is it?" The Kel Dor holding the dagger asked.

"What? Where's what? I...I don't know..."

"Don't play games with me. She wouldn't tell me either, now she's dead. Rumor has it that you have a package, a package worth a lot of credits."

"I don't know anything about a package," Quintano stated as his eyes continued to dart left and right. He was trying to figure out how to draw his weapon fast enough without being shot. Of course, he still didn't know how many of them there were. There still could be more waiting outside. It was best to stall and gather as much information as possible to plan his escape.

"Let me spell it out for you," the Kel Dor replied. "A bounty request came over the regular channels. It mentioned you as the bounty. Now, I wonder what you did to upset the Empire so much that they would hire a bounty hunter."

“It was...a misunderstanding, that’s all. I’m sure that once I talk it over with...”

The Kel Dor shook his head. “That’s not going to be happening any time soon. You see, me and my boys thought that ‘sure we could bring you in’. But the opportunity was retracted as soon as this ‘A’Den Verda Fett’ accepted the hunt before we could.”

‘At least now I have a name to the Mandalorian that has been hunting me,’ Quintano thought to himself.

“Now, the way we figure it,” the Kel Dor continued, “you owe us a great deal of credits on an opportunity that has been missed. We weren’t sure what to do about that, but that was until, to our surprise, a certain package arrived. Although a package wasn’t mentioned in regard to the bounty, we are fairly certain that it has something to do with why the Empire wants you so badly. Once Jessa, your last known relationship, received one with your name on it shortly after the bounty on your head was announced, we saw our opportunity. Unfortunately she got herself killed. Tessa didn’t know where it was, so her only purpose was to lead us to you. Now, tell us where to find this package and we’ll kill you quickly. Otherwise, we’ll just take you down to the slums and sell you to the organ pirates.”

“I...I really don’t know anything about a package.” Although this was a lie, Quintano knew that the next question would be where it was located. This, he really didn’t know. The last person that might have known was Tessa and her corpse was still bleeding next to his feet.

The Kel Dor motioned to the other two. They closed in on Quintano quickly and removed his blaster. With theirs pointed at his back, they gave a slight shove as a way to prod him forward to follow their leader.

Quintano followed the Kel Dor out of the apartment, down the hall, and toward the building’s main exit. He knew that once they got him to any waiting speeder, it would probably be all over.

The longer that he waited to try to make his escape, the less likely that it would succeed.

Just as they exited the main building, an astromech slammed into the lead Kel Dor. He stumbled one before his body fell sideways. The two Kel Dor turned their attention toward the astromech and took their surveillance off of their prize. It was the moment that Quintano had been looking for.

Quintano spun in place and grabbed the Kel Dor on his right. Another spin put him in back of the alien and before anyone knew what was happening, both he and Kel Dor were fighting for the weapon.

The astromech charged the downed mercenary who was already in the act of reaching for his blaster. The droid extended its appendage forward and shot forth an electrical bolt that jolted through the alien's body. The Kel Dor's body went into an uncontrollable spasm before he passed out.

The second Kel Dor readied his blaster and shot. He was sure that he had a clear shot despite the fact that the smuggler and his partner were struggling for the gun. He was wrong.

Quintano spun and put the Kel Dor's body between him and the other alien. The bolt hit his opponent and his body went limp in his arms. Without missing a beat, Quintano directed the dead alien's blaster toward the second opponent and shot, using the dead body as a shield. The blaster's bolt struck true and hit dead center mass. Within a few moments all three Kel Dor were down.

As Quintano picked up his blaster, he turned to the astromech that had basically saved his life. He was going to thank the little droid for its accidental interference when he realized that the markings and features were not only familiar but he was sure that it was the droid that he had left behind.

“Aro? Aro, is that you?”

“Beep, beep, bwirl, tweet, tweet, woo.”

“Wait...what? I appreciate that, don’t get me wrong, but how did you find me?”

“Whirl, burp, woo, woo, bleep beep.”

“What do you mean security cameras? Registered destinations of cabs? If you can find me then...”

A'Den stepped out of the shadows between the two shops. The Mandalorian had caught sight of the small gang that had apprehended Quintano. They had led him out of the apartment complex at gunpoint. This had been problematic. The Hutts would easily turn a blind eye to abduction, and perhaps they would disregard a quick shot or even a dead body or two, but they wouldn't tolerate an all-out firefight. That would damage property and scare off customers. There had to be an easier way to pick up Quintano without causing so much attention. It was when the R2-0 had come along did the situation present itself.

A'Den initiated the jetpack and flew through the air. The distance between the two of them closed quickly. If the distance could be closed fast enough then there was a chance to catch him and finally be done with the chase. That never happened.

“Dweet, dweet, wooo, wooo!”

Quintano looked up and to his right. The warning had come just in time, any closer and the advancing Mandalorian would have been on top of him. He would have to thank Aro yet again, but that would have to wait.

‘Damn it,’ Quintano thought to himself. ‘Doesn’t that bounty hunter ever give up? What’s so important about that package?’

## Chapter: The Chase

The answers would have to wait. With more to think about and no time to do so, Quintano bolted to his right. The Mandalorian had the advantage of flight, speed, and maneuverability. Attempting to shot the Mandalorian now would be a mistake. If he wanted to get away from the bounty hunter, he was going to have to even the playing field.

Quintano's route took him into a one of the few drug shops in the area. His sudden burst toward the door had caught the two hired guns off guard and as his body slammed into theirs, the two guards went spiraling toward the ground. With any luck, by the time they recovered, they would be able to slow down the Mandalorian

Inside the building, the roof was low. This would stop the bounty hunter from flying around. The lights were dim so that the patrons could enjoy their experience. A thick layer of mist hung in the air and this, combined with the dim lights, reduced the ability to see. Many patrons lay on the floor on top of large pillows or were propped up against the wall or some pillar. All of them seemed to be staring into some great void that only existed in their minds. None were responsive to his entrance. The owner behind the counter in the middle of the room and the few thugs that had been hired to keep the peace, however, were very responsive.

“Hey, you can’t just barge in here.”

Two Gamorrean guards stepped out of the shadows from the back of the room and started to advance upon Quintano. They were paid well enough to ensure that violence was kept to a minimum and unwanted guests were tossed out. The intruder seemed to apply to both of these conditions.



Quintano's mind raced as his form ran through the store. He was able to pick out the best place to put his feet in between the patrons that were slumped on the floor. One wrong move and he could have tripped himself up. However, he found that he could always think best under pressure and this was one of those cases.

As he quickly picked his way through the store, Quintano moved under the wide sweeping arms of the guard. His body ducked and then weaved so quickly that the lumbering brute didn't stand a chance in trying to catch him. Yet, he knew that unless he didn't do something to prevent the guard from chasing him, there was a good chance of still being caught.

Faster than what had been expected, Quintano stopped, dropped low, pivoted, and kicked out. His foot caught the Gamorrean in the back of the leg. The guard's leg buckled and his huge form fell. It would be a while before he was able to get back and come back after him.

Aro had followed the wake of destruction that Quintano was making along the way. He had rolled between the two guards outside that were still trying to get up. Inside, the A2-0 unit had to ignite its jets to fly over the individuals that the smuggler was hopping over. It was when the two guards started to descend upon them did the astromech droid act.

As the second guard started to close in on them, the astromech opened a small slot and extended a thin metallic appendage. Electricity flew from the metal arm and shot through the air to cover the short distance between the droid and the guard. The bolt struck the Gamorrean with enough force to drop him straight to the ground. It would be stunned and temporarily out of the chase, but it wouldn't be that way for long.

Quintano caught the actions of Aro and smiled. He was really starting to get to like the droid. It had initiative and seemed to be able to not only keep up with him, but packed a punch when needed.

Without missing a beat, the smuggler spun back around and headed toward the back of the room despite the comments from the owner. Quintano had spent enough time in this area to know the layout of many of the businesses without even having to step foot inside. He already knew that there was a back door and this was where he was going.

By the time that A'Den had arrived at the drug den, the two guards that had been knocked down had gotten back up. On top of that, they were now ready for any other intruder where they hadn't been before. Both reached out and caught hold of A'Den just as the bounty hunter had turned off the jetpack and started to enter the shop.

The insult of being grabbed (especially during such a long and arduous hunt and one that was going to have a huge payout) was insulting, upsetting, delaying, and would not be tolerated. A'Den reversed the grip on both of the guards and held on for balance. A single hop brought the Mandalorian into the air and a swift kick to the face stunned the first guard. Still using the guards as balance and using the momentum of the jump and the kick, A'Den spun in midair and did a roundabout kick that hit the second guard in the face as well.

Before the bounty hunter's body started to fall back toward the ground, the jetpack was initiated. A'Den flew up and forward. With a quick spin, both guards were smashed into the wall of the very building that they were guarding. Their bodies were unconscious before they were released and they were left to fall unceremoniously to the ground.

The Mandalorian landed and walked into the shop. Again caution had to be made. Disturbing shops could only be tolerated for so long. That caution was tossed out the window as soon as A'Den stepped inside.

The two guards that had been downed by Quintano had obviously had their pride hurt and they were looking for someone to take their frustrations out upon. And, although A'Den was able

to see Quintano slip out the back door, he would have to wait until these guards were dealt with. The bounty hunter could only give a shake of the head in realization at just how good Quintano had become with staying one step ahead from being caught.

A'Den dropped low under the first guard's attempt to capture and or subdue. The bounty hunter's leg kicked out and caught the guard in the knee and a second kick caught him in the groin. This slowed both guards down just long enough to realize that they were in over their heads. Without losing momentum, A'Den gave a short burst from the jetpack. The Mandalorian had to be careful to not crash into the ceiling or any low hanging beams. A'Den flew upward from the low position and came up with a left hand punch, straight to the lower jaw of the second guard.

The momentum of the jetpack thrust was able to put A'Den up and over the first guard. Another kick to the knee, this time to the backside, finished the job that the first kick started. There was a loud snap and the guard went down hard, in pain.

It was then that the first guard had realized that things were getting out of hand. It was best to kill off the intruder now and claim self-defense to the Hutts before the Mandalorian tore through the both of them. The guard pulled a dagger.

A'Den had already noticed the weapons on both of the guards. The stun sticks would do anything against the Mandalorian armor. The dagger, however, could find a weak spot. This made the attack dangerous and all now all bets were off. A'Den reach back, caught hold of the Mandalorian dagger and let it fly.

The blade flew true and struck hard. The guard tried to gasp and cry out in pain but the dagger sticking out of his throat made it impossible to do anything but let out a few gagging noises as blood started to spurt out. His knees buckled once before falling to the ground dead.

A'Den retrieved the thrown dagger and did a quick scan. The owner of the complex was running for his life while the first

guard was limping out after him as quickly as possible. It was no doubt they were going to call some of the Hutt guards to take care of their problem. This would no doubt include a bribe to initiate a reaction, any reaction, and probably another to ensure that the guards acted immediately. This would still give A'Den a little time to catch up to Quintano, apprehend him and be off before the guards arrived.

Quintano led the way out the back door and across the street to a used parts dealer. Here, the junk dealer had shelves of mechanical and electrical parts that had been salvaged or even "borrowed". Every part for every item could be found here, or at least that's what the shop owner and his advertisement had stated and from the looks of things, this might actually be true.

There were multiple shelves that lined the walls and standing shelves in the middle of the room. There were boxes and crates. All of these were stuffed with items, gears, conductors, alternators, parts of engines, parts of blasters, comm. devices, radar pieces, and the list went on and on. Some of these items probably worked, but it was doubtful that all of them did. Most of them were leaking fluids, were rusted or were missing parts. All were sold as was and there was no return policy. Prices were negotiable during the sale but were final at end of it.

Quintano had known about the store and had frequented it regularly when he could. It was amazing what parts that he found and they were usually at a great price. And although he had been here numerous times, he never thought himself a regular and doubted that the store owner would even recognize him. He hoped that this would be the case. He would love to come back here sometime in the future that was if he had a future.

The smuggler doubted that the confusion that he had created back at the drug den would have slowed the Mandalorian down for any good length of time, but hopefully it was a start. Now, it was time to increase that delay. Now, he could continue to make it harder for the bounty hunter to catch him.

Quintano started to pull every shelf down that he could as he came across them. Shelves, boxes, barrels, and crates all went smashing to the ground. Engines and alternators went scattering about. Huge blocks of metal, gears, and electrical components rolled about the room. As each shelf collapsed, they started to fall upon each other making a barrier of entangled metal bracings that would take a lifetime to undo. The fallen pieces would make foot travel difficult at best and there would be no room to use a jetpack.

The stream of obscenities that came from the store owner's mouth flowed like a drunken Gamorrean. Quintano was able to understand a few of them, as well as a few of the death threats that followed, and although he didn't understand everything, there was enough to get the gist. His desire to ever come back here again was now lost due to the threat of having his head ripped off, and that was if the Gamorrean didn't catch him now.

Being caught was doubtful though. The mess and disaster that he was making had caused such a pile up of debris that he doubted that anyone would be able to get through. Hopefully this would be the case against the Mandalorian.

Quintano continued to pull everything down behind him with Aro close at hand. The droid had to dodge many falling items and shelves to avoid being squashed and the smuggler hoped that he didn't accidentally trap the astromech. The droid had been a better companion to him than he had been to it and he didn't want to just abandon the little guy after all of this. Yet, it was still a chance that he had to take if he wanted to get free.

The smuggler continued to make his way toward the back of the room where he found a stairway leading up. This he took and headed for the second floor where he continued to repeat his process. Shelves and all of the items upon them came crashing to the ground, blocking the entrance up the stairs and further blocking any progress forward even if one did make it through the bottom level.

At the end of the room, Quintano found what he was looking for. There was the window that he remembered. And this one wasn't just any ordinary window; it was placed right where he needed it.

As soon as Quintano reached the window, he grabbed a nearby metallic bar from the assorted mess of random objects that were all around him. With a quick flick of his arm, the piece shattered the window and sent shards of glass flying in all directions to the ground below.

“Come on Aro, out the window.”

The astromech droid gave a series of tweets before realizing what the smuggler was suggesting, a repeat from Oja's mansion. It initiated its jets and gave a short burst from its standing position to fly up and through the window. As it did, Quintano jumped after him. His body flew through the window and caught the droid in mid-flight.

Aro's jets weren't strong enough to hold them both airborne, but they were enough to slow down their descent from the second floor fall. Their forms continued their drop until Quintano was able to let go and follow through with a roll on the ground to reduce the impact of the fall. As soon as the smuggler came out of his roll, he took off at full speed with the astromech right behind him.

The shop's window had overlooked the taxi docking bay. This had proven to be a shortcut to where Quintano wanted to get to and insured that he didn't have to go all the way around several buildings just to get here. With any luck, all of his distractions and this shortcut would give him enough time to grab a taxi and get out of there.

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A'Den burst through the back door of the drug den and stopped. There was no evidence of the smuggler and for a short

time the Mandalorian had lost him. That was until the sound of crashing equipment with the very loud and boisterous Gamorrean started to come from the building directly across the street. Without hesitation, A'Den took off toward the shop.

Inside was a disaster. Shelves had been toppled and everything that had been on them had been scattered upon the floor. The owner of the shop, a very irate Gamorrean who was spotting off enough colorful metaphors to embarrass a Hutt, had been trapped behind his counter and it was doubtful that he was going to be getting out any time soon. The mess was so complete that A'Den had to wonder how the smuggler was going to be able to escape, until the stairs were seen. The crash of glass upstairs on the second level confirmed Quintano's location and his intention.

A'Den's observation was of recognition that there was no way to cross the room and get upstairs before Quintano got away yet again. There had to be another way. If the final route could be figured out then the chase could continue.

The Mandalorian flipped up a small panel on the arm pad of the armor. A few quick pushes of the buttons brought the small computer online. The network was accessed and the layout of the area came on screen. It was then did A'Den realize where the smuggler was going and if haste wasn't initiated immediately then the hunt would have to start all over.

Ignoring the outraged shopkeeper, A'Den stepped outside, flipped on the jetpack and pushed it as fast as it could go. The bounty hunter zipped between the buildings and around corners. A hover cart pulled by a "tamed" rancor was knocked over sending the rancor into a frenzy. A lean-to shop that had been haphazardly built was knocked aside and the structure was sent tumbling to the ground. Two personal speeders were sent colliding into each other. Many of the pedestrians had to dodge out of the way and more than a few droids went scurrying in all directions. None of these slowed down the focused Mandalorian.

## Chapter: Wild Ride

As A'Den rounded the last corner to come upon the taxi landing pad, the smuggler could be seen up ahead just about to get into one of the taxies with his R2-0 unit right behind him. From the look of things, the smuggler was going to hop into the taxi and have the astromech jet its way onto the small ship. There was just too much distance between them to capture the smuggler before he took off, but there was something faster than the jetpack, at least for a short burst.

The bounty hunter leveled the left arm of the power armor and fired. The small grappling hook shot through the air with its strong cable in tow. The projectile cut across the large landing bay. The cable uncoiled and zipped along. The aim was perfect.

Quintano had heard the pop of the grapple hook being shot and the zipping sound of the cable that was coming toward him. Quickly the smuggler dove over the railing of the landing pad in a desperate attempt to get away in the taxi that was near him. It was too late, the grapple wrapped around his leg just as he went over.

A'Den smiled under the Mandalorian armor helmet. All that needed to be done now was to reel in the prize and be on the way before too much attention was made. A quick yank brought the cable taught. The smuggler wasn't going anywhere.

The sudden and forceful pull from the taxi shot the Mandalorian through the air. A'Den's body twisted and twirled while the empty taxi continued at an incredible speed. The bounty hunter had been caught completely by surprise and couldn't stop from being dragged off of the landing pad.

It was Quintano's turn to smile as he climbed back over the railing. He had just enough time to untangle the cable, hook it on



to the taxi and kick it into high speed and now that he had, he was able to enjoy the show before him. The Mandalorian bounced off of the railing and went sailing through the air, being dragged behind the taxi. He waved a slight “farewell” as the bounty hunter disappeared from sight among all of the other traffic that dominated this area.

Quintano turned to fetch another taxi, one that would take him back to his ship and head to Gamorr. The sooner he got ahold of the package, the sooner he could put all of this behind him. However, this was all dashed aside when he heard the large crowd start to gather.

“There he is.”

“That’s the one.”

“My shop is destroyed because of him.”

“He scared my customers away, I want compensation.”

The crowd had found several security guards that were now closing in on him. Yes, the taxi was still available, however making it back to the landing bays where his ship was kept was now out of the question. His face would be circulated until his name was identified. His ship would then be guarded and he would be caught the moment he got to the landing bays. He would have to escape and lay low for a while.

“Aro, come on. It looks like that we are no longer wanted.”

With a quick jump, Quintano hopped into the nearest taxi with the astromech using his jets to follow suit. As Quintano undid the holding cable, Aro made its way to the front of the speeder. It extended one of its appendages and entered it into the taxi’s controls. After a few dials, the speeder roared to life and took off into the traffic.

A'Den's body continued to spin out of control. It took every bit of self-control with the right hand to start to active the recoil feature of the grapple hook. Slowly the Mandalorian started to gain ground upon the runaway speeder. Closer and closer the taxi came as the gap between them became smaller and smaller. If only the controls could be reached then perhaps they could be overridden. Even if they couldn't then at least the ride to the predetermined site would be easier than being dangled and dragged along.

The other speeder seemed to come out of nowhere. It had just missed the speeder, but had managed to strike A'Den with such a force that the Mandalorian was sure that consciousness would fade. Sparks came from the jetpack from where it had been struck.

To make matters worse the blow had shifted the grapple hook and it came loose. For one brief moment, A'Den continued to fly forward under the ship's momentum. Then, the Mandalorian started to drop.

A'Den tried to get the jetpack started. It had been impossible to do so while spinning out of control, now there was no choice. Either the jetpack was going to ignite or the fall from this height would be fatal. It seemed that the later would be the reality as the pack sputtered and sputtered but never came to life.

The Mandalorian continued to fall, faster and faster. Speeders flew by and did their best to twist and turn out of the way from the falling bounty hunter, but it was to no avail. Another speeder hit A'Den and sent the Mandalorian flying through the air again.

A'Den shook off the pain that was flowing, fought through the desire to give in to the fading consciousness, and tried to ignore the disorientation. Breathing had become difficult from the blow to the chest and A'Den was starting to see stars. The Mandalorian continued to spin through the air.

In a desperate attempt at a last ditch effort to prevent complete and certain death, A'Den retracted the grapple hook and coil and then reshot. The grappling hook flew through the air with the coil flying right behind it. As A'Den's body fell beyond the shot projectile, the grapple caught the side of a building. The sudden stop from falling was shifted to a swing toward the skyscraper that had been caught. The incredible momentum threw the Mandalorian into the building with too much speed. The impact was going to hurt and threatened to loosen the hold of grapple.

## Chapter: Rogue's Den

*"... and once we are done, we can use the programmers to override the taxis. That will hide our delivery service and once the speeders are found, we'll be long gone."*

The half dozen Rodians were standing around their rented apartment complex. They had paid credits upfront and did their best to hide any trail that might lead any authority back to them. Everything seemed to be in order.

The room was a simple square shape about twenty feet by twenty feet. A couple of smaller bedrooms shot off from the main room on one side while a kitchen and dining room combination joined on the other. The large bay window overlooked the cityscape of Mee Naga and offered the view of tall buildings and several layers of traffic of speeders flying from one destination to another, off to destinations unknown.

The room was devoid of furniture, the Rodians had moved all of it into the smaller bedrooms which were now so crowded that they could no longer be slept in. In their place were boxes and crates that covered the area. Some of the crates were up to two meters long while others were only a meter along each side. These were crammed into every corner and left only a few small spaces to move about.

Many of the boxes were open and their contents were revealed. A few had droid parts, several had engines, and a couple had missiles designed to be fired from ships. There were boxes with laser blasters, boxes with grenades, and other boxes with more electronic equipment. The inventory seemed to be enough to supply a small army and a few ships while also able to build a couple of battle droids to supplement any fight that they might see.

*"And what about the Hutts? Won't they find out?"* Asked another Rodian.

*"They won't know a thing. I've bribed several guards and have gotten the appropriate passes. We should be fine. Our cousin's death will be avenged. The Hutts will find that they can't just throw our family into such a violent situation, and it doesn't matter who shoots first."*

*"I'm still not sure about this,"* said a third Rodian. *"Jabba's already dead and the other Hutts weren't even involved."*

Hreedo grabbed the vest of the weaker and smaller Rodian and pulled him closer out of frustration.

*"All of the Hutts are guilty by association. They will all pay for our cousin's death. Now are you part of this or do you want out?"*

The threat of being kicked out of the group and out of the action was understood. The others wouldn't want any loose ends. This meant that he might just be shot right here and now. There really wasn't any way out of this.

*"No, no. I'm...I'm in."*

*"I don't know,"* stated a fourth. *"It seems too easy. What if something goes wrong? What if..."*

The large bay window shattered under the gunshot. Glass blew into the room and flew in all directions. Shards were impaled into the walls and into the crates.

The spray of glass was followed by the rush of air. The tall buildings had created their own atmospheric pressures and some areas were susceptible to large gusts of wind, especially when there was a change in pressure. As the window opened, the flurry of wind started to enter the room.

The small explosion of the shot was accompanied by the sounds from outside. The loud volume of noise was almost deafening compared to the quiet apartment. The sounds of rushing speeders mixed with the sound of the gusts of wind intruded upon the room like the roar of a great rancor.

However, these things weren't what had caught the Rodians' attention. Once they had caught their wits about them and the initial shock had worn off, their immediate thoughts went straight toward the Mandalorian who had just blasted the thick glass and swung in through window. With all of their secrecy, the arms that could supply an army and the conspiracy to plot against the Hutts, the Rodians pulled their small blasters in anticipation of being caught by the local authorities.

A'Den flew through the window that had to be shot open to prevent being smashed into it. The Mandalorian rolled with the impact to the apartment's floor. Usually such an action would bring the bounty hunter out of danger. This time, this was not the case. The contents of the room and the occupancy had been seen before shooting out of the window. The Mandalorian was ready and had come out of the roll with a small metallic ball.

A'Den gave a quick snap of a wrist and sent the ball smashing into the ground. The bright white flash that followed exploded into the eyes of the unsuspecting Rodians. The sudden burst of illumination filled the room and for one brief moment its occupants were blinded. That moment was all that A'Den needed.

The Mandalorian stayed in a kneeling position, just below the Rodians' aim, and had kept one of the crates between them. A quick snap brought both hand blasters up and into position and before the Rodians had any idea what had happened, before they could even see who their intruder was, let alone get a bead on the individual, A'Den opened fire.

A'Den's arms started dead center and created a semi-circle away from each other. Red bolt blasts shot through the air and

crossed the short distance with complete, exact, and deadly accuracy. Screams of pain were heard as the Rodians were cut down where they stood. A few return shots were attempted, but were way off target passing over the Mandalorian's head. These, however, were few as death had come and had claimed the lives of those that used to occupy the room.

A'Den slowly stood. Pain still wracked the Mandalorian's form and despite the need to chase after the large payout, A'Den knew that this was going to have to wait. Rest would be needed and much welcomed. However, that also meant that a new plan could be formulated and, while the opportunity offered itself, inventory could be taken. This also gave the opportunity to fix the jetpack that had been damaged during the two separate collisions with oncoming speeders.

The Mandalorian made a quick look through some of the crates. Most of them were useless. The missiles would be nice to take back to the Ebon Mortis, but it would take several droids to haul them around and without the paperwork and all of the attention that had already been caused, this would be problematic. Most of the weapons were inferior to the ones that were already being carried and the others would be too cumbersome. A'Den did resupply with a couple of grenades and a few flash bombs and left the rest of the weaponry alone.

One of the crates had a set of stims. Many were to help stimulate adrenal glands to increase strength and decrease pain. A few others stimulated the mind while others increased the body's ability to heal. Usually A'Den didn't deal with stims. They were used too often to give an individual an increased edge while fighting and this was beyond the Mandalorian's code of conduct. However, this was no longer a combat situation and the effects would wear off before the hunt would commence.

A'Den grabbed two different stims, one to increase strength and decrease pain, and a second one to increase natural healing. With care, A'Den popped the tops off both of the stim injectors.

One by one, the Mandalorian injected them between the plates of the armor.

The effects were immediate. A'Den's heart started to race. The Mandalorian had never felt more alive, even when facing death itself. Nothing had been as good as this. The thought of taking the rest of the crate for future use did cross A'Den's mind, but that only resulted in the shaking of a head. That would be a mistake and A'Den knew it. There were already too many individuals that were addicted to this stuff and A'Den wasn't going to be one of them.

Another crate supplied an item of interest. It seemed that the Rodians were going to try to override the taxi shuttles to make their escape plan. These would help getting around Nar Shaddaa a lot easier.

Finally there was another crate of interest. This one had smaller rockets and would easily replace the one that was fired. Again, the Mandalorian wanted to take the whole crate, but due to time, space required, weight, and the attention that it would create, A'Den settled on taking just one for replacement.

A smile came across A'Den's face. The items that had been added to the list of expenses had been replaced. However, since the general didn't know this, didn't need to know this, and finding this inventory was by chance and not by some deliberate measure, the expense of their initial usage would still stand. These were bonus items and were not part of the negotiated contract.

After a satisfactory resupplying of gear, A'Den flipped up the control panel to the miniature computer on the right arm of the battle suit. A few buttons were pushed and once the access to the network was connected, A'Den was able to tap into the camera systems again. A facial recognition program ran while the camera views flashed on the screen. It was the same tactic that had worked to track Quintano down the first time and would probably be able to do so again.



While the program started to take its time, A'Den slipped off the jetpack and readied to fix it. The supply of tools in the various compartments around the armor would easily accommodate the task and any parts needed could probably be scavenged from the items in the room. It was going to take a while to repair the damage, but since the program was also going to take some time anyway, A'Den would be able to do both while coming down off of the chemically stimulated high from the stims.

## Chapter: Shadows

Quintano pulled the rolling bay door down and blocked out the horrible view of the city that they had come to. It had been the smuggler's idea that Aro take them to a spot that would have less cameras and would be less likely to be on the grid. This had been one of the lower sections of the slum area.

This area was known for a variety of gangs, drugs, violence, and some of the worst places to ever visit. These weren't even the organized criminals; those were sponsored by the Hutts. These were leftover dregs of various species that had banded together. Even the Hutts had problems driving these individuals out since they seemed to be more like womp rats and as soon as any form of authority had shown up, they all seemed to disappear. These were the bottom feeders, a plight to the authority, yet necessary to ensure that no other bottom feeder could rise any further.

The only real export from this section of the city was dead bodies, and there were plenty to be found. The organ thieves would steal parts from anybody they could find, even living ones. Victims that had been murdered elsewhere in the city were often be dumped here.

Where graffiti was seen periodically around the red light district, it was prevalent here. There were gang signs everywhere, even in places that seemed inaccessible. There was no shortage of warnings that there were a multitude of groups that seemed to be at war with each other and anyone visiting would either be confused as one of the other gangs or simply be killed in a crossfire.

Litter was scattered all about. There were piles of junk in almost every corner and a good portion of it even in the middle of the "street". From the looks of things, nothing had been cleaned

up in a long time and it seemed that there would be no attempt to break this tradition any time soon.

The smells of various drugs wafted through the air. There was a sweet disgusting scent mixed with some putrid odor. There was an ethereal smell with a nauseating stench. There were whiffs of various stimulants and enhancers, of crystals and powders. This was all mixed with the smell of alcohol and not the good stuff either, but the really nasty homemade brew rotgut that could easily start a Corellian Star Cruiser. Finally there was the smell of the refuge, wastes, chemical runoff from various factories, grime, dirt, and every other pungent odor that could be thought of.

These things, however, were nothing compared to the sounds. The sights and smells were obvious and noticeable. It was the unnoticed that sent chills up Quintano's spine. For the most part, there was silence. And it wasn't just an ordinary peaceful silence (if there was a difference between the lack of sounds) but it was that awful, dreadful silence that always came right before some horrible nightmare stepped from the shadows. It was the type of silence that crept into his soul.

But it wasn't silent all the time. There would be that one clang, the one hiss, the one sudden sound that cut through the air like some unwanted beast. The silence would be shattered and everything would scatter. The sound would echo off of the empty walls and carry down empty corridor and deserted alleyways. Then, like it had been before, all sound seemed to be swallowed up by the silence once again.

Quintano had found this empty warehouse. It was actually the third empty warehouse that he had found and had thought that the others might have been some sort of drop points of some nefarious activity. After seeing the third one, he had decided to take a chance anyway. He figured that every warehouse was probably used for this exact same thing and if he wanted to use one then he just needed to take it and keep it.

Here, Quintano was able to find a corner to put his back against and get some rest for the “night” and wait for things to settle down. The speeder would be considered lost. Meanwhile, Aro was doing its best to tap into the network and erase all traces of their identities. That would keep the local authorities from tracking them down. However, if the Mandalorian was still out there then it was doubtful that this tactic would slow him down.

Quintano had hoped that the bounty hunter would give up after not being able to find him, but doubted that this would be the case. He still had a ship back at the spaceport and if the Mandalorian got there before he did, then escape off of this planet would be all but impossible. Yes, he could probably hop aboard some shuttle, but he still needed to make it to Gamorr, pick up the package, and return it to the seller that wanted to buy it without raising suspicion or attention. This couldn’t be done on a shuttle full of other passengers. His own ship would be the best route.

What Quintano really needed to do was rest while Aro continued deleting the files. Once that was done, and the coast was clear for the most part, then he would chance making a run for his ship. Until then he got as comfortable as possible and closed his eyes.

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The whistles and beeps of Aro had woken the smuggler from his rest. He had sworn that he had only just nodded off and that might have been the case. Sleep eluded him for most of the night. His mind was on the possibility of being discovered by the authorities, by the bounty hunter, by some gang down here, by the Hutts that were now upset with him, or by the group that had killed Tessa and perhaps even Jessa as well.

The ground was hard upon his body and sleeping sitting up was never comfortable. His body hurt all over and his muscles ached. All of this had combined to not getting any sleep, or so he thought, until Aro had woken him.

“Ok, ok, I hear you...just five more minutes.”

“Bleep, twirl, burp, tweet, tweet, xxrl.”

“Yes, I know we should get going. It’s just that...”

“Whirl, bleep, zzt, phrip, zzt, zzt, woo.”

“Ok, yes, I understand that the new, oncoming shift would be less likely to spot us. However, a few more minutes into their shift won’t make a difference. Unlike droids, I need sleep. I can’t stay awake all night and...”

“Zxt.”

“Yes, yes, alright yes. I didn’t mean to sound ungrateful. Yes, I am very thankful that you hacked into the network.”

“Zxt.”

“And erased the data, deleting our wanted pictures from being displayed all over Nar Shaddaa.”

“Zxt.”

“And kept guard all night.”

“Zxt.”

“Yes, and kept the ship from being impounded. Wait, what? Being impounded?”

“Whril, zip, pop, freal.”

“Ok, ok, I’m getting up. Yes, you’re right; we can’t keep the authorities at bay forever. They’ll figure everything out eventually. The sooner we get out of here, the better.”

It didn't take long to open the warehouse door while Aro reprogrammed the taxi again. This time, it would take them back to the spaceport and with any luck, there wouldn't be any problems. A quick look told Quintano that the coast was clear and that no one was watching them. With a sudden hop into the speeder, Aro started the engine and the taxi roared to life. Within moments, they were off, back into the cityscape and the already building traffic of the day.

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A cloaked figure stepped out from beyond the shadows of the early morning. He watched as the taxi lifted off and flew toward the direction of the spaceport. His eyes took in the view and a smile came upon his face.

He was a tall thin man with an average build, or at least that what he had appeared to be. In actuality, his muscles were finely honed for his size; it was just that he wore clothing that was a little larger to hide his true appearance. There was no reason to boast his abilities and draw attention to himself; he always did best with the element of surprise.

His hair was black and short; cut moderately but longer than military fashion. Again, he didn't want to draw attention to the military training that he was very proficient in. The cloak hid most of his features and kept the small blaster that he had on his hip well hidden. The dagger in his boot was usually also overlooked.

Behind the cloaked figure, crumbled in a small heap deeper into the shadows where they would probably never be found, were several dead bodies. These were the unfortunate souls that were contemplating taking over the warehouse that Quintano was occupying. That was not acceptable. This was his stakeout, not theirs. This was his mission, not theirs. This was his prize and they should have known better. He was the best there was and he wasn't going to have his mission go up in smoke by a bunch of nerf herders.

The Imperial agent named Valas slipped the small, compact binoculars into its pouch on his side. From there he pulled his small holo communicator and punched in the frequency that was needed. The image flickered a few times before coming into view.

“Valas here.”

When the Imperial officer responded his voice was full of static, but it was going to be the best that could be received. The officer was using a weaker transmitter so that his transmission wouldn’t be detected by anyone aboard the large Imperial ship that he was stationed on. Fortunately Valas was using a state of the art holo communicator that was not only able to bring in the transmission as well as it was doing from the weaker transmission, but it had also compensated for the huge distance and the amount of interference way down here in the slum area.

“Report, agent.”

Valas frowned at that. He didn’t like the tone that the officer was giving him. The military had little to no respect for intelligence agents and he had proven superior even to that title. The officer was trying to treat him like a regular soldier and that wasn’t going over very well. However, it was tolerated due to the amount of compensation he was getting from the assignment.

“The target is still secure. The assignment is still going accordingly.”

“Does he have the item?”

“Negative, repeat negative. However, he will lead me to it in due time.”

“If there's any way to insure the delivery in a more prompt manner...”

“Let me remind you,” Valas said sharply. “I don’t answer to you. I may be working for an assignment for you, but that is out of a mutual benefit. Now, as far as the allotted time frame, these things can’t be rushed. I’ve had plenty of experiences with this as can be verified by my proficiency rating.”

The officer put his hands up and outward in a way to placate the Imperial intelligence agent. “No one is questioning your proficiency or your effectiveness. You are the best and that was why I sought you out. It’s just that time is of essence and there are other factors at work here. It was just a reminder of this assignment’s importance.”

“I will treat this assignment like any other. It will be done proficiently, professionally, and with as much haste as possible without showing our hand.”

The officer nodded. This was the best response that he could hope for from the often sarcastic and anti-authoritative agent. With a slight sigh, the image of the office waved his hand over the controls of his holo communicator and shut it off.

Valas shook his head. The officer didn’t really understand. He really didn’t have any idea who he was dealing with.

The Imperial agent put his holo comm. away and brought out his tracking unit. There, on his radar, was the dot that he had been following. He had slipped the tracking device on Quintano while he was coordinating the working crew at the spaceport when he had initially arrived.

It had been relatively easy to pick up Quintano’s trail. The Fury class Imperial Interceptor had excellent tracking capabilities and the recognizable ion trail of the Miy’til Starfighter was distinct enough to not be mistaken for any other ship. Once the course was established, and Valas’s suspicions were confirmed, the assassin put in a route to Nar Shaddaa.



The Wraith was faster in hyper drive than the smaller ship and was able to get to Nar Shaddaa before Quintano had. And, since he had top priority, even above many of the Generals that were coming and going, he was able to tie up the traffic long enough to ensure that he could land before being spotted. He had even been able to tell the traffic tower which landing bay to put the smuggler. Once Quintano had landed, Valas was already waiting.

Valas had used several different clearance codes that he had confiscated, a few that he had earned and a couple of others that he had been temporarily given for this assignment. He had used these in various places, mixing up their usage, so no one would be able to back track his trail. By the time he had finished with the spaceport, no one knew who had actually requested what or how many higher up authorities had actually visited. Then, just like that, he was gone.

The Imperial agent turned back into the shadows. He would find his “borrowed” speeder and follow the smuggler at a distance. There was a good chance that he was heading back to port to head to Gamorr next and in the unlikely chance that he lost him; this was where he would go. Nothing would get in the way of the mission and the item would be delivered as promised.

The only wild card that could possibly prevent the mission from becoming a success was the bounty hunter. A'Den Verda Fett had proven to be more tenacious and than he had imagined. If this continued, then he might just have to take care of the Mandalorian personally. A smile came upon his face as he considered that thought.

## Chapter: Perilous Pursuit

Quintano couldn't help but continue to scan the area for any oncoming speeders. There were just far too many to track all at once and any one of them could be following him. The best that he could do was keep an eye out for any erratic drivers and hope that he could get back to his ship before anything happened.

The sudden jolt that ran through the speeder told him that he had been looking in the wrong direction. The collision with the other speeder came from below him, in his blind spot, and Quintano realized that he should have known better. The bounty hunter wasn't going to give up so easily.

"Punch it, Aro," Quintano shouted toward the R2-0 astromech.

The droid gave a few tweets and chirps in what sounded like a bit of frustration over the situation. It had already been navigating the speeder steadily at the same speed as everyone else to not cause any undo and unneeded attention. Now it was time to change that. With a few twists of the interface that its appendage was connected to, the speeder roared to life and started to accelerate.

A'Den adjusted the controls on the speeder and shifted the engine to a greater velocity. As the small ship sped up, the Mandalorian struck the back and underside of the smuggler's speeder time and again. With any luck Quintano would either find some place to land or run the risk of an engine failure.

Aro did its best to weave in between the traffic of the other speeders. It piloted the craft over and around and through the traffic. When that didn't work to shake off the Mandalorian, Aro shifted over into the oncoming traffic. There was no way that the Mandalorian could make the same maneuvers at the incredible

speed that the astromech could make. It had been programmed to make these calculations faster than any pilot.

Quintano lurched backwards and almost fell over with the sudden shift in trajectory. Aro was flying in such a crazy fashion that it was difficult to even stay standing. The speeder continued to shift left and then right. It weaved and bobbed and zig zagged through the traffic of the others in the area.

A'Den shifted the controls over and over again. Each maneuver was countered by the expert skill of the astromech. Nothing seemed to work. For each shift that was made to catch the smuggler, the droid only re-shifted. Each passing moment only resulted in losing ground and the distance between them was widening.

"Not again," A'Den said aloud as the grapple hook was brought forth again.

A quick aim and the hook was shot through the air with expert accuracy. It zipped through and pulled the strong cable behind it. The grapple hooked around the back end of the intended speeder before it had a chance to get away.

A sudden twist of the captured speeder pulled A'Den out of the craft and sent the Mandalorian sailing through the air. A'Den's craft, no longer being piloted and was no longer on the preprogrammed route, went flying out of control. Various speeders and crafts started to veer off in various directions in a desperate attempt to avoid a collision.

This had proven to be fruitless to one unfortunate pilot. The two speeders collided into each other with such a force that both spun out of control and began their plummet to the ground far below.

The sudden pull from the craft was not only anticipated, but expected. As A'Den's body flew upward, the grapple's motor

was activated. The coil snapped taught and the Mandalorian's body started to reel forward toward the craft.

The bounty hunter's body continued to whip through the air. The Mandalorian spun and was bounced around like some comet's tail trying to keep up with the comet itself. A quick change of direction from the speeder in a desperate attempt to lose the bounty hunter sent A'Den flying in the opposite direction with incredible force. Yet, A'Den's coil held as did the grapple. The only thing of notice was the fact that the bounty hunter's body was still approaching steadily.

Aro pulled the speeder up and back down, left and then right. Over and over, the droid attempted to fling the Mandalorian off of their tail. Yet the bounty hunter was only pulled along in between the oncoming traffic.

Quintano went to work at trying to pull off the grappling hook. If the hook could be removed then they had hope of losing the Mandalorian once and for all. The tension was too great with each bank, twist, or turn that the astromech made. However, as they pulled into a power dive there was a short amount of time where the tension went slack. Quintano pulled one more time.

A'Den's free hand pulled one of the blasters. The bounty hunter didn't want to resort to sending bolts of instant death toward the only possibility of any real payment that had come out of this profession. One wrong shot and the smuggler would be dead. Yet, one wrong move and A'Den knew that death would come in the form of another speeding craft or even another free fall. There had been too much luck last time to ever hope for it again. It was time to end this chase now.

Quintano's hold upon the grappling hook was let go the moment that the blasts started to fly by his face. He hoped that they were just warning shots, but as the Mandalorian twirled through the air, any one of these could take him out. There had to be another way.

Aro navigated the speeder back toward the oncoming traffic and swooped under them. A quick adjustment of the controls sent the speeder back up. The Mandalorian followed suit and smashed into the underside of another speeder.

This wasn't going to happen again. A'Den redirected energy throughout the various controls toward the power of the grappling hook's motor. With any luck, and if the motor didn't burn out, the distance would close faster.

The small motor whined out of protest, not only from the Mandalorian's weight but out of the inertia and momentum. The entire process was putting a greater strain upon the motor than it was designed to handle, and yet it pulled the Mandalorian up to the speeder.

A'Den pulled up to the craft and pulled the handgun toward the smuggler. The prey was now only an arm's length away. This had been the closest distance that had been achieved. Now, hopefully, the smuggler would realize the danger that he was in and would give up.

Quintano brought his leg up and out. The quick snap landed a kicking blow upon the bounty hunter. It was time to show this Mandalorian just how serious he was in survival.

The sudden kick to the face threw A'Den off balance and the bounty hunter went flying back off the speeder. The Mandalorian went back to being dragged through the air.

"Weep, woot, tweet, tweet, tweet."

"Sure, if you think that you can do better than I can then you take the Mandalorian and I'll take the controls."

As the bounty hunter started to reel back in, Aro and Quintano switched places. The smuggler took the controls and held the speeder steady so that the astromech could follow through with its plan. Meanwhile, Aro moved to the back.

As Aro came to the back, the astromech extended another appendage. The arm came out and the circular saw blade that was attached to the end came to life. The blade whirled and spun and when it was lowered, sparks flew from the friction between it and the metal cable. It didn't take long before the cable snapped and the Mandalorian was cut free.

"Wee, wee, wee, wee." The droid's comments seemed to be filled with joy and fulfilment as the Mandalorian fell through the air.

A'Den switched on the jetpack and maneuvered into the traffic of the speeders. The Mandalorian gave a quick dodge and a collision was avoided. The last time that this had happened, the jetpack was knocked out of commission. This time A'Den was ready. Another quick movement brought the bounty hunter right into the co-pilot seat of another craft.

*"These are for designated purposes only."* The protocol droid gave a surprised alarm as soon as A'Den landed. *"Only designated personnel..."*

However, the protest was quickly interrupted. The Mandalorian hooked an arm around the droid, gave a fast twist, and flung it through the air. The droid's body only went a short distance before gravity took over. The screech of its exasperation could be heard as it fell between the lanes of traffic, never to be seen or heard from again.

A'Den ignored the last vocal announcement from the droid. With speed and diligence, A'Den applied one of the programming devices on the speeder's controls. A few punches of the buttons lit up the device and it was only a matter of moments before A'Den had full control.

With the throttle in the highest setting, the bounty hunter took off through the traffic once again. The smuggler had given up being chased thinking that the hunt had been interrupted but

A'Den wasn't about to give up so easily. A'Den's speeder zipped through the various other crafts in a reckless speed while the bounty hunter kept an eye on the prey up ahead and down one lane.

Once A'Den was satisfied, the bounty hunt pushed the throttle down at an angle and sent the speeder into a power dive. The craft's engine continued to whine in protest, yet A'Den continued to ignore the protest that came from the speeder. Instead, the craft was pushed even faster.

The other speeders dove to get out of the way of the maniac driver. They swerved out of control and almost into each other. Their noise and voices of obscenities could be heard all over.

It was only at this time did Quintano realize that they were still being followed.

“What will it take to make the Mandalorian give up?”

The rhetorical question was only answered by the bounty hunter bumping the borrowed speeder into his. The jolt nearly knocked Quintano out of his craft. However, instead of flying out into open air, the smuggler's body slammed into the throttle.

The speeder flew into overdrive and went into a power dive. As Quintano struggled with the controls, Aro slid forward and smashed into the smuggler. This had created a moan of pain from Quintano, yet, despite this, he was able to gain control.

“Woo, woo.”

“Yes, I know that we're still being followed, but I'm driving this time.”

Quintano banked hard to the right and then back up. Another hard left and a powerful power dive pulled some serious force to fling Aro all over the place before the astromech was able to magnetically seal itself to the speeder's floor. The smuggler

zipped through hangar bays, around buildings and back through traffic in a desperate attempt to throw off the Mandalorian.

Nothing that Quintano had done worked. Every turn was met by another. Every power dive was followed. Every narrow tunnel, every roll, every twist and turn, every incline, and every maneuver, no matter how well executed, was only matched by the bounty hunter. Even when Quintano did manage to pull ahead on some expert piloting skill, the Mandalorian found some other way to gain the distance.

A'Den had to admit that the smuggler was a better navigator and had been a better pilot. Keeping up with Quintano was difficult at best and the engine was already pushed to its maximum. This was the only saving grace but it couldn't be kept up for long. Sooner or later the engine would give out and all of Quintano's expert maneuvering would pay off. Something had to give.

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Valas moved his speeder a little closer to the scene that was playing out before him. These two individuals seemed to be more suicidal than just simply trying capture or avoid being caught. It had now become personal and with that, it had become unprofessional. They were being reckless and with that came the chance that the smuggler might die. This would be no good. Without Quintano, the location of the item would no longer be accessible.

The Imperial agent had hung far enough back as to not be seen or even suspected. He didn't want his presence to be known but by the looks of things, that wasn't going to be an issue. The two of them were so wrapped up with each other that they no longer were aware of their surroundings. Valas knew that he could be right beside them and they still wouldn't know that he was there. This was one of his greatest abilities, even without his prey being reckless. They were only making this too easy for him. Still, he needed to end the chase if he wanted results.



Valas reached behind him and grabbed the long barreled sniper rifle that he had stored back there. This was one of his most trusted weapons and he had more kills with this than any other weapon that he had, although his dagger was probably a close second. He never went anywhere without it, even if it meant disassembling it and carrying it around in a small case or disguising it as some other item.

With one hand on the controls, Valas brought the weapon to the front of the speeder and laid the barrel across the windshield. He had to take into consideration the movement of his speeder, the movement of the target, the side wind gusts, and everyone else that was swerving in and out of traffic. His heart dropped into a relaxed state. His mind cleared of everything else and with the flow of traffic memorized, he didn't have to worry about driving for too long. His eye focused down the sight and he anticipated the next movement. It was almost out of instinct when he pulled the trigger.

As A'Den banked yet again to try to keep in pursuit of the target in sight, the sound that didn't want to be heard echoed through the air. The engine had blown. Smoke was steaming out of the engine block in thick bellows. The speeder was becoming less and less responsive with each passing moment and the speed was diminishing. It would soon become nil within a matter of moments and if the speeder wasn't put down soon, it would fall down and that would be fatal.

A'Den gave one last look at the smuggler as he pulled away. The bounty hunter was sure that a smug look of arrogance came across Quintano's face; the slight wave was completely obvious. The Mandalorian could only give a shake of the head as a realization of losing the smuggler once again was now inevitable. The jetpack couldn't keep up with the speeder and too much distance had come between them to try to gain another speeder to restart the chase. However, there was another way. Hopefully all of the contingencies that were put in place would slow Quintano

down long enough to catch back up. Until then, A'Den had to find a place to land.

Quintano turned the speeder back toward the spaceport, the direction that he had been heading prior to this chase. With any luck the authorities wouldn't know that he was involved in the chaotic mess that had occurred. Once he landed the speeder, he would reprogram it to fly around by itself for a while to further confuse the authorities and distract his departure. That should keep everyone occupied long enough to get off of this planet once and for all and finally be on his way to Gamorr.

Valas smiled. The blast had been perfect. Hitting the bounty hunter would have been a harder target and any miss would ensure that the Mandalorian would then know that there was a third party involved. As it was, the hit to the engine worked well enough. The Mandalorian was now temporarily out of the picture and hopefully that would either delay the bounty hunter long enough to either give up hope on the chase, to crash into an oncoming speeder or even a nearby building, or even come to the realization that a third party involvement was serious enough and skilled enough to take down any unwanted involvement. A miss would show a lack of skill that could be turned into a greater encouragement. This hit would install fear. Now all he had to do was to follow Quintano and ensure that the item was delivered. Barring this possibility, he would then make sure that he personally hand delivered the item.

A'Den found a nearby landing pad and brought the speeder down for a landing. It wasn't soft or graceful, but it was a landing that could be walked away from. This speeder's engine was no longer functional and would have to be replaced. The best thing to do was to confiscate another speeder and that might take a little time.

This was on the top priority of A'Den's mind and would have happened if something hadn't come to be noticed. The damage to the engine was smaller than had been suspected. On top of this, the engine block had a hole that went inward, not outward. This

wasn't an explosion; this was a shot from a sniper rifle. Someone else was out there.

The question now was, was this person working with Quintano? And since there had been no trace of the sniper before now, how long had this third party been around? Has he been following them all this time? Was the shot just meant to postpone and delay or was it supposed to have been a kill shot and just missed, hitting the engine instead? Or was this some random shot by some random individual not related to the case at hand.

That last question was highly probable. There was enough criminal activities here on Nar Shaddaa to ensure this possibility. However, with the last gang that had tried to kidnap Quintano, it would seem that word is already getting around concerning Quintano's package and any third party wouldn't just be random, they would be connected to this case somehow.

If there really was a third party, this would complicate things, especially if that individual was skilled with a sniper rifle. The next shot could come from anywhere and from anyone. However, this wasn't a reason to panic and become paranoid; it was a reason to hurry the mission along even faster. The quicker that this mission was finished meant the less likely that it would turn deadly. With this in mind, A'Den went on the lookout for another speeder.

## Chapter: Leaving Nar Shaddaa

Quintano went through the take off sequence. Aro had already taken its spot behind the cockpit and everything seemed to have checked out. The pre-flight sequence was going along as expected, the ship had been fueled, and the ship had even had been power washed. The desert sands of Kessel had been blasted away.

“Mee Naga flight control, this is the Miy’til Starfighter Onyx Star, all systems are go and ready for launch.”

Quintano wasn’t sure what name Koran Kane had given his starfighter and a name had to be given to register in port. He wanted to make sure that no one could associate this ship with the Hutt smuggler and he had to come up with something at the spur of the moment. It really didn’t matter what he called his ship, he was certain that most ships in this port weren’t their real names anyway.

However, once a ship’s name was registered, it was put into the space port’s data base; rather it was real or not. This kept track of all comings and goings of every ship and this had been very helpful for Quintano. Since Tessa had given the package to a ship leaving for Gamorr, all he needed to do was estimate the arrival date of the package and then cross reference that with any ships leaving for Gamorr.

Since Gamorr was known to have vicious tribal wars between various Gamorreans, it wasn’t an ideal planet to visit or even run supplies to. That meant that the amount of ships that ever went to Gamorr was limited. Once Aro had tapped into the public database of ships that came and went, there was only one that fit the time frame that was allotted for. The ship was a basic cargo ship piloted by a Chiss named Gavid Tane.

Now all Quintano had to do was leave this spaceport and hunt down Gavid Tane somewhere on Gamorr. All systems were up and running, the course was set in, and everything was good to go. The only thing left was for clearance from the control tower.

Unlike many other spaceports that simply allowed ships to come and go as they pleased, Nar Shaddaa had a very sophisticated traffic control station. Everything had to be run smoothly or else there was a risk of the large amount of ships colliding with one another. Or at least that's what the official word was. It was almost a well known fact that the Hutts were just trying to restrict certain shipments or perhaps even give priorities to those that had the biggest bribe.

"Negative, repeat negative. Power down your engine immediately."

Quintano felt a chill run down his spine. He was looking forward to finally making some headway in getting his package that any further delay was a major frustration. But it was more than just a possible delay. It was also possible that one of the parties after him might have gotten to the spaceport control center before he was able to leave.

Quintano took a deep breath before answering. There was no reason to panic and cause an unwarranted alarm. Hopefully this was all a big misunderstanding. As he powered the ship down, Quintano replied back to the spaceport control center.

"What seems to be the problem Mee Naga flight control?"

"We've had an outbreak of a Mynock infestation."

The mention of Mynocks sent a flurry of bleeps, whirrs, and tweets from Aro. This was one of the droid's worst fear and probably the greatest fear of most droids. These parasites were known to eat power couplings from ships and were also known to

devour droids very quickly for their power source. No droid ever wanted to be around with Mynocks were spotted.

“What do you mean a Mynock infestation? I don’t have any Mynocks aboard. Those things are around two meters in length, I would know if I had any. Besides, they mostly found in asteroid belts and if you check my flight path you’ll see that I haven’t been around any asteroid belts.”

“I case you aren’t aware of the spaceport regulation, Miy’til Starfighter Onyx Star, all ships must be quarantined and thoroughly checked before leaving or taking off. And, yes, we know that these are up to two meters long, however, you may be infested with Mynock eggs.”

Now Quintano was sure that this was all a ruse. It hadn’t seemed accurate at first. The latest comment had proven it. Mynocks didn’t lay eggs; they split in half to form another Mynock. Something suspicious was going on.

The smuggler watched as a small group of spaceport workers approached his ship. They were covered from head to toe with a bio-hazard suit and carried various pieces of equipment including containment cages, bio-scanners, spray containers, and electrical probes. They were escorted by a few military guards that kept their distance from the bio crew, yet had their weapons in a semi-ready position so they could take care of anything out of the ordinary.

Quintano waited and watched every move that every individual made. He was ready to re-engage the engines and take off at a moment’s notice at the first sign of trouble, and he didn’t care if the safety protocols were taken or even if he risked a crash with another ship. Whatever was really going on, he was going to be ready for it.

Time went by and the bio crew checked every space that they could possibly look over. They sprayed in various areas, and poked and prodded every section that they could find. Their

check was not only thorough but overly thorough. The crew seemed to have checked and rechecked everyone else's spot that was already prodded, sprayed, analyzed and sprayed again.

After about an hour of overzealous checking, the crew gave the ship a clean bill of health and finally gave Quintano the go ahead to redo his launch sequence. This had only left Quintano more puzzled than ever. He had thought that the crew would have been a cover to let the military come in and haul him away, and when that didn't happen and the crew left, there had been more questions than answers. The only reason that the smuggler could have thought that this charade had actually happened was to delay him from taking off.

Then it struck him. Of course it was meant to delay him. This was the Mandalorian's doing. The bounty hunter must have paid off the crew to do this and prevent him from leaving if there was any chance of him actually getting away from being caught. He had to shake his head at this and give the bounty hunter even more credit than he had prior. The Mandalorian was doing his best in every regard to bring him in and it didn't seem as if the chase would end any time soon. This was only a further motivation to get off of this planet immediately.

With this in mind, Quintano quickly went through the takeoff process as fast as he could; he even skipped a few processes that he could do once they were off the ground. As soon as he was satisfied, he pulled back on the throttle and engaged the engines just over the recommended speed allowed at the spaceport.

The maneuver had made the ship less agile for the short time and the increased speed made his reaction time shorter. This had resulted in him banking hard twice to miss two other ships and just barely clipping a third. Any other pilot would have crashed, would have panicked, and would have done something stupid. Quintano, however, was able to put his expert piloting skills to the test even while Aro was still making adjustments.

“We need to make the trip to hyperspace. Make sure the coordinates are set, I’m about ready to punch it.”

“Woo, weep, weep, twirl, burp, bleep, bleep.”

“No, we’re not being followed. I would have seen something by now. And yes, I know that the Mandalorian is flying an X-70b Phantom Class. There isn’t one on our scanners so the quicker we can cut out of here the less likely that there will be one.”

“Burlip, xxzt, frzz.”

“Yes, I do see it. The ship is a barge, not a Phantom Class. You’re just being paranoid. Now get me those coordinates and prepare for hyperdrive.”

“Beep, burp, zzt, freep, tweet kxxt.”

“No, no need to worry. We’ve left the Mandalorian far behind for good this time. Unless the bounty hunter is able to read minds, there is no way that we can be tracked. The Mandalorian has no idea where we are going and as soon as we make the jump, we’ll be in the clear.”

This seemed to placate the droid and Quintano wished that it would placate himself. Yet, somehow he doubted that he had seen the last of that bounty hunter. He would keep a constant look out for anything suspicious while the package was being retrieved and sold to his contact.

As soon as the coordinates came online, Quintano pushed the lever forward to activate the hyper drive. He usually would wait until he was further out of the planet’s atmosphere, but he wanted to leave in a hurry. The jump made this early would have created problems for any other pilot since the planet’s gravitational well interfered with a jump. This was where Quintano had excelled. He was known to take the risks that no one else wanted to or dared to try.



The space around the ship started to warp. The reflection of light bouncing off of the nearby ships streamed across Quintano's cockpit canopy. Each color became an elongated version of itself until they all vanished into infinity. The ship jumped into hyperspace and disappeared from the sights and the radar of the ships that were watching.

As the barge moved to the side to start its course to some parts unknown the Phantom Class ship came out from underneath it. Its presence was only picked up as a ghost on the radar of the barge and was probably not even picked up by any other ship. It was only at this point that anyone realized that it was even there.

The bribe that was given to the control tower and the spaceport crew had been well worth it. They had stalled the smuggler long enough to be able to get back to the Ebon Mortis. Of course this bribe would also be added to the fee that was to be collected.

The hard part was to take off simultaneously with the barge. As the larger ship took off, A'Den had to swing the Ebon Mortis around and under several other ships that were coming and going and then slip under the barge. Once there, it was a matter of precision piloting to maintain the same speed and trajectory.

Since A'Den had already overhead the destination and had already preprogrammed the route, it was only a matter of engaging the warp drive engine. This had to be done at the right time to not lose the smuggler but be further back in distance and time to not be spotted. A'Den waited several heartbeats. This didn't seem like a lot of time but when a ship was going faster than the speed of light, every passing moment was a considerable distance.

Once A'Den was satisfied that enough time had elapsed, the hyper drive engine was engaged. Quicker than most anyone could even realize that the Phantom Class ship was even there, the ship slipped into hyperspace and was gone. It was as if it had never been there.

However, this tactic didn't fool everyone. The Imperial Agent Valas had not only seen this before but had utilized the same strategy a few times. He had to admit that the bounty hunter was good. The Mandalorian just wouldn't give up and was a decent pilot, but he was more efficient and more determined. If the bounty hunter continued to get in the way then there would be one less Mandalorian to worry about in the galaxy.

The Fury Class Imperial Interceptor named the Wraith swung around the control tower. Valas already had the coordinates locked in and was about to follow the smuggler when the Ebon Mortis had shown up. Valas pulled back on the controls and waited. As soon as the Phantom Class ship was gone, he initiated the hyper drive engines and followed. The next time that they would meet would be on Gamorr and only one person would be walking away with the package.

# Book: Captured

## Chapter: Gamorr

The streams of light came to a sudden stop as the Miy'til Starfighter came out of hyper drive. The orb of a planet hung in space like a colorful marble against a black velvet backdrop. Its various colors brought the planet to life.

Gamorr had a wide variety of terrain, unlike some of the other planets that Quintano had recently been on, and it was a pleasant sight. The vibrant greens from the huge diversity of the flora of the Gamorrean forests (which covered a vast majority of the land mass) were a stunning view from space. Mountainous areas could be seen dividing several land masses into smaller sections. Massive rivers cut furrows through the world's surface and only added to the wild look of the planet. Swamps were so large that they could be seen from space.

The poles of the planet offered frozen tundra and icy plateaus. This planet was wild on every level, on every aspect. Nothing was very hospitable here.

Even if the jungles and dense forests looked welcoming, these offered some of the most vicious plant and animal life around. There were mobile mushrooms called Snoruks that roamed as a collective hive along the jungle basin. There were huge snow beasts that wandered the icy tundra. There were large aquatic predators that could swallow small ships whole. Finally there were the Gamorreans themselves.

The Gamorrean clans were known to have very bloody warfare that was constantly being waged. These were very savage and tourism was often regarded as a risk to one's life. All in all there was very little reason to come here.

This would all make perfect sense if someone wanted to hide a very coveted package that murderous thugs would kill for. Quintano had to admit that the tactic had been wise. The only problem, however, was for him to find it.

There were several small towns that were known to be fairly stable and Gavid Tane was scheduled to land on one of them, the small town named Urrsh Muh, or at least that's what the flight log had stated on Nar Shaddaa. Of course the flight log could be wrong. It might be that Gavid hadn't gone to Urrsh Muh but to a different town on Gamorr or could have traveled to a different planet altogether. However, it was the only lead he had.

The buildings of Urrsh Muh came into view. Their sand stone color was very plain against the vibrant greens of the jungle that was trying to overtake it. The square shapes of the houses and various shops and businesses were of a basic architectural design and showed the lack of technological advances of this race. The stone wall that surrounded the town was probably meant to hold back an invading and adversarial tribe of Gamorreans, but was doing little to keep back the vines, trees and large bushes that was pushing against it.

Near one side of the town there was what appeared to be a junk heap full of scrap metal. There were pieces of vehicles, ships, gear and weapons that had been accumulated. From what it looked like, the Gamorreans had gathered pieces of anything and everything that had been used on their planet in regards to the war between the rebels and the Empire. But it was hard to tell why the junk pile was there. There didn't seem to be a reclamation processing plant and there weren't a whole lot of metals being used in their building structures.

Quintano brought his ship around and found an open landing port. There were a few other ships on a couple of other docking pads which was a direct contrast to the large amount of traffic at Nar Shaddaa. The small size of the town and the aggressive life style of the Gamorreans had ensured that there was little traffic here.

“Stay with the ship, Aro,” Quintano stated. “Hopefully this won’t take long and I want to be able to get out of here as quickly as possible.”

“Bxxzt.”

“I know, I know. But I hate to think that the Mandalorian would find some way to track us down again, and even if not that bounty hunter, then some other. Then there’s the fact that the Gamorreans aren’t very friendly. They have a tendency of ripping droids apart for scrap hardware.”

“Wooooo.”

Quintano tried to ignore the lonely coo from the astromech. He was sure that he would also complain if he was told to stay with the ship. Still, it was for the best and hopefully this wouldn’t take too long.

The smuggler made his initial investigation around the different landing pads. He wanted to make sure that the ship, and therefore the pilot, that he was looking for, was actually here. This would become a dead end real fast if the pilot couldn’t be found.

The humidity stuck to Quintano’s shirt and sweat started to pour from his forehead. He was getting tired of all of these planets with their extreme temperatures. He swore that after this, he would find a decent planet that had a more tolerable atmosphere without all of these extremes. There, he would settle down and never have to worry about anything ever again.

His thoughts were interrupted when he saw what he was looking for. The cargo barge that had been recorded leaving the same time that Tessa had mentioned was here, on the landing pad only a few feet away. He gave it a full look over, circling the barge, to make sure that all of the markings and identifying marks were correct by matching them up on his data pad. Once he was positive that this was the ship, he started out toward the nearest

tavern where he was sure that he would either find the pilot or find someone that could direct him to the pilot.

The outside of the tavern was a dump. The sign that used to have its name on it had rotted away and only the post still remained. The windows had been boarded up to hold the remaining glass in place and if it wasn't for the noise coming from inside, Quintano would have thought that the place had been abandoned some time ago.

The inside looked just as bad. Tables and chairs were broken and the few patrons that were inside had managed to put something together for their temporary usage. From the looks of things, if Quintano wanted a table, he would have to find some old wooden or metal debris that was scattered about and put a makeshift table and chair together. There were stains on the floor and the smuggler had no idea what they were and wasn't sure that he wanted to know. The room smelled of sweat and body odor with a hint of strong booze that permeated the whole tavern. This, with the humidity of the stale air, created a pungent odor that Quintano was hoping that he didn't have to tolerate for any length of time.

The small roof had trapped the heat and humidity. The atmosphere outside was more preferable than in here and Quintano wondered why anyone would want to come inside at all. The walls had accumulated moisture from the humidity and were dripping wet to form small pools of water along the base.

Of the half dozen or so patrons that were in the tavern, the majority of them were Gamorreans. This was to be expected. The last remaining patron was a Chiss and since the pilot of the ship that had left Nar Shaddaa and was supposed to deliver the package to some random place was a Chiss, this was the individual to talk to.

“Gavid Tane?”

The alien turned up from his drink, a liquid that looked more like slop or even swamp water than anything remotely digestible let alone palatable.

“Excuse me?”

“Are you Gavid Tane? Are you the pilot of the barge outside, the one who just came from Nar Shaddaa?”

This put the Chiss on the defense. He had only come here to drop off his supplies, pick up another batch and be on his way. He only wanted to beat the heat and find a place to relax before heading back into space again. He didn’t want to be hunted down. Then again, perhaps this individual had something to haul for a price.

“Yes, yes I’m Gavid.”

Quintano gave a sigh of relief. At last he was closing in on the one thing that would help him retire and put this whole mess behind him.

“Good. Look, I’m looking for a package that a Twi’lek named Tessa gave to you back on Nar Shaddaa. There seems to be some kind of mistake. The package actually belongs to me. It has my name on the outside and I have I.D. to prove that I’m the owner. Do you still have it or have you dropped it off somewhere? It’s very important that I...”

“No one gave me a package.”

“Perhaps you don’t remember. Think. This is very important, a Twi’lek on Nar Shaddaa...”

Gavid shook his head. “No, no one gave me a...” The Chiss was never able to finish his sentence. All that came out was a garbled sound of anguish as he coughed up blood.

Chaos erupted all across the tavern, and from the sounds outside, the rest of the town was suffering the same fate. Everything had happened so fast that it was hard to process it all at once, and yet, for one brief moment, as his adrenaline kicked in, time almost seemed to stand still.

The Gamorrean behind Gavid was pulling his mighty battle axe out of the Chiss's back. There was a sickening suction sound as he did. Blood dripped from the creature's weapon and a smile came upon the alien's face. Quintano knew that he would be next.

A brief look all around and Quintano could see that there were many more Gamorreans that had entered. He had been too busy questioning the Chiss that he hadn't even noticed the increase of customers and probably wouldn't have thought anything of it. Except now that he had it was obvious that this second group were wearing different clothing than the ones that were here. This was another clan that had come to raid. This was a clan war.

The scene outside had confirmed his suspicions. There were small skirmishes throughout the town. Gamorreans were killing each other left and right. Axes tore into flesh. Large clubs bashed bone. Bodies fell under the slaughter.

A nearby building went up in flames and then another. There was a small explosion somewhere. Screams of pain and battle cries filled the air. Blood flowed onto the streets.

Before Quintano had realized what had happened, he had his blaster drawn and was already in the motion of firing. The Gamorrean was hit, dead center. The blast seemed to surprise them both, but it was the big brute that fell to the ground.

Without missing a beat, Quintano turned and started to blast anything that moved toward him. A Gamorrean that had finished off one of its targets turned its attention toward the smuggler and was shot in the head. A set of beasts smashed through the wall while fighting another and A'Den got two more. A quick spin to



his right caught another as it lifted its axe up toward him for an instant decapitation.

Quintano knew that he couldn't keep this up. He had to get back to his ship and get out of here. The hunt for his package had now come to a dead end and it was time to give up on the entire treasure hunt. It wasn't worth dying for, especially since he was out of leads.

The smuggler found an opening in the fight and tried to make a break for it. He never stood a chance. The blow to the back of his head made the world spin. Consciousness faded and everything went dark.

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The Ebon Mortis entered the Gamorrean atmosphere and cut through the sky with ease. Its streamline design allowed it to fly without any problems through the humid air. Its presence continued to cast a shadow over the rainforests and swamplands until it came upon the small town of Urrsh Muh that A'Den was looking for.

The tracking device on the underside of the Miy'til Starfighter had worked well enough and had led the bounty hunter here. Finally this was a small enough civilization to not worry about disturbing the population, it was away from any local authorities, and there wasn't anyone or anything that could get in the way. All that needed to be done now was to pick up the smuggler and be on the way.

The Miy'til Starfighter was easy enough to find, sitting on the landing bay in the small town. This was a pleasant sight.

What wasn't a pleasant sight was the fact that most of the town had been burned down by a recent fire. The skeletal frames of the buildings were barely standing and were burnt to cinders. Smoke continued to rise where the fire had burned down to embers.

It looked as if a battle had happened here. Gamorrean bodies littered the area. Blood had been splattered upon the ground.

A'Den landed the Ebon Mortis a short distance away from the Miy'til Starfighter and waited for a short bit. If there were any aggressive opposition still in the area then hopefully they would make themselves known. None came.

The Mandalorian opened the door of the Phantom Class, hid behind one of the supporting frames and drew both blasters. This provided cover for any attack. Again, none came.

A'Den slowly exited the Ebon Mortis and methodically crossed the distance to the Miy'til Starfighter. A sudden twist and both hand held blasters were shoved into the cockpit of the ship. It was empty. Even the droid that sat in the back to navigate was gone.

'Of course it wasn't going to be that easy,' mused A'Den.

The bounty hunter carefully started a search pattern. Everything was carefully examined and systematically scrutinized. Large footprints dominated the muddy streets; more footprints than there were dead Gamorreans.

Based upon the culture of the Gamorreans, these brutal beasts often had clan wars to prove their worth or superiority. From the looks of things, this was probably the case here. One clan had declared war against another and devastated the town.

However, despite this brutish line of thinking, the Gamorreans had their own sense of code. They didn't use tech, like blasters, to fight. They resorted in crude axes and clubs to bash and hack each other in a show of strength and brawn. This helped weed out the weak, only the strongest survived.

This would mean that anything weaker would be cut down immediately as an insult to their ways. That would explain the dead Chiss. The dead Gamorreans around the Chiss with blaster fire in their chests suggested that Quintano went down shooting

while taking as many down with him as possible, since the Chiss didn't have any weapons and was killed by a huge gash to his back. Quintano was more than likely trying to get information about his package from the Chiss when all hell broke loose. Unfortunately, Quintano's blaster was here, lying with the dead bodies and not with the smuggler. This would mean that the smuggler would have no way to defend himself if the need arose.

Since Quintano's body was nowhere to be found, A'Den could only surmise that this probably meant that they had taken him hostage to kill later in some religious ceremony, as a sacrifice, target practice, or just to toss him into a pit and challenge him to a one on one, hand to hand combat. Either way, Quintano was more than likely going to die very soon if help didn't come quickly.

'Damn, that smuggler gets into more trouble than he's worth.'

There seemed to be a set of tracks from the tavern that led back out toward the thick jungle forest that surrounded this area. From the looks of all of the other tracks, the Gamorreans from the raiding party had all gone in that direction. If Quintano was still alive, then that would be the way to go. With both blasters drawn, A'Den moved into the jungle after the prey that would elude the hunt no more.

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Valas brought the Wraith on a sweeping pass. All of the tracking devices were brought up on his radar, the one that he put on the Ebon Mortis, the one that he put on the Miy'til Starfighter, and the third one, the one that the Mandalorian had also put on the Miy'til Starfighter. These two weren't getting away ever again.

As the shadow of the Fury-class Imperial interceptor passed over the landing bay, Valas was able to see that neither of the two ships were occupied and the view of the town explained why. It

was easy to figure out that Quintano had gone into the jungle and A'Den was going in after him.

The scenarios started to play out in Valas's head. If the Mandalorian couldn't free the smuggler in time, then he would be dead and Valas's mission of getting him to his scheduled appointment would be a failure. If the bounty did end up freeing him, then he would be collected as a bounty and still miss his appointment. In either case, Valas understood that he would have to help free Quintano while keeping him from being captured and at the same time remain hidden. If Quintano believed that an Imperial agent was also after him then he would run and still not make the appointment.

The next question was, how far into the jungle were they going and where were they heading? This had a simple solution. Since the Gamorreans usually didn't use tech, a droid in the middle of the jungle would be easy enough to find, it would be the only one there. A few adjustments on the scanners revealed where it was.

The droid's readings came in strong a couple of miles into the thick jungle. It had traveled toward a clearing deeper in and had halted its progress. Valas could only guess that the droid was trying to figure out how to get in there and help without simply getting it killed. It was time to move in and do something before the droid did something stupid.

Landing here, at the landing pad, would only give his position away. He was a ghost, not to be seen. No, he had to land somewhere else and then hike in. Once he found a position, he would do what he does best; he would take care of the situation one way or another.

## Chapter: Fight for Freedom

Quintano woke in pain. His head throbbed from where he had been struck. It felt as if some sarlacc was trying to eat its way out of his skull.

His skull wasn't the only thing that hurt. His arms ached from the fact that his hands were tied behind the stake that he was standing in front of. He had no idea how long he had been like this, but it seemed that it had been for an awfully long time. His shoulders weren't meant to keep his weight suspended.

From what he could tell, a significant amount of time had passed since he had been knocked out. The sun had dropped closer to the horizon and the air seemed cooler, if that was possible.

The area that he was in seemed to be some form of religious site or perhaps just a gathering site, he couldn't tell since he didn't know a whole lot about Gamorreans. Then again, he wondered who did. He also wondered if it was even worth knowing at this point, he was sure that he was going to die here and it really didn't matter why, it was just going to be a matter of time.

The large rocky hill had been cleared from all of the taller vegetation that threatened to encroach upon it. Around the base of the hill were many Gamorreans pushing and shoving each other, but not seemingly in an aggressive fashion, more like they were bored and wanted the ceremony to get on with. Small fires had been started so the beasts could see better with the setting sun and Quintano was sure that his death was only the beginning of the night's festival.

Currently he was tied to the large stake at the top of the hill where he could see the scene below him. Another small fire was lit in his proximity and it started to cast eerie shadows across the hill top and into the jungle. With him, another Gamorrean was throwing his arms up and making grunting noises that was starting to inspire the crowd below. From what he could tell, this was the leader of the clan below.

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Aro sat back in the shadows and watched the scene play out. It knew that it could use its jets to get up to Quintano faster than the rest of the clan could run up the hill. However, there was no way to get the both of them out of there fast enough. They would be surrounded and the little droid knew that it couldn't fly far with the smuggler's weight.

The tap on its head brought it out of its reverie. It had been too busy with trying to figure out how to rescue Quintano that it hadn't been paying attention to its radar. Quickly the droid spun its top section to see behind it to get an idea who had snuck up. The realization of who it was only brought shock and dismay.

Aro quickly went into panic mode. It beeps and tweets started to sound like some sort of alarm being set off. Its arm shot out and started to send electrical jolts in the individual's direction in a desperate attempt to ward off the danger.

"Shh...Or you'll get us both killed," A'Den stated trying to calm the droid down. "If I wanted to dismantle you, I would have done it by now. Besides, we both want the same thing, we want him freed and we can't do that if you bring the entire Gamorrean tribe after us, now can we?"

This seemed to placate the little droid, at least to the point where it stopped making noises that were eventually going to be heard. However, it did continue to periodically zap the bounty hunter with a mild electrical bolt just to show its annoyance.

“Ouch...you little bucket of bolts...hey, knock that off, I’m here to help. Now, here’s what we’re going to do.”

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The crowd had started to come to a fever pitch. Quintano could feel his body tremble. They would come in and do what they were going to do and there wasn’t anything he could do to stop them. Once their chanting ended then his death would be the crescendo.

Then it stopped. All at once, they all went silent and anxiety filled the air. The chief rose up his axe and spun toward the bound smuggler.

The blast shot through the air and struck the chief in the back of his head. His body shook only once before it dropped to the ground, never to move again.

The crowd below turned their attention to the one that had shot and for a brief moment they couldn’t believe what they saw. The Mandalorian was flying through the air with his rifle still smoking from the blast that had been fired. Beside him was an astromech using its thrusters to launch itself through the air.

Both landed beside the smuggler that the Gamorreans had planned to kill. Having their chief die was one thing (that was the way of their life) there would be a new one. However, there wouldn’t be another sacrifice. They had these two outnumbered and they knew it all at once. They gave a unified roar that echoed through the jungle around them and started their charge up the hill.

“Aro...? And...what the...?”

“Bleep, beep, beep, twirl, tweet.”

The astromech’s excitement and concern could no longer be contained. It continued to give a series of beeps as it went to

work. One of its armatures extended. This one had a circular saw blade attached that immediately started to spin. It only took a moment to cut through the ropes.

“And it’s nice to meet you as well,” the Mandalorian stated while opening fire upon the oncoming hoard of Gamorreans that were heading toward them. “I assume you know how to use a blaster?”

“I thought you wanted me dead,” Quintano said flatly while reaching for the weapons.

“Dead? No. But we can discuss that later. Now shut up and fire.”

Quintano had suspected that the bounty hunter didn’t want him to die; he just wanted to hear it to confirm his fears. It also told him that the bounty hunter would rather risk his life to bring him in alive than to just give up and let him die here. This meant that the Empire really wanted that package. It also meant that once he let everyone know that he really didn’t know where it was, his life would be forfeit.

However, that was something that he would have to figure out later. Right now he had to save his life one moment at a time. With the Mandalorian’s pistols drawn, Quintano opened fire.

A’Den tossed out one grenade after another setting off explosions. Their blasts lit up the night. Their devastation was incredible. Shards of super-hot metal cut through the air. Concussive shockwaves blew any and all to the ground. Yet the Gamorreans didn’t stop, they didn’t relent. If anything, they pushed harder with greater ferocity.

Quintano turned and started blasting as many as he could. Each shot was as well placed as he could aim. One by one Gamorreans fell under his barrage of blaster fire. He spun and shot two more coming up the side and spun again to cover the back.



A'Den's grenades had run out and the bounty hunter kept count of each one that was used. If there was a way out of this, then they would be added to the bill that would be collected. Until then, the rifle would have to do.

The Mandalorian opened fire with the EE-3 carbine rifle. Triple shots flew through the air and blasted each opponent. While the smuggler's opponents took a couple of shots each to put down, A'Den took each Gamorrean down with each hit. The problem was, the rifle would either overload quicker than the pistols or would run out of rounds. With this in mind, the Mandalorian knew that every shot had to count.

A'Den turned to one side and shot one of the Gamorreans in the face as it had almost made its assent. A quick spin back caught another in the chest, sending it to the ground.

Both A'Den and Quintano took a step back from the advancing horde and suddenly stopped. Their backs hit upon each other and both of them now knew and understood. They would fight together or die together, but they would have to depend on each other to watch each other's backs.

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Valas had taken a comfortable spot up in one of the trees. He had gotten to the area before the Mandalorian had made his move and he wondered when that was going to happen. The chieftain was obviously going to kill the smuggler if something wasn't done quickly.

The assassin shook his head at the situation. It was time to get personally involved. There were too many of the Gamorreans to take on by himself in a straight fighter, which was why he brought his sniper rifle. However, after the first shot, they would know that he was there and it would be difficult to keep all of them at bay.

Still, he could at least strike down the lead chieftain and hope that Quintano could take the opportunity to escape during the entire chaos that would erupt. Even if that happened, the smuggler would then know that he was being chased by someone else. That would have to be dealt with another time. Right now, he was going to deal with the first and immediate threat to the life of the smuggler that needed to make an appointment.

Valas brought up his sniper rifle and brought the Gamorrean leader into his sights. He held his breath, steadied his aim, and started to pull the trigger...and then all hell broke loose.

The very thing that he hadn't expected was happening. The Mandalorian was risking his life to help the smuggler escape.

"I guess the bounty must be well worth it," Valas mused to himself.

The two of them, with the periodic help from the astromech, seemed to be holding their own, at least initially. However, as the battle continued, they were losing ground. The horde of Gamorrean would overwhelm them. The Mandalorian and the droid could easily escape, but neither of them could carry Quintano and that was the one that needed to live out of the three of them.

Valas brought his rifle around and found the first target. A swift pull of the trigger and the alien's skull burst open. Valas shifted, found another and then another. Shot after shot was made and Gamorreans started to fall.

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A'Den turned to the right and brought the rifle around. Without even thinking, the trigger was pulled and the oncoming warrior was blown dead center of its chest. At this point, A'Den knew that missing would be difficult.

The next Gamorrean came up after that one and brought up its axe. There was no time to take this one down. The blow was going to hurt. With any hope the armor would absorb or deflect most of the damage and a shot could be gotten off.

The beast's skull exploded sending a shower of bone fragments, blood and brains in all directions. Without missing a beat, A'Den turned and opened fire at another and then another. However, the incident was not forgotten.

It had come to A'Den's realization that the sniper that hit the taxi speeder not too long ago back on Nar Shaddaa was still out there. The first sniper shot at the speeder was easily dismissed. Now, however, the timing and the shot was too coincidental. The question was, what did the sniper want and whose side was he on?

The question would have to wait as A'Den pivoted to the right and let the butt of the rifle lead the way. There just hadn't been enough time to spin the weapon around and get off a shot. The rifle smacked the Gamorrean in the face and made it back up. That gave the room and time needed to blast it.

With the creatures now within range for hand to hand combat, A'Den reached for the dagger that was always within an arm's reach. A plunge forward caught an alien in the neck and a spin to the right slashed another wide open.

Aro became more active with the Gamorreans being this close. It gave electric shocks with one appendage and utilized its circular saw with another. The aliens didn't learn fast enough to keep away from the droid since they continued to fall.

Quintano turned and blasted out to his side. The pistols were becoming hot in his hand and he ran the risk of them either exploding in his face or running out of energy. However, it didn't matter. With another turn to his left, he shot the last of the Gamorreans.

As the last beast fell, Valas adjusted his sniper rifle. The Mandalorian came into view of his crosshairs. One quick pull of the trigger and the bounty hunter would be dead. The only foreseeable problem would be that Quintano would know that he was there and would run and never make his appointment. The assassin held his hand but kept the crosshairs focused. If the situation took a turn for the worse then he would chance the smuggler's flight and drag him to his meeting before killing him.

"I think that's the last..." A'Den's sentence was never finished. The blow to the back of the head from Quintano's pistols dropped the bounty hunter to the ground, unconscious.

Quintano brought up one of the blasters and leveled it at an angle in a downward position. In one brief moment the chase would be over. Instead, he shook his head and lowered the weapon.

"I may be many things, Mandalorian, but I'm not a murderer."

---

Valas watched as the smuggler took care of the situation all by himself. The Mandalorian went down hard, now all he had to do was pull the trigger. It would be the quickest and easiest way to bring an end to the pursuit that had been given and would clear the way to the appointment that needed to be made.

But, to the assassin's surprise, it didn't happen. Quintano didn't take the shot. Instead, he just turned and headed back toward Urrsh Muh.

Valas gave a shrug of his shoulders. He could take care of the Mandalorian for the smuggler, if he had the shot, but at this angle he didn't. He would have to wait until the Quintano was gone before making a move to finish what he had started before heading back to the Wraith. He would then have to try to catch up to the smuggler and make sure that he stayed the course. No, it was better to just leave the matter alone and concentrate on

Quintano. If the Mandalorian stayed down long enough or even was smart enough to get the hint, then the situation was dealt with. But if the Mandalorian popped up again, then it would be the last time that he interfered.

With the focus on making haste to get back to the Wraith and follow Quintano, Valas climbed back down out of the tree. It would still take some time to get back to his ship and he wanted to be ready for when Quintano became airborne.

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Quintano slowly picked his way through the jungle back toward Urrsh Muh. His heart was heavy with all the emotions that he had gone through lately and his mind was lost in his thoughts. There was a lot to think about.

All seemed to be lost. The package was nowhere to be found and the last person to have ever seen it was dead. Gavid Tane was dead, Tessa was dead, and the trail had grown cold. He could try to run through the public records of the spaceport during the time that Tessa was suppose to have given the package to Gavid and see if she had given it to someone else. That could take days, even with Aro's help.

The thought had merit, at least in its initial consideration. However, Tessa might not have even given it to anyone. She may have just tossed it or sold it to someone else. It would be a waste of time, effort, and energy especially since there were now several individuals that he had ticked off during his search for the item. Time was running against him from all directions.

Quintano had to consider this above the income that the artifact could possibly bring him, and that was if he was going to be paid at all. His contact had been too mysterious and there had been no way to tell what he was really walking into. The promise of the credits was too enticing, but now he had to reconsider if it was worth it.

After upsetting the Hutts, some underworld syndicate that had killed off Jessa and Tessa, the Gamorreans, the authorities on Kessel, the Empire, the rebel alliance, and several others that he was sure would find out about the package as time went on, let alone the fact that the Mandalorian was still after him, the most sensible thing to do was to forget about the package all together and just lay low. There were just too many people involved, too many hazards and not enough proof that he could find it again let alone get paid for it. No, it was best to just forget about the whole thing, cut his losses, and to find a new tavern to hole up in.

He had felt as if he had been one of those off-worlder tourists that had been given a map and a promise of lost treasure only to find out that the treasure wasn't real and the map had been sold for an outrageous amount of credits. He had laughed and shook his head at those that were gullible to be led around like that. Yet, here he was following the same promise. Even though he hadn't invested in a map, he wondered if he had been played all along anyway. Had there been something else that he had done or had he led others around on a wild Nerf hunt while another individual was in the background running free without any distractions?

All these questions were making his head spin. The only cure was something strong at a tavern in some neutral territory where no one knew who he was. This brought a smile to his face, that, and the sight of his ship as he started to make his way toward the landing bay.

---

A'Den woke with a splitting headache. That double crossing smuggler had delivered a cheap shot and he was going to pay for it.

'No,' A'Den mused with a shake of the head. 'There should have been a better watch over Quintano and the move should have been expected. That mistake will not happen again.'

The question was what to do next. Since Quintano had lost his trail on his package, there was no known destination to where he might go next. Once the smuggler got back into his ship, he would head out into parts unknown. The tracking device was still on the ship, but if Quintano got too far away then it would be useless and then there wouldn't be any way to get paid.

A'Den had to bring him in now or all of this would have been in vain. The contract would be broken and there would be stain upon the family name of Fett. A'Den knew that something had to be done. Besides, the smuggler still had the two blasters and no one steals from a Fett. A'Den switched on the jetpack. With any luck, the smuggler could be caught before he made it to his ship, went into hyperspace and disappeared forever.

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The beeps from the astromech brought Quintano's attention back to reality. The last time that Aro started giving these warning sounds was when there was approaching danger. Aro had always been correct in its analysis of any situation and it was best to not ignore the droid. A quick look up and back explained the droid's alarm.

Quintano just had to shake his head. He couldn't believe it. The Mandalorian just wasn't giving up. Sure enough, the bounty hunter was using his jetpack to make up the time and distance. But it wasn't going to be enough. The Mandalorian was too far away. The bounty hunter couldn't catch up in time. All he had to do was cross the very short distance and he would be in his ship. He would be in the air long before the bounty hunter got here and would be in hyperspace before the bounty hunter could even reach his own ship. Again the Mandalorian was just too late.

A'Den couldn't believe it. Quintano was going to get away again. On top of that, the smuggler had the audacity to stop for a brief time, give a smug smile and a proceeded to give a "goodbye" wave.

“No, no, no...Not again.”

Without thinking of the repercussions that might happen, A'Den immediately landed, dropped into a three point bracing stance and fired the rocket that was kept on the jetpack. Only after the rocket had fired did the thought that Quintano might be too close to the ship come to mind. It was too late.

The rocket flew with complete accuracy. It streaked through the sky straight for its intended target. Nothing could change its course.

Quintano looked out in horror. Did the bounty hunter really want to kill him? At this proximity to the ship, he would be blow up with it. His only chance of survival was to run.

The smuggler took off in a dead sprint. His arms beat as quickly as they could. His legs carried him as fast as he could make them. His only hope was that he could make it out of the explosion zone in time.

The explosion rocked the landing bay. The Miy'til Starfighter blew into fragmented shards that filled the air. Superheated metal and debris went sky high.

The fireball took up most of the landing area and could be seen for miles around. The heat blast caught one of the closer buildings on fire and two trees went up in flames.

The blast blew over the remains of another building and a smaller ship was knocked over. Aro was picked up and flung through the air and Quintano never stood a chance. His body went sailing and hit the ground hard. Darkness came over his lifeless form.

A'Den just stood there, stunned. Everything that had happened up until now was a moot point. With the smuggler dead, there was no bounty to be collected. A'Den just couldn't believe that it had come to this. Greed had turned to murder. The others that had



been killed were in self-defense; even the archeologists back on Korriban were armed and highly trained Imperial officers. Quintano might have been armed, but he had shown mercy. However, if there was even a slim chance that he had survived...

The jetpack was turned on and A'Den's form took to the air. The pack was pushed to its limit, and although the distance was short, A'Den felt as if time itself had stood still and too much of it had been spent to get to the destination.

A hesitant feel for a pulse had revealed that the smuggler wasn't dead, only out cold. He might have a slight concussion and perhaps a few bruised muscles or even a cracked rib or two, but he would live. Now for the...

The high pitched squeal of the astromech coming in hard and fast on its thrusters warned A'Den of the danger that was approaching. If the little droid had remained quiet then perhaps it would have gotten the drop, perhaps. However, with the announcement of its arrival, A'Den was able to respond.

Within a heartbeat, A'Den reached into one of the many pockets built into the armor and took out a small, round object with one hand while bringing the rifle around. A split second was all that it took to put the orb upon the front of the barrel and another to bring the rifle back around. The droid was already too close.

A'Den fired and the bolt struck point blank on the droid's midsection. An electrical discharge from the restraining bolt shot through the astromech like a living creature. The astromech dropped from its approach and fell to the ground, near Quintano, with a thud. Only a brief "woo" came from the droid as A'Den stepped towards the both of them.

## Chapter: The Last Call

“I have the smuggler aboard and ready to deliver.”

A'Den had brought both the smuggler and the astromech aboard the Ebon Mortis and had taken to the air. A low orbit course had been set around the planet, since no other course had been given and it was a wise idea to leave the planet's surface out of growing respect of its native inhabitants.

The Mandalorian had stationed the astromech in one of the few crew's quarters that was available. The one picked had the least functioning attributes except for the door that could be closed and locked. Although the restraining bolt would ensure that the droid would remain in a suspended status, A'Den wasn't going to take any chances. There had already been too many chances taken and now that Quintano was aboard, there was no need to take any more. If the droid was able to get the bolt off somehow, then there still wouldn't be any way possible for the astromech to interfere with the exchange.

Quintano, on the other hand, had been brought to the bridge. His hands were shackled behind his back. Here, the smuggler could be watched over personally. The man had been so fortuitous with either blatant luck or even incredible skill, that A'Den wanted to make sure, without a doubt, where the smuggler was at any given time. Again, nothing was to go to be left to chance.

“Excellent. Meet me on Kintan at these coordinates for the delivery.”

Quintano opened the attached file and found the coordinates for the rendezvous point. Kintan wasn't a planet that most

individuals wanted to visit and the site was at one of the most desolate places that the planet had to offer.

With a final look toward the still unconscious smuggler, A'Den gave a nod. The sooner that this job was over the better it would be. The coordinates were punched in, the course was set, and within a moment the ship went into hyperspace leaving Gamorr far behind.

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Valas sat in the command station on the bridge of the Wraith. The blip on his radar screen showing the Miy'til Starfighter wasn't moving. It should have taken off by now and the assassin wondered what was taking the smuggler so long.

The blip's disappearance brought nothing but alarm. It shouldn't have just disappeared, unless...

The scanners picked up a large explosion on the planet where the Miy'til Starfighter should have been.

Valas slammed his fist down upon the control panel. It had to have been the Mandalorian. His initial assessment of the bounty hunter's situation had been wrong. He should have taken the time to assassinate him. Now, the bounty hunter had gone too far. It was time to put an end to that life once and for all.

However, all wasn't lost, at least not yet. There was still time to recapture the smuggler or at least stop the transaction of his deliverance to the Empire. Of course this would include killing the Mandalorian, dragging the smuggler to his real appointment, and then killing him as well. That would ensure his success in his mission and would tie up all the loose ends.

Valas turned on his comms and listened in to the conversation. He still had his tracking device on the Ebon Mortis that could not only track its movements, but was tapped into its communications. Tracking its movements was great in a short

distance, but that could prove ineffective if the ship got too far away. Listening to where it was going was going to be a huge advantage.

“...Meet me on Kintan at these coordinates for the delivery.”

Valas smiled. He would get there and prepare for the exchange. He would prevent it from happening and wrap this assignment up nicely.

The ship's comms signaled an incoming call. He had expected the call, although he hadn't expected it to be so soon. The officer must have gone into panic mode. Still, its timing not only confirmed his suspicions of its source, but also who on the Audacious that it might be. Only a handful of officers had the authority to enter the general's private room and fewer still the ability to tap into the general's private comm. line. How else would this individual know when to call and what information to relay? With a smile, Valas patch the communication through.

The light pale blue hologram of the hooded figure appeared on the holo comm. control panel. Its image slightly winked in and out, no doubt from the lack of power the officer was using to ensure that the transmission wouldn't be picked up by anyone else aboard the Audacious.

“I thought better of you. Your reputation had preceded you but I see now that it was under a false pretense. You have failed your mission. The bounty hunter now has Quintano and is on the way to meet General Fess on...”

“Kintan...yes, I know.” Valas's reply cut off the cloaked figure in mid sentence. “Don't look so surprised, lieutenant, I am well aware of my situation. Now, let's get a few things straight shall we?”

“First, as far as my reputation has gone, it has been without blemish. All of my missions have been a success and they always

will be. There is no question about my abilities or my authority and you will never question either of those again. Understood?”

“Next, yes, I do know who you are, so you don’t have to hide your face behind a cloak. And how did I figure out who you were? That’s easy. I have eyes and ears on everything. I can tap into every frequency and listen in on every conversation, yes, even the Emperor’s. There is nothing that can hide from me and no information that I can’t retrieve. This is why you have hired me in the first place, or have you forgotten?”

“This brings me to my next point. You don’t get to tell me how to do my job, and I don’t tell you how to undermine your general’s command.”

“Finally, as far as my assignment being a failure, I will ask you these questions. Is Quintano still alive? Yes. Has he been handed over to the general? No. So far, I’ve done my job. I’ve kept him alive and kept him from the Empire. This is only a minor setback, one that is going to be rectified as soon as I finish this conversation with you.”

“So, let me do my job, the one that you hired me to do and keep this channel secure by not broadcasting unnecessary details that I already know, let alone to criticize me on how I work. Neither of these settles well with me and if it continues I’ll have to have this conversation in person. Do we have an understanding?”

The hologram communication ended from the other side of the transmission.

Valas smiled as he punched in the coordinates to Kintan.

## Chapter: In Route

Quintano groaned from the massive headache and the body aches that he felt all over. He felt as if he had been hit by a runaway speeder or went a round or two with a Wookiee and had lost.

The vibration through the metal floor that he was laying on told him that he was on some kind of a ship, but he knew that it wasn't his. The Mandalorian had seen to it that the Miy'til Starfighter was nothing more than stardust. If his guess was correct, and it probably was, then this was the Mandalorian's ship.

He tried to sit up but found it useless. Not only were his muscles no longer cooperative, his hands were bound behind his back. The best that he could do was lean up against the computer station to get a better look at his surroundings.

He had to admit that the inside of the ship was impressive. Although the computers looked outdated, they still had an elegance about them that said that they were the state of the art for their time. There were at least two chairs for piloting the craft and a couple of others to run other functions throughout the ship, and although it would only take one individual to navigate, the craft would probably function at a higher peak performance if it had more crew members.

This was a relief to Quintano. There weren't any other members aboard. He only had to deal with the one Mandalorian and as soon as he got his hands on...

The bounty hunter was stationed just off to the right. He could see the armored figure. The individual stood monitoring the

navigations control with the helmet set up on the console. At least he could see the back side of the...long blonde hair?

“Wait what? You’re a girl!”

“I’m far from being a girl,” A’Den Verda Fett stated as she turned toward him. “I’m quite grown up, thank you, in case that bit of observation had escaped your notice.”

No, he had to admit that now that he saw her, she wasn’t a “girl” at all. As a matter of fact her soft features and deep emerald green eyes were very attractive. He did his best to not blush or stare too much.

“No, well, what I mean is...”

“What you mean is that you didn’t expect me to be a female.” A’Den put a hand upon her hip and gave a smirk of disapproval. “You think that because I’m a woman means that I can’t handle myself or be as good as you? Well, let me tell you something, I caught you. I guess that makes me better than you at least.”

“Only by blowing up my ship and nearly killing me, thank you very much.” Quintano’s words were dripping with sarcasm.

“You’re still alive aren’t you? And in one piece?”

“Yes, well again, no thanks to you.”

“Well, thanks to me, you’re still alive from the Gamorreans. So, yes, I did save your life. That means you owe me.”

“Saving me doesn’t count if you are just going to hand me over to the Empire. They’re just going to kill me anyway.”

That last comment seemed to bring the conversation to a dramatic end. The words hit hard and A’Den Verda had to turn back to her work. Actually she had already finished, she just

didn't want to have to look at the man that she knew that she was condemning to death.

'It's just a job, it's just a job,' she kept telling herself.

It was Quintano that broke the silence. "Where's Aro?"

"I assume you mean your astromech. It's in the other room with a restraining bolt."

"You're not planning on dismantling him or killing him off as well are you?"

A'Den snapped back at him. "This mission is just about me getting you to General Fess. I don't care about your astromech. I'll probably just dump him off on some deserted planet and be done with the both of you." Her temper had flared.

Quintano sighed and shook his head. "I was far better off staying with the rebellion."

A'Den gave a scoff. "You? You used to work for the Rebellion?" Her tone was full of doubt.

"Yes, me, and why not? I'm a damn good pilot." Quintano's burst was more of a defensive reply before going silent for a brief time. "Yeah, well, not everyone is cut out for it. It seems I don't like taking orders and they didn't like repeating them to me."

For the first time, A'Den looked at the smuggler differently. Curiosity had gotten the best of her. There was time to kill and a story to be heard.

"Alright, I'll bite. How did you come to work for them?"

Quintano took a deep sigh and got as comfortable as he could. "I was raised on a farm, content from all of this war. We were a happy family. Life was easy; we grew our crops, we sold our crops."



“One day, the Empire decided that we were going to fall in line and those who didn’t would die. Of course we fought back, we all did. We were a peaceful planet; there wasn’t much for a defense. The Empire swept through use like wheat.”

“My parents put me on a passing speeder as the war was closing in upon our farm. It was one of those government aid speeders that was picking up women and children and taking them to safety. They only had room for one more. When the war was over, I went back to try to find my parents. The farm was destroyed and they were nowhere to be found, they were gone. I still don’t know if they are still alive looking for me, were taken prisoner or what had happened. So, I joined the rebellion to find them or at least to take my frustrations out upon the Empire that had separated us”

“My hatred for the Empire made me reckless. I took challenges that put whole patrols at risk. I was asked to leave. My heart broke. I was without purpose and had nowhere to go. I figured if I needed anyone to look up to, it would be me. This was all that I had left.”

“Without a job, I took up smuggling. I had to get some income. It was here that I could hurt both the Empire and the rebels. I no longer cared much for the war that they are bringing upon us, upon all of us, anyone that got caught up in their conflict.”

Once again, silence filled the command center of the ship. A’Den Verda couldn’t help but feel for the man that she had captured. Her heart went out to him. But she had to shake her head and clear her thoughts. She had a mission to do and no amount of heartfelt storytelling was going to distract her from her contract.

“Look,” she said, trying to convince herself more than Quintano. “The war is hard on everyone. I need to make a living as well.”

Quintano gave a scoff at that. “At least you have a ship, armor and weapons. You seem to be doing well enough.”

A'Den Verda shook her head. “It wasn't always like that. When the war came into full swing on my planet, the resources were drained. Factories were shut down and moved elsewhere. Towns and sometimes whole cities slowly withered and died. We became unemployed. We became worthless and started to turn on each other. Civil war erupted. It was all that we could do to make ends meet.”

“I woke up one day to find that I was abandoned, left to fend for myself. I don't blame them, not really. We would have never made it together. I ended up living on the streets and only had the clothing on my back. I begged for food and found shelter where I could.”

A'Den gave a slight chuck and a brief smile, before her smile became cold. “There was this man who used to come around and give me food every now and then. I thought that he was important with his shiny armor and weapons. He was going to save us all, or so I thought. I looked forward to seeing him every day, not just for the food, but for the hope that everything would be alright. He would make sure of that.”

“One night he was drunk and things got out of hand. Let's just say that this *used* to be his armor and blaster. Some days I can still see his blood on his dagger that I now carry.”

“I became strong and did what I had to do to survive, including taking this job. I'm not going back to the way things used to be. The money I'm getting from turning you in will help me start a new life. It's nothing personal, it's just a job.”

“As far as the ship is concerned it isn't mine either, I stole it. Yes, I'll probably keep it, but who knows who'll be coming to look for it.”

Quintano gave her a stern look as he spoke. “Well, excuse me for taking it personally. Like I said before, he’s going to kill me, one way or another and I take my life and my death very personally.”

Again, this seemed to hit A’Den hard. She turned her face away as if struck. This mission was becoming harder and harder to come to terms with.

“Look”, Quintano continued. “I have a deal coming up that will pay very handsomely. Why don’t we split it? I could give you a quarter of the take. What do you say?”

There was no answer that came from the Mandalorian. Quintano couldn’t figure out if she was trying to ignore him or was contemplating the situation. It was time to tip the scales.

“Ok, ok,” Quintano added. “I see you that you have great negotiation skills. I’ll tell you what, I’ll give you a third. That’s a whole third.”

A’Den snapped back her answer almost fast enough to cut him off of his sentence. “You don’t even have the item that you are looking for and don’t even know where to start looking for it. So there’s no way to get paid. A third of nothing is still nothing.”

This statement hit Quintano rather hard. The bounty hunter was right. He really had nothing to show for his efforts and nothing left to bargain with. He was desperate and running out of options. There was only one thing left to do.

Quintano rolled to one side and tucked his knees under him as he did. The momentum rolled him to a kneeling position and a sudden movement with his leg brought his foot underneath him. It was the position that was needed. This had all happened within a heartbeat and within another, Quintano kicked off.

The smuggler’s feet carried him as quickly as they could for the short amount of distance. His body slammed into the

unsuspecting bounty hunter and the two of them collided against the computer console and then crashed to the ground.

Quintano's brash move had got him the surprise, but that was all. A'Den's armor took the brunt of the blow and the added weight of the suite made it more difficult to overcome the bounty hunter, especially with his hands shackled behind his back. There was only a brief exchange of sheer force before it was A'Den who had overpowered the smuggler and ended up on top of him.

A'Den didn't want to have to do this, but the smuggler had left her no other choice. She reached into her side pocket of her armor and produced a shock collar. As she brought it forward, she turned it on. Once the collar touched Quintano's body, the smuggler's form jolted from the current only momentarily before falling unconscious.

A'Den gave a sigh of regret. Now, she was going to have to fit him with it just to keep him in line. She also had to find another room to lock him into to make sure that he didn't try a stunt like that again. When that was done, she could focus on getting to Kintan uninterrupted, but not necessarily unbothered. She knew, deep down, that turning Quintano in would still weigh heavy on her soul.

## Chapter: Kintan

A'Den brought the Ebon Mortis into Kintan's atmosphere and started the descent procedures. There had been no problems getting here, which brought conflicting emotions. On the one hand, she was looking forward to the large reward at the end of this deal. It would make life a whole lot easier. On the other hand, any problems could mean that she could find some way to back out of the contract. She had to admit that she was feeling sorry for the smuggler and had to constantly remind herself that this was only a job and not to get emotionally attached. That was getting harder and harder to do knowing that Quintano would be tortured over information that he didn't have until he was ultimately killed.

'It's just a payment, it's just a payment,' she said over and over to herself.

The Ebon Mortis swung around toward the eastern part of the planet. It was said that this side of Kintan had been bathed by a radiation burst of some exploding star a long time ago. There were other rumors including being a test site of some Imperial weapon or some experiment that had gone horribly wrong. Whatever the reason was, this side of the planet was now a wasteland.

What used to be covered in thick, prolific, and abundant forests was now a nightmarish landscape. Whatever had happened had killed off so much of the flora that only a few enduring shrubs could be found. There were still patches of scorched trees that stood erect like tombstones marking where life used to be. Their structures had been transformed to not decompose. They were petrified, in their way, and were only dead reminders of what was and would never give their life back to the planet to help anything grow again. These small patches of petrified forests looked as if

some great fire had recently come through and scorched everything in its path, leaving blackened charred pillars of burned remains.

Whatever had happened had also created a massive influx of lava flows. The ground was covered with cooled lava fields, blacked and jagged rock formations that littered the area. Old collapsed lava tubes cut through the area leaving furrows along the land. There were places there were glass, sections that had nothing but pumice, and other places that were thick with billowing toxic gases. There was even an active lava river that that destroyed everything that it touched and anything that got near it.

Many caves dotted the mountains in the area. These were more of the hollowed out lava tubes that had been cooled over the years. These were now the only reprieve that any species would have in the area. Here, some precipitation would accumulate to feed the few surviving, scrawny bushes that were trying to live.

A'Den brought the Ebon Mortis down toward a field of pumice. The beacon that she had hollowed brought her to a landing site that was acceptable. It was in a wide open field of volcanic rock where anyone could see anything coming for at least a mile. If anything were to happen, she would be able to see it coming soon enough to get her, her ship, and her cargo out of there in time.

The Mandalorian landed the craft and flipped on a few scanners. So far, there wasn't another ship in sight and none on the radar. The small landing beacon was visible off in the distance but nothing else gave any indication that anyone else was here.

From the looks of things, the general had planted the landing beacon first and then left to wait for her arrival. Since he wanted this information off the books, he wouldn't stay here and wait for her, his presence would be missed. He also couldn't use a hyper drive to arrive since it would take too long to get here once the landing beacon announced her arrival. No, this meant that his

ship, the Audacious, was somewhere nearby and watching the area closely.

This could lead to a huge amount of problems. The larger ship would already have a lock on her location and could fire down upon her at any moment. She could be surrounded by Imperial T.I.E. fighters. This could be the biggest trap that she had ever walked into, and if the general thought that she was no longer on the “need to know” list, then her life could easily be forfeit.

With this in mind, A'Den increased the radar range of the sensors. She also kept most of the engines online. This would drain fuel but she wouldn't need to go through a pre-start up program to get them running again. She also made sure that the ship's guns were functional and took the time to program them into the small computer on her armor. They wouldn't be able to fire very accurately this way, but it might be able to give her some cover if it was needed. Hopefully, none of these contingencies would be needed. Hopefully the general would want the meeting to be too covert to want to bring attention to anyone and that he wouldn't risk a battle that might get his prize killed before he was able to get the information that he needed out of him.

Now was the hard part; waiting. It was easy to wait for the right moment when hunting. It wasn't easy to sit here and wait to see if she had made a fatal decision. Yet, all she could do was look out, through the cockpit window, and watch the landing beacon in hopes that the transaction would go well, or perhaps, not at all.

---

“Sir you told us to let you know when a ship came into the sector.”

The officer had come into General Brakin Fess's personal command room to deliver the message that the general had been waiting for. The general had seemed to be in an agitated mood and the officer had hoped that this news would relieve him,

hopefully to the point that he would give him a promotion for doing a job well done.

The officer had been instructed by the general to maintain a low synchronized orbit on the western side of the planet in the hopes of hiding its presence from any incoming ships. It wasn't an easy task, but the officer had his team do their best to keep them hidden. With any luck, they had remained concealed from whatever it was that the general was hiding from and this would also reflect well on his performance.

“Our probes have detected an old X-70B Phantom Class that came out of hyper drive. What are your instructions?”

This made the general snap out of his reverie. His stomach had been churning over the whole episode and the sooner he got the smuggler back, the quicker he would have the information and the quicker he could report back to the Emperor. As long as nothing went wrong with the transaction, everything would be fine.

The thought about sending his entire landing squad down in a fleet of T.I.E. fighters had crossed his mind. However, he couldn't afford to let anyone know about his failure to maintain a single smuggler aboard his ship, under his command. No, there was only one thing that he could say.

“I'll handle this myself. Prepare my ship.”

---

The Imperial Agent Valas pulled his ship around from the western portion of the planet's South Pole. The Wraith was hidden by the magnetic flux of the planet and would only come up as a shadow or an anomaly on anyone's radar. It was an old, but effective trick, one that he enjoyed using often.

He had seen the Audacious once he had come out of hyper drive and he had kept a monitor on them. He would hate to have



any further complications since his source of payment was aboard that ship and so was the individual that he had to ensure didn't get his hands upon Quintano. It was best to remain hidden from them while making sure they didn't do anything to jeopardize his mission. He would use every trick that he could to ensure that he stayed off of their radar.

The Wraith was equipped with a cloaking device that drained considerable amount of power. He had turned it on as soon as he picked up the Audacious on his radar and he was sure that the incompetent crew had mistaken his arrival for a ghost on their sensors before he disappeared. After he had moved into the south pole's magnetic field, he shut off the power draining device to save energy, there was no need to have it on here.

Once his radar picked up the Phantom Class ship, he gave it a couple of minutes to land before moving in. He wanted to make sure that no one knew that he was there, that's how he worked, and that's how he always worked. None would see him coming.

Valas had made a short power dive toward the frigid land here at the South Pole, before he cut his thrusters. The heat pattern of his engines would be picked up against the cold atmosphere and if he wanted to remain hidden then his approach would have to be the hard way.

His speed accelerated as he continued to let the Wraith freefall. At first the sides of the ship started to heat up as air started to accumulate too fast. Its friction pushed hard against the ship and several of the sections started to glow red, then white, overheating the ship on an entry speed that it wasn't designed to withstand. The ship started to shake under the strain. Warning lights started to flash showing the imminent danger of destruction. Gauges started to move into the red section. Alarms started to go off.

Yet Valas didn't relent. He didn't move and didn't worry. Despite the fact that the ship was threatening to fall apart all around him or crash into the icy landscape below, the Imperial

agent made no move to correct his flight path or his trajectory. His situation had either escaped him or it was of no concern.

Valas watched as the ground continued to speed up toward him. He made no move and paid no attention to the computers or the engines. Instead he continued to count. Each moment was another tick in his head as he calculated speed, acceleration, distance covered and gravity. His mental facilities coldly processed each attribute until...

Valas pulled back on the throttle hard. The engines came to life and started to make a whining sound that started low and continued to climb to a roar, a protest that threatened to blow. The gauges that were pushing their red zones had maxed out. The throttle shook and tried to be unresponsive but Valas didn't yield or concede.

The Wraith pulled up and skimmed across the ice field. Its engine's thrust caused a wake of ice and permafrost to kick up behind it. The frigid cold cloud covered the heat from the engine blast. All that would be picked up on anyone's radar would be a small blizzard that cut across the frozen tundra, not uncommon in these parts.

Valas followed the mountains out of the polar ice capped region. He kept low and up against the icy peaks as much as possible. Hopefully he would be able to fly under anyone's radar. He kept his speed slow and constant so even if he were to be picked up against the shadows of the mountains, he could be confused with a flock of migrating birds. By the time any figured out that he was even there, he would be long gone.

The Imperial agent kept an eye on the landing beacon. He made a few adjustments to make sure that his flight plan kept him on the far side of the mountains while maintaining a course toward the device. This was as much a beacon to him as it was to the two individuals that were meeting for their transaction.

When Valas was satisfied that he was nearly perpendicular to the site, he turned the Wraith inward, toward the battered side of the planet. There were now enough crags to hide his presence, enough lava rock to absorb his heat signature, and enough lava and magma rivers to confuse anyone's radar. His ship was as invisible as he often was by himself.

As the Imperial agent came closer to the site, Valas found an area to land. It was some distance away and behind a set of jagged crags to hide his landing. The dark rocks and burnt landscape would hide his black Fury class if anyone passed overhead and the tall peaks would block any visual observation from the plane of pumice ahead of him.

After quickly shutting off the engines and finishing his landing procedure, Valas went to his weapon's rack. There he found the collection of weapons that he had collected over the years. There were so many to choose from, but one was always his favorite, his sniper rifle. He collected this one and set off to find a good spot.

Valas's climb up the craggy cliff would have been difficult to most individuals, but his training had included finding the highest peak possible for the higher ground advantage. This meant that he had spent quite a lot of time climbing rocks to get a better perspective or to get a better snipe shot. This particular climb meant that he would have both. From here, he would be able to see anyone and anything coming and going and he would have the perfect shot and could be long gone before anyone knew that he was even there.

Although the crag was full of jagged edged volcanic rock, Valas was able to find his hand grips and footholds until he was able to make his way to a spot near the top. He didn't want the highest point on the peak or else he would be silhouetted against the light of day. Instead, he found a place to conceal himself in a restful position.

When he was ready and comfortable, the Imperial agent swung the sniper rifle off of his shoulder. He used the scope to find the landing beacon. After a few adjustments of the scope, he brought the section into view. Here he was able to see even the smallest detail. He could punch a hole into anyone's skull from this spot. Once he was satisfied, he settled into his spot. He still had to wait for the second arrival and had to make sure that Quintano was still with the bounty hunter before making his move.

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A'Den watched as the T.I.E. interceptor came in for approach. It was one of those snub fighters, built for one individual. She knew that the ship had little armor but made up for it in firepower. Her hand slipped over the controls ready to take off at a moment's notice. Again, she had almost hoped that he would take a shot at her and then she would have an excuse to break the contract. He never did.

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General Brakin Fess brought his interceptor in toward the landing site. As he passed over, he was able to see that a ship had already arrived ahead of him and it was in fact an X-70B Phantom Class. He hadn't known what ship the bounty hunter was arriving in and hoped that this was the Mandalorian's. Then again, the Mandalorian was the only one who knew about the beacon.

The general brought his T.I.E. Interceptor to the far side of the field and waited for a moment to see if the bounty hunter would double cross him. When that didn't seem to be the case, he got out and started to make his way toward the middle of the field where the beacon was. However, he was no fool, his hand still rested upon his blaster.

## Chapter: The Exchange

As the general started to get out of his ship, A'Den went and brought Quintano out of his temporary quarters. A few adjustments on the cuffs and Quintano was free from being held to the post, but his hands remained shackled together. She tried not to look into his defeated face lest it would break her heart. This mission was bad enough.

"Come on, let's get this over with," A'Den stated with as much of a resolve as she could.

"You don't have to do this, you know." Quintano's statement was more of a "one last plea" that he doubted would work.

"Yes, yes I do. I've signed a contract. I never break a contract. If I did, then word would get around and I would be out of business. This is just business, nothing personal."

"Yes, well you've said that before, and like I've stated, I take being sold to the Empire to be tortured and then killed very personal."

"Just give them what they want and I'm sure they'll make it quick."

"Thanks, but that's really not much of a comfort, and as you pointed out earlier, I don't have the information to give them."

The silence between them was thick and neither of them knew what more to say as A'Den started to reach for the exit door controls. It was then that Quintano looked down the hallway. From here he could see Aro further down the ship, in the other room, the restraining bolt still on the droid. He knew that the astromech was still active and was still able to "see" and "hear" everything, it was just unable to do anything about it. He was

going to miss that astromech, perhaps the only droid he would ever miss.

“At least take care of Aro, will you? I’ve grown quite fond of that droid.”

A’Den didn’t have the heart to tell him that the droid was either going to have its memory wiped at best, or smashed down into parts at worst.

“I’ll see what I can do,” she stated trying not to choke up.

A’Den gave a slight shove upon Quintano’s back to get him going out the ship’s door. It really wasn’t meant to make sure that the smuggler would go; it was more of a resolve to her to make sure that she was going to go through with this.

The two of them slowly walked toward the beacon. The only sound came from the small pumice rocks as they crunched under their footfalls. Everything else seemed to be dead silent.

A’Den continued to scan the horizon for anything out of the ordinary. Anything would do to break off the exchange. She had hoped beyond anything that something would, perhaps the arrival of another ship or the gleam of a sniper’s rifle. There was nothing.

Her eyes glanced toward the general that was now approaching her. His hand had slipped toward his pistol. She almost had to laugh at that. She could tell that he was more nervous than she was. This would greatly affect his aim and she was sure that she was a better shot than he was. Officers had a tendency of staying behind their computer consoles or on the bridge of their ships. No, she knew that he was no threat, at least by himself, and that she would be able to outshoot him if needed.

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Valas pulled his sniper rifle around and started to focus. He brought the three of them into the sight of his scope. He had a great view of all of them and could even see the sweat that was starting to form on the general's forehead.

One shot would be all it would take. The question was, which one should he shoot first? He made his choice and took aim. The target's head came into the crosshairs. His finger started to pull on the trigger. One more moment and...

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"It's good to see that you have completed your mission so successfully. You've done a great task for the Empire and ..."

A'Den shook her head. She didn't want to hear the political banter of the general. There was only one thing on her mind.

"The deal was delivery for payment. Here's the bill," A'Den said flatly.

The Mandalorian handed over the small data pad that showed the list of expenses that had accumulated and the grand total on the bottom. It had added up to a large sum over a short amount of time. However, she wondered if it had all really been worth it.

General Brakin Fess took a quick look at the bottom line and nearly fell over. Clearly this was a joke, perhaps a mistake. His eyes went to the top of the list and started to scrutinize each item that was listed. There was the flat fee for each "day", mileage, repairs needed to the ship, refueling, laser battery recharging, bribes, several hazard pay fees, rockets fired, shots fired, and grenades used. There were docking fees, meals, and a fee for "miscellaneous". There was even the fee to erase all data files from Korriban, Kessel, Jabim, Nar Kreeta, Gamorr, Felucia and Nar Shaddaa.

"You've ... you've got to be joking. This is outrageous. I'm not paying this fee."

"May I remind you, general, that you signed a contract? No payment, no delivery."

"What? Now listen here, I'm a general in the Imperial..."

"I don't care if you are the Emperor himself. No payment, no delivery."

The general sighed. "Ok. I'll see what I can do to make payment installments." He still couldn't believe the price. There was no way that he could move that much credits without it being noticed. He was going to have to think of something. Perhaps if he just simply shot the bounty hunter, then there would be one less problem and one less witness.

"No," A'Den said flatly. "All the credits now."

General Fess looked up from the tablet. His body froze the moment that he noticed that the Mandalorian had pulled a blaster. There was no way that he could reach for his before the bounty hunter was able to get a shot off.

"But...but I don't have..." The general started to say something while his hand made a sudden move on his blaster.

The general was never able to finish his sentence. His ears picked up the sound of the blaster fire before his body realized what hit him. He was dead before he hit the ground.

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Valas slowly removed his finger from the trigger. It seemed that the situation had taken care of itself. Now the rest of the mission was going to play out exactly as he was hired to make sure that it would do. The very bounty hunter that was threatening to prevent his mission from happening was the same bounty hunter that ensured that it would happen. Now the Mandalorian didn't need to be removed, at least not yet.



Of course he would still need to follow the smuggler to make sure that he had his package and that he continued on to his meeting, he wasn't going to just leave it to chance. Just because this situation worked itself out didn't mean that everything would do so as well. After all, he was a professional and this was what he was getting paid to do.

The assassin adjusted his ear piece. It was able to pick up sounds from a considerable distance away. Any conversation between the bounty and the smuggler might give a hint as to where Quintano would go from here, if the package had really been recovered, where it might be hiding, and any other information that might be useful.

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A'Den put away her blaster. There was a slight sigh of relief as she did. It was over, it was finally over. She didn't have to worry about a contract being broken and didn't have to worry about her consciousness bothering her.

'It's too bad about the lack payment,' she thought to herself as she looked down upon the general's body. Yes, it would have been blood money, but it still would have been quite a lot. There were plenty of things that she could have done with it, including...

Her eyes moved towards the general's interceptor. If the general wasn't going to pay her in credits, then at least he should pay her in equipment. If memory served her correctly, some of these T.I.E. Interceptor's came with stealth technology. She could easily take the stealth unit and retrofit it aboard the Ebon Mortis.

She made a step towards the T.I.E. fighter but then suddenly stopped. Something had caught her attention out of the corner of her eye. There had been movement, something quick. With reflexes at a speed as if her life depended on it, she dropped to a hunched position and spun in place to face the oncoming threat.

Her right hand drew her blaster while her left immediately hit the control button to the shocking collar. Everything was more out of reflex.

The sight before her was one that she should have suspected. Quintano had tried to make a break for it and she didn't blame him. Given the circumstances, she probably would have as well. She was sure that Quintano was trying to get out of the short range of the collar's control before she was able to hit the button, and then try to make it back to her ship probably to free the astromech who would in turn free him.

However, before he had gotten too far, perhaps a few steps, she had hit the button and sent a jolt through his body. A'Den hadn't even realized what she had done until she saw the smuggler's body shake uncontrollably. His form was out cold before hitting the ground.

She shook her head, more at herself than at him. She should have told him to wait here and everything was going to be worked out. Now he was unconscious and would be for quite some time. There wasn't anything that could be done except wait.

A'Den turned toward the T.I.E. interceptor. There was still the stealth technology that she wanted to dismantle from the general's ship, if it had any. That would take a little bit of time and hopefully she would be done by the time Quintano woke up.

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Quintano slowly opened his eyes. His body hurt like hell. His hope of escape was now dashed aside as he realized that he hadn't been able to get out of A'Den's range fast enough. With a groan he started to sit up and couldn't help but see the Mandalorian looking down at him.

"What did you do that for?" Quintano asked as he started to stand.

While he stood, Quintano realized that he could actually rub his neck from where the collar had shocked him. Two things struck him simultaneously. The first was that his shackles had been removed and the second was the fact that the shock collar had also been removed. It seemed that A'Den was letting him go.

A'Den shrugged. "Perhaps I simply felt like it. Perhaps you were about to run away. The question is: where would you have gone?"

Quintano stood silently. He had hoped to reach her ship and leave her behind. It was better than having her leave him behind, which he was sure that she was going to do. But he really didn't want to tell her that. However, it was no use hiding it; he could see in her eyes that she understood what he was thinking.

"You do realize that there's a perfectly good T.I.E. Interceptor right over there, don't you?"

Quintano had to smile at that bit of irony. If it had been General Brakin Fess that had hired A'Den, which it looked like it had been, then the ship was the same T.I.E. interceptor from the Audacious that he had considered taking in the first place. He was glad that he hadn't blown it up while it was still in the docking bay.

"I didn't know that you cared."

"Don't be silly, I don't, it's strictly selfish. If the Empire finds the general's ship here then they'll trace all ships in this area, including mine. If I were you, I would take his ship as far away from here as possible and dump it. You should probably get a move on; the Audacious will be missing their general soon."

Quintano had to nod at that. It was a good idea and it seemed that A'Den had taken everything into account. However, he wasn't just going to dump a perfectly good ship. The T.I.E. Interceptor would be worth quite a bit of credits, it would be a shame if it didn't go into his pocket.

A'Den interrupted his thoughts. "By the way," she said. "I did some research on Tessa. She never did send a package to Gamorr."

"Wait. What? How do you know about that conversation? You overheard that?"

"I wanted to gather as much information on your next possible move in case I lost you again." She tapped her helmet. "It's got an audio amplifier, able to hear a whisper one hundred meters away. Anyway, I just thought that you would like to know that you won't find your package on Gamorr. She had no intention of getting rid of it. According to her records, she was a junkie and was known to visit the slums for her next fix. I assume that she was out of credits and had sent Jessa in her place. I also assume that once her sister was killed, she took her job out of guilt and out of desperation to get some credits. She was probably going to sell the package to a potential buyer to help her get out of the dump that she was in."

Quintano gave a look of disappointment. He was about to say something, but A'Den spoke first.

"However, if you're still looking for your package, you will find it hidden in her couch. I noticed a slight bump to it when I came in."

"You knew all along? But you didn't say anything?"

A'Den shrugged. "I wasn't paid to bring in a package; I was only paid to bring in you, alive."

There was a slight awkward pause between the two of them as neither knew what to say next. Then A'Den took off her helmet and gave a slight shake of her head to let her long blonde hair shake loose.

"Take care, Quintano Roo," she said.

“Wait, what about Aro?”

A'Den opened a small panel door on the forearm portion of her armor. After pushing a couple of buttons she closed the small hatch and gave a short nod toward the Ebon Mortis.

Quintano turned toward the direction that A'Den had alluded towards. A smile came across his face as Aro came rolling out of the ramp walkway of the bounty hunter's ship as it tweeted, chirped, blipped, and flashed several of its display lights in what could only be considered as happiness. It was then that the smuggler turned back toward A'Den.

“So...you do care.”

“About you?” A'Den gave a slight smirk. “I just need the interceptor dropped off somewhere, far from here. As far as your droid is concerned I don't have room for an astromech or a need for one. It would just clog up space and waste my time. Besides, I work better alone.”

Quintano had to think if any of those statements were really true. He doubted that any of them were factual. However, she wasn't in the mood to be called on it, at least not yet.

Quintano smiled. “We'll meet again, A'Den Verda Fett.”

“Not unless you have another bounty on your head, smuggler. And next time, he better pay up.”

As Aro passed the bounty hunter heading back to her ship while it was catching up with Quintano, the astromech gave a slight “zzxt” of disgust toward the Mandalorian. This only brought out a slight chuckle from both A'Den and Quintano. As much as the droid had been programmed to respond to living beings and have a personality, it still had a lot to learn.

Quintano couldn't help but watch her head back to her ship. Despite her attempt at having a cold exterior to protect her as much as her armor did, he was sure that she really did care, underneath it all. Yes, he would do whatever it took to meet such an interesting character again. Besides, he had to admit that he kind of liked the view.

The smuggler shook his head. Now wasn't the time to think such things. He had things to do and it was time to get started.

"Come on Aro, let's go."

---

Valas smiled. He had the information that he needed. Quintano was right back on track. Again, the bounty hunter been the push in the right direction that this mission needed. Perhaps the Mandalorian was worth sparing after all.

That thought also made his smile. The fact that the Mandalorian had turned out to be a woman, and an attractive one at that, was a pleasant twist that he hadn't seen coming but was glad that it had happened. He was also glad that such a creature didn't go to waste. Perhaps some other time, he would make her "acquaintance". Until then, he had a mission to do.

Valas started to make his way back down from his roost. It was an easy descent and from there he quickly made his way to his ship. He moved as quickly as he could without being an all-out run, he didn't want to risk a fall on the rocky terrain. There were still a few things left to do if he wanted to be successful on this mission and time wasn't his ally.

At his ship, Valas turned on his monitor. The smuggler had been offered to take the interceptor. With that in mind, the Imperial Agent modified his radar to look for the Imperial ship.

The first blip on his radar told him that the Phantom Class had taken off and eventually left the planet's atmosphere. It was only

a short time thereafter that the second blip, identified by his radar as the interceptor, also took to the sky.

Since the interceptor's departure had confirmed the smuggler's mode of transportation, it was now going to be easy to follow the ship without being seen. The Imperial agent had full knowledge on how the radar worked on the T.I.E. fighters, as well as most modern Imperial ships. With that, he went to work. A few buttons were pushed on his communications console and in a short amount of time a certain frequency was transmitted. The T.I.E. fighter would pick up the signal as static; however the message would still be received. The virus that was being transmitted would mess with the T.I.E. fighter's radar ever so slightly, slightly enough to give a few echoes. This would give him the opportunity to slip in behind the T.I.E. fighter without being noticed.

Valas brought the engines online, pulled back on the throttle and took off to shadow the smaller ship to parts unknown. If he was correct, then the smuggler would be heading out to fetch the package. If he was wrong, then the smuggler would try to run and hide. Either way, he would deal with Quintano appropriately.

## Chapter: Tammar

Quintano walked into the Elghinyrrok Veldrin Cantina. His eyes took in the scene before him as he kept a vigilant scan for anything suspicious. He almost had to laugh at that thought, everything here seemed suspicious.

The place was almost full. Its tables were occupied, most of the stools against the bar were full and there were many that were lingering about. There was an Anno Dat and an Aqualish. A Cathar was talking with a Chiss. A Devaronian was waiting all alone while a group of Rodins were having a discussion all to themselves. A Dug was using its “feet” trying to grab a drink while walking upon its “hands” and a Duros was trying to hit on one of the waitresses. The list went on and on.

Yet, despite the near full capacity of the tavern, the noise level was much lower than expected. Everyone talked in whispers. Drinks were ordered through a series of slight hand gestures. Individuals leaned close to speak to one another.

And it wasn’t just conversations that were subtle; the transactions between the individuals were as well. Small packages were exchanged under tables, data pads were handed off during a brief encounter, a signal was given to an informant across the room before a drink was reached for, data chips were palmed, and credits were exchanged right under everyone’s noses. These exchanges were quick and subtle and would have gone unnoticed by everyone else who was doing the same thing.

Along with the transactions were the “tips” that the bartender and the waitresses received. These were actually a percentage, a cut of the transaction. Although there was no way to really know how much the transaction amounted to, and as such there was no way to ensure that the appropriate percentage was contributed, as



long as the “tip” was substantial there was no questioning of the transactions being conducted.

The tavern was doing very well with their income. Yet, despite their lucrative business, everything seemed to be run down and in need of repair or replacement. The tables and chairs were damaged, there seemed to be a blood splatter on one wall, and a couple of the lights flickered as their electrical shortage was made known by the sparks that shot from them. Even the dishes and mugs were cracked and mismatching. This would be the sign that any other tavern was falling apart.

Quintano wondered about the look of the tavern. Had this look been deliberate to keep the appearance of an unimportant place to visit? Had it been this way to keep out the normal crowd? Or perhaps too much of the “tips” were going into bribes to keep other organizations happy and keep them in business? The smuggler shook his head and had to admit that it was probably a little bit of both.

Quintano also had to admit that this was probably the perfect spot for a rendezvous. There were all sorts of smugglers and assassins here and none of them wanted any trouble. None of them wanted a bad deal. This meant that if his deal went bad, then the whole tavern would erupt in gunfire. No, it was best to make this deal as quickly and as quietly as possible and leave shortly thereafter.

The planet of Tammar had also been a smart idea. It’s thin atmosphere discouraged everyone away from this world. The native Tammarians had oxygen concentrators to help them breath, but few travelers had taken the liberty to bring along such a device. This, added with the fact that Tammar didn’t even have standing water, made the world unlikely on anyone’s tourist list.

Quintano had left Aro outside. Yes, he had heard the various complaints that the astromech had given, but there were several reasons. First, he wouldn’t have to worry about someone inside trying to steal him. A quick inhibitor and the droid would have

been shut down and before he knew it, Aro could be gone. The second reason was because he needed backup just in case something did go wrong. Aro would be able to travel around back and take care of any emergency contingency if one was needed, and since Aro wasn't affected by the thin atmosphere, it made perfect sense to keep the droid outside. Finally there was the "no droids allowed" sign. At first Quintano thought that this was yet another establishment that didn't want droids taking up too much space. However, this wasn't the case at all. Droids could zoom in their optical receptors and pick up what others couldn't. On top of this, they could record every transaction that was going on.

Despite the fact that outside had a thin atmosphere, the inside was perfectly balanced. The tavern had at least invested in a pressurization device that helped keep the oxygen levels at a breathable state. It also allowed their drinks to stay in a liquid state. The cantina simply couldn't operate without their device.

The smuggler looked around for his table while he adjusted the package under his arm. There were so many shady characters sitting in corners wearing hoods that it was almost impossible to tell who he was looking for. However, once his eyes spotted the person, he was sure that he had the right contact at the right rendezvous spot.

The man was off in the corner booth by himself, the only one at the moment by himself. Although Quintano had never seen the man's face completely since it was always hidden by the hood of his cloak, there was no mistaken the man's sharp jaw features. Then there was the fact that the individual sat up straight, almost at attention. This, along with the way he presented himself in the holo transmissions, suggested that he was military. The question had arisen in Quintano's mind of what side of the war the buyer was on, but in the end it didn't really matter. As long as he got paid, he was happy to be done with this deal.

Quintano made his way through the bar toward the back and slid into the booth. He felt a shiver go up his spine and for the first time during this whole mission he had a bad feeling about

this. Anyone here could be gunning for him and he wouldn't know it.

The man that sat behind the table, under the hood, didn't even move. He hadn't flinched and hadn't even seemed to acknowledge that he had even arrived. At first Quintano thought that the man might be dead and that the whole drop had been compromised. Then, the figure spoke.

"I see you have the package."

"Yes," Quintano stated with hesitation. "It took some doing. I had to sneak it out of a Sith burial site and through Imperial space. I've been chased, shot at, and even captured more than once. I've even had to endure eating bug soup all for this. You won't believe..."

The hooded figure only held up a hand to stop the smuggler from talking. He simply didn't have the time or patience to hear this man's story and quite frankly he didn't care. Besides, it didn't matter what the smuggler had to endure to get the item, the payment was going to be the same. At this point, if the smuggler wanted to continue to talk then the only payment he would receive was a blaster bolt.

"Ok, ok. So I guess you're not the talking type. Would you mind telling me what this is all about?"

"It is best that you not know." The man's tone continued to be flat. "In other words, I could tell you but then I would have to kill you."

Quintano smiled at that, until he realized that the man was serious.

"Now, if you don't mind," the man continued as soon as he noticed that Quintano had gotten the point. "The package."

Quintano put the package on the table and started to unwrap it. It was only now that he came to the sudden fear that this might not be the seal that he was looking for. What if he had grabbed the wrong one? What if someone switched it on him during transit or had accidentally been mistaken for someone else's artifact find? What if Tessa had swapped it? This entire process would be for naught if this wasn't what the hooded man was looking for.

The hooded man sat back and watched at the item was unwrapped. The seal was ebony black, about a foot in diameter, two inches thick, and made from dense beskar. Carved across the top was an ancient Sith word:

**N J L N U Y**

According to the report that he had received of what the seal would look like, this had fit the exact description. Unless this was a copy, this was what he was looking for. It was finally in his grasp.

Although the jungle Felucians weren't able to do the job of stopping the bounty hunter, the exchange of information to the general had still been stopped. The seal hadn't been delivered to the general and now it never would be. Now, the master would rise and a new power would sweep through the galaxy.

The agent named Valas had also done his job well. He had ensured that nothing had happened to Quintano so that he would be able to lead them to the seal. Everything had gone according to plan. Now there was only a few things to clean up and all would be set.

The man moved his right hand under the table. He could feel his blaster as his fingers danced over the weapon. One quick shot and the smuggler would be dead. The only other individual left to know of this item's existence, the only loose end, would be dealt

with. This wouldn't be the first time that this establishment had to dispose of a dead body and it wouldn't be the last.

The man thought against it. Any dead body might arouse undue suspicions. A death would ensure that the item in question was worth a considerable amount of attention and that attention was not wanted. It was best to simply pay off the smuggler and pretend that this artifact was only out of idle curiosity, nothing more.

Instead of the blaster, a small bag of coins was produced. This wasn't the standard credits that were often used by most of the known civilization. Out here, in the outer rim planets, most individuals dealt in coins out of fear that the standard credits would vary in price too often or that their value would crash, especially during this time of war. Also, credits had a habit of being traceable. Withdraws and deposits could be matched up with dates and connections between transactions could be made. Coins did not have this problem.

Quintano reached for the bag of coins and thought about counting them out, but decided against it. He had seen the brief hesitation of the man and had believed that he would be shot. His body had tensed and he was ready to duck for cover, but gave a sigh of relief when it was bag, not a blaster, that was being presented. With this in mind, Quintano decided that it was best to simply take the money and leave.

With only the slightest nod, the smuggler took the bag and left the table. His business was concluded and there was no reason to stay here any longer.

The hooded man stayed and watched the smuggler leave. He still had an urge to shoot him in the back; however he still might be useful later. He would hate to get rid of such a competent smuggler and decent pilot.

Once Quintano had left the cantina, the man tossed a few coins on the table to pay for his drink followed by a smaller coin bag

for the “tip”. This was starting to become an expensive endeavor, and the expenses were just beginning, but it was going to be well worth it. A new order would bring a new system which would bring about a new economy. These coins would be worthless soon.

The man turned toward the back of the cantina and found the back door. This wasn’t an unknown exit (there were at least two of those that the general customer didn’t know about) it was just the other exit that the second party would use once a transaction was finished to allow both parties to go their separate ways. Here, he would finalize the last of the transactions that needed to happen.

Valas waited for his contact to leave the cantina before even thinking about following. He had stayed so blended in the shadows that no one had even noticed that he was there and when he did move, several individuals jumped at his presence. He has stayed here to make sure that the deal went as well as the contact wanted and if there were any trouble then he would deal with it immediately, even if that meant shooting up the whole bar. Now that the deal had gone well, it was time to get paid and before that he had to make sure that they weren’t being followed.

When the Imperial agent was satisfied that all was clear, he left the shadows and followed out the back door. This was where things could get complicated. Although previous scouting had proven that there hadn’t been any backup for the contact, that didn’t mean that some didn’t come later. For all he knew, he was now walking into a trap. There was also the possibility that the contact would try to make a run for his ship and disappear.

Valas was sure that he could take on any contingent that came his way. If it were a trap, then he would make sure that every individual was taken down and any that escaped would be hunted down. If the contract tried to run, then there would be no place in the galaxy where he could hide, not even on the Emperor’s personal ship.

His suspicious mind had been alleviated once he saw his hooded contact waiting just outside. He could almost laugh at himself for being so paranoid. However, it was his paranoia that had kept him alive.

Outside, Valas could see the terrain of Tammar. From here, it was mainly a large plane. The thin atmosphere had stunted the growth of the entire flora and hardly anything had grown. What had passed as trees stood no more than three feet high and were far and few between. There were a few shrubs that also dotted the open plane. These were short and squat with branches that seemed too big for the plant's proportions.

There was hardly any green as far as he could tell. There were plenty of reds, yellows, and oranges. There was ochre and rust, crimson and amber, but nothing in the way of green. It seemed that the plant life was in a perpetual state of autumn. Even the patches of grass and weeds were more like straw.

"I believe this is your payment," the contact said as he held out a small coin bag and a bottle with a label on it. The fluorescent purple liquid with its slight pulsating glow was the same one that the assassin had an interest in. The label would tell Valas where it was made and how he could get more.

Valas accepted these and, without saying a word, he turned and left. There was nothing that needed to be said. There were no goodbye's that needed to be uttered and no compliments, gratitude's or platitudes that needed to be exchanged. He would slip back into the darkness and if he was needed again, he would arrive; for the right price of course.

The hooded man was pleased with everything. Everything had turned out the way he had expected. Everything was planned perfectly, right down to this meeting here, on this planet. With that thought, his mind went to the next phase. He pulled out a good size vial of acid.

This was where the planet would come in handy. He had picked Tammar because of its thin atmosphere. The lack of pressure would ensure that the acid wouldn't pool or accumulate; it would dissolve into the air. All evidence would be gone.

With a steady hand, the figure gently uncorked the bottle and started to pour the liquid. He had to be quick enough to allow the acid to work before evaporating and steady enough to make sure that the whole task was complete. He couldn't afford to miss even a single spot.

The acid was from a planet called Raxus Prime. The entire world had been built up as a factory, manufacturing, processing planet. Where this was advantageous to manufacturing, it had become a planet of poison gases, terrible pollution, piles of rusted metal, and stream of acid. It was not a hospitable place to visit.

The acid, however dangerous and corrosive it was to the plant's environment, had numerous benefits. It could eat through some of the hardest materials known throughout the whole galaxy, including the very dense material known as beskar. This was the ideal solution to his problem.

As the acid hit the seal, the heavy metal started to be eaten away. The fumes from the chemical reaction bellowed and fumed. Foam started to bubble as the metal started to fade. Inch by inch the acid was slowly poured creating a horrible, deforming mass of melted ooze and froth spume. As the foam ate away the metal, the material turned to fumes and dissipated into the air. By the time it was all over, there was nothing left of the seal to even suggest that it was even there.

Lieutenant Draks Kelen removed the hood of his cloak and smiled at the work that was done. Without the seal, the unspoken one would be able to free himself. Now everything was set in motion. There would be a new order. There was only one thing left to do.



The Imperial lieutenant knelt upon the hard ground and let his mind wander. He had no training in the use of the mystical thing being called “The Force”, but he knew someone who was. That person had contacted him. That person would do so again. All he had to do was open his mind and...

Draks could feel a cold, rotting feeling of death that started to swim around in the back of his mind. It was as if a womp rat had crawled into his skull, died and started to decompose. The world felt colder and his blood felt as if it had turned to ice.

What came with that were the emotions. There was greed and anger, bitterness and despair all mixed into one. He felt angry with the world. He felt as if he could kill everyone here and he felt justified for some unknown reason, as if it was his right to rule by force and his right to take what was needed by might. He felt like he was drowning in a sea of raw, negative emotions.

He knew that these weren’t his emotions; they made him sick to his stomach to feel this way. These were the emotions of the one that was contacting him and that individual had brought his poison along with the ride.

This was typical when he was being contacted. He held back his desire to vomit and tried to keep focused. The quicker he finished the conversation, the quicker the feeling would go away.

“It is done, Master.”

‘Good,’ replied the voice in his head. ‘*Meet me on Korriban.*’

“Yes, Master.”

‘*I shall await your arrival. Don’t make me wait too long.*’

## Chapter: Epilogue

The red dust swirled one last time as though it were some great beast that was settling down from its mighty assault. The wind had ceased for the time being and everything became calm once again. The raging sandstorm was now over.

The landscape of red dust upon the red crags of the towering rocky landscape and the endless dunes seemed to stretch forever. Nothing moved and nothing wanted to. Everything was still hunkered down from the relentless storm that threatened to flail the skin off of anything that moved and suffocate anything that breathed. Anything that had been caught out in the open was now buried beyond hope of being found ever again.

With the storm now passed, the sun started to beat down upon the planet once again. Its oppressive heat was like a hand of a living god upon the residents of Korriban. But the inhabitants of the world wouldn't have it any other way. The heat and the sand made them who they were, who they will always be, and who they always have been.

The Imperial shuttle went through the landing process as soon as it came upon the site. From the initial scan from their higher elevation, it was difficult to tell if this was the site at all. The sand had covered so much of the area that there wasn't anything left to identify the spot. That was until their landing thrusters had cleared away part of a dune to reveal the wreckage of the last Imperial shuttle that had come through here.

"Try the comms again," Davin, the pilot, suggested.

"I've tried them several times, but all I get is static."

"Well, try them one more time. We're obviously at the site and the wind has died down. There has to be someone alive out here."

Arwen, the co-pilot gave a sigh. Davin was an up and coming officer and he wanted to show off his recent promotion by trying to look impressive. The only thing that he looked like right now was a lost nerf wandering through the landscape trying to get the other nerfs to follow him. Yet, he was still the officer in charge. However, he wondered what he had done to pull such uninspiring and unimportant a mission as this.

The members of the site and the archeologists hadn't reported in and they had basically been written off as not being able to make it out of the storm in time. However, there was still a small chance that they had found shelter and were still alive, just not able to communicate. Arwen had his doubts though. He had seen these sandstorms before and nothing survived them.

“Imperial Shuttle KhaRon, this is Imperial Shuttle Rodin, acknowledge. Imperial Shuttle KhaRon, this is Imperial Shuttle Rodin, acknowledge.”

After a moment of silence Arwen adjusted the comm. links and tried again. “To anyone receiving this message, this is Imperial Shuttle Rodin, acknowledge.”

The only response was static.

Davin finished the landing of the Imperial Shuttle. The ship kicked up more sand and its thrusters uncovered more of the wreckage of the first shuttle before powering down. After the pilot completed the landing procedure, the exit door was opened and the two officers filed out onto the planet's surface.

The oppressive heat hit the both of them like a fist and the bright illuminating sun temporarily blinded them. The both of them had to stop and get their bearings before accepting their change of climate from their shuttle to this nearly inhospitable planet that they landed on. It was a wonder to them both why anyone would want to come here in the first place and what in the entire

multiverse that they had done to deserve such an opportunity to experience this unwelcoming environment.

They made their way toward the wreckage of the first shuttle. It was worse than they thought. The shuttle wasn't downed or even wrecked, it was obliterated. Pieces of the ship had been scattered all over the desert floor, and although most of them were covered by the sandstorm, the main hull still had enough intact to give some semblance that a ship had been here in the first place.

Besides the metallic shards that were scattered about and the skeletal frame of the ship, there was nothing to suggest that anything else had been here. There weren't any signs of survivors and by the looks of things there wasn't any hope that anyone would survive this. Any clue of why the shuttle had gone down was lost due to the sand that had been blasted by the storm earlier.

"Think it was the storm?" Arwen asked.

Davin shrugged. "I can't say for certain. We can let an investigation team figure that out. We're just here to look for survivors and secure the area. Come on; let's check out the burial site." With that, Davin turned and led the way toward the tomb site not too far away.

Although the "trek" was only a short distance, the heat continued to be oppressive and the sand slowed them down. The minor distance felt as if it was twice as long and by the time they reached the tomb opening, they were relieved to find that the underground structure maintained a constant cooler temperature than outside. This was what they had noticed on the way here, sand and heat and the difference once they entered the tomb. What they failed to notice was the small mound slightly outside the entrance, the mound of sand that covered the bodies that once stood there, the bodies that had been cut down by a Mandalorian bounty hunter before the storm had hit.

The tomb site opening was no more than a sloped walkway of sand that passed under a sandstone archway. The building blocks were the same reddish color of the sand and blended in with them making the site very easy to miss. Their square shapes were chipped and weathered from time, wind and sand; yet they still held their structural integrity.

Once inside, the entryway leveled out about fifteen feet underground. Here it opened to a small room, dark from the lack of sunlight reaching it. However, there were several L.E.D. lights of light blue, white, yellow and green that lit up a small section on the side of the room. From what they could tell, this was probably some computer or machinery that was left on in the dark.

Davin reached to his side and found his flashlight. A slight adjustment and the instrument came to life shining its illumination upon the cavern that they had walked into. The light cut through the darkness and the source of the diodes could be seen.

The room was rather small, about twenty feet square. A hall exited from the other side. Up against the side of one wall was a large computer that took up most of the wall's area. It was a much older model then they had ever seen. There were controls with words and symbols written in an ancient alien language that they didn't understand, yet it wasn't too difficult to get the jest of its operation.

The computer wasn't hooked up to any other machinery with the exception of a few wires that went up and a smaller device off to its side. It wasn't hard to speculate that these had been attached to some solar panel or heat panel that would have generated enough power for the computer to run. However, these panels were obviously long gone. There were several screens, all of which were smashed and a few data input devices that wouldn't interface with anything they had. All in all the only thing this computer would be good for was data storage, a few monitor readings and for a communications relay. The transmitter, or

what looked like one, was out of commission and all data storage was, at least at this point, useless to access.

There was one button that did seem operational and was flashing a light blue. This was attached near a lens that pointed out and away from the computer itself, toward the middle of the room. The lens and button were similar in design to their holo-technology, although rather crude, and the assumption of a message needing to be played wasn't lost on them.

The smaller device that was attached to the side of the computer was a small generator. This was easily identifiable as one that the Emperor used frequently to run small portable devices. It really wasn't big enough to run a computer this size, but since most of the computer functions weren't working, it seemed that the generator was only used for a couple of the functioning abilities, probably just enough to see what the computer could do or if there were any data worth trying to extract.

"Hello?" Davin's voice echoed off of the walls and carried down the hall at the other end of the room. The only sound that responded was his voice reverberating back at him.

"Looks like no one's home."

Arwen had to roll his eyes at the officer's remark. He wondered if Davin had gotten his promotion due to his ability to state the obvious.

"This would have been perfect shelter for them from the storm," Davin continued to speak as though Arwen was an idiot and couldn't have figured that out for himself.

Following Davin's logic and line of reasoning, Arwen started to make a few assumptions. "Well, either they tried to brave the storm and died trying, although that sounds unlikely. Perhaps they never made it out."

This brought a curious look on Davin's face.

"Think about it," Arwen continued. "They couldn't have fit on the shuttle, no one else was out here, and they would have been the most idiotic archeologists if they tried to make it through the storm. Last place would be for them to be here, somewhere. And if they're not answering, then maybe something's here in these tombs..."

"I don't want to hear anything about any superstitious tales of ghosts, do you hear me?" Davin's face and his voice showed his irritation.

"Yes, yes sir."

"Good. Now, we'll conduct our investigation without any further tales of some unnatural disturbances. So far, my report will state that the team was wiped out by the storm. That is, unless the hologram message has something more to say upon the subject. It looks like the archeologists started running the startup programs and initiated temporary power to the computer. Let's see what the blinking comm. link recording says, shall we?"

Davin gave the controls one last look over to make sure that his suspicions were correct about their functions. When he was satisfied that he was, he gave the blinking light a slight push and activated the message.

The light blue hologram sputtered to life. The figure that stood before them was of a man in robes. His hair was pulled back slick, his face was wrinkled and his eyes seemed dark as if they would drain the very soul out of anyone that had seen them when he was still alive. His mere presence, although a mere hologram and was probably even long dead, sent a chill up both of their spines. When he spoke, there seemed to be a deep echo that wasn't part of the poor recording but rather something sinister deep within the individual.

*"I am Darth Gethen of the Sith Council..."*

“The Sith Council?” Arwen asked. “There hasn’t been a Sith Council since...”

“Shhh...”,

*“This is a warning. Do not venture beyond this point. Do not disturb this site. This is the site of the one that shall not be remembered, that shall be buried and forgotten about. This is the site of Darth Abloaf.”*

*“No records shall be kept of this abomination with the exception of this warning. All evidence of Darth Abloaf’s existence has been wiped from all databases except for here and only to give a full and meaningful warning as to not venture any further.”*

*“The Sith Council has all agreed to this burial site and the Sith Lord, or at least what is known as his remains, shall be buried here and kept hidden and secure. Any who seek him shall seek only death.”*

*“The abomination known as Darth Abloaf had brought about such destruction to the likes that none has seen before and none shall ever see again. Even after his destruction, many times over, he has still risen. Nothing has been able to destroy him. So, in an attempt to lock the abomination away, this tomb has been built and buried. Trespass no further. Do not disengage these wards and do not remove the seal, repeat, under no circumstance shall you remove the seal of Abloaf. It is the only thing that keeps the abomination at bay. You have been warned.”*

The hologram sputtered a couple of times before ending its transmission. The illumination that it had upon the cavern tomb faded and left only a few lit buttons on the console and Davin’s flashlight as the only source of light.

“You don’t really think...”, Arwen started to ask tentatively.



“Are you afraid of some ghost that’s been dead and buried for all of these years? There’s nothing here but old ghost stories of gloom and doom designed to scare off the timid. This isn’t anything more than something to scare away would-be tomb robbers or some would-be Sith Lords trying to find some hidden secret that doesn’t really exist. This is only meant to perpetuate fear of the old Sith, some old and faded religion. But the Sith are long gone. There’s nothing down here.”

Davin turned his flashlight toward the tunnel that ran deeper into the tomb. The illumination let up several electrical and mechanical devices that appeared to be offline. From what he could tell, these had been damaged a long time ago and were no longer functioning and would probably not be anytime soon. Their damage would take quite some time to fix and would probably need to be replaced. They had nothing to worry about from lasers, or missiles or some other nasty trap that might still be down here.

“Come on, follow me.”

“This isn’t a good idea,” Arwen stated showing nervousness in his voice.

“Look we were told to investigate the site and look for survivors. We can’t say that we’ve investigated until we look everywhere, now can we?”

“No, I guess not...”

“And you don’t want to be the one to have to report to the Emperor that this mission was a failure because you were afraid of some old message about a possible ghost, do you?”

Arwen rolled his eyes. This mission would never catch the Emperor’s attention. But Davin had a point. Some official would hear about it and he would have to be the one to stand and be questioned about the success or failure of the mission and he

really didn't want to be the one to take the blame if there weren't any good news.

"No, I guess not."

"Good, now follow me, and that's an order."

'Well, as long as it's an order,' Arwen thought in a sarcastic mood.

Their figures moved slowly down the stone hall. Sandstone blocks continued down the passage, worn by age. The deeper darkness only slightly receded by the illumination of their flashlight.

The figure before them came out of the darkness as they rounded the corner. It towered over them like some specter in the night. Its grimacing snarl showed its disapproval of their presence and it was...

Both Arwen and Davin stopped dead in their tracks. Their hearts stopped beating for just one moment as they looked up and saw true terror for the first time. Death had come for them and no one could save them for the...

Both of them started to laugh as they realized that the large "figure" was nothing more than a statue. Its facial expression was enough to startle anyone and its "sudden appearance" from the darkness, once their flashlight illuminated its presence, only added to the startle that they had felt. Now, they realized just how spooked they really were and there really wasn't anything in here to be afraid of.

From what they could tell, the hall had turned and opened into a fairly large cavern, larger than the extent of the illumination of their flashlights. Beyond their illumination was only darkness. They couldn't see the other side of the room, but what they could see only continued to give them pause.

Along the sides of the room, for as far as they could tell, were several large statues that lined the perimeter. There were all about ten feet tall and looked similar in appearance to the one that had startled them. They all had a horrible looking face with either a smug look upon them or perhaps even a sneer. None looked happy. All had the same sunken look in their eyes with slightly wrinkled look upon their faces. It was as if an entire Sith council were looking down upon this site to give it judgement, and a judgement that wasn't very pleasing.

"Stay here," Davin stated. "I'll be right back."

"Wait, where are you going?"

"I'm going to check out what's inside this room."

"Why you?"

"Because I'm the one with a flashlight. Now stay put."

Actually Davin had to admit to himself that it had nothing to do with the possession of the only flashlight. Since the archeologists weren't around, anything and everything that they had found would now be his to re-find. That was, he would get credit for anything in this room and there would be none the wiser.

As Arwen watched Davin go deeper into the cavern tomb and disappear into darkness, he couldn't help but feel a shudder down his spine. He couldn't help but think that this was a bad idea. He couldn't help but feel that he was being watched.

"What was that?" Arwen asked; his voice echoed off of the back walls of the chamber, hidden from sight.

"What was what?" Came the response.

"Did you say something?" Arwen asked nervously.

"Yes, I asked you what you're talking about."

“No, before that.”

“Nothing. I didn’t say anything before that. It’s just your imagination.”

“No, I could have sworn that I’ve heard something, or someone. Are you sure that we are the only ones here?”

“We haven’t seen anyone or any sign of anyone and the archeologists would have said something by now if they were here. It must just be the wind.”

Arwen had to think about that. Perhaps it had been the wind from outside. However, it had died down by the time they had entered the tomb. Had it picked up again?

Davin’s light continued to search off in the distance and Arwen continued to watch it pick up yet another statue. The beam of light would turn left and right as Davin moved about looking at one statue after another. Sometimes Arwen was able to see a bit of what his superior officer was looking at, other times he turned away and darkness faded again.

As Davin’s flashlight turned back, it started to flicker. Its power started to cut in and out and started to cast eerie shadows across the statues making them look as if they were moving, as if they were coming alive. Then, suddenly, the flashlight went out and darkness consumed the cavern.

“Davin?” Arwen asked quietly, almost at a whisper. It was barely audible even to him, yet since there was no other sound, his words seemed to cut through the air like a knife.

The slight touch upon his shoulder sent chills down Arwen’s spine. It was cold and electrifying at the same time. For the briefest of moments his arm went numb before he regained feeling again. Fear spread across his body. A cold sweat broke out across his forehead.

“That’s not funny, Davin. Stop messing around. Stop touching me.”

“That’s not me. I’m over here.” Davin’s voice cut through the darkness from the other side of the room.

Arwen gave a moment to compose himself lest he would lose complete control, scream a piercing scream of complete panic and bolt for the exit. There was still a portion of him that told him to do so, yet beyond all reason and all rational, he stayed.

“Maybe we should leave.”

“No, wait,” Davin stated. “I’ve got the light to work.”

Davin’s words came as the flashlight came back on. It sputtered to life before the light became a steady stream that barely cut through the darkness.

“Hey,” Davin exclaimed. His voice echoed off of the walls and echoed throughout the tomb. “Didn’t the message say something about a seal? I found the burial site, but there’s no seal. Where’s the seal? You don’t think that one of those archeologists ran off with it do you? I’m pretty sure it’s worth a fortune. I’m sure that’s what happened. They just grabbed the ...”

Davin never finished his sentence. The hand shot up from the grave and grabbed his ankle. Davin’s heart stopped before it raced with fear. Panic overcame him with the sudden appearance of the dead appendage.

The grip was like a vise, stronger than anything he had ever felt before. The very touch of the hand had sent a chill that came over his body, a cold that numbed his soul. It was as if ice had frozen his form and nothing could make him move again.

The scream cut through the air and split the silence. The cry echoed throughout the cavern and filled the tomb. The blood

curling shrill reverberated against the walls and came back. Then there was silence once again.

Davin's flashlight fell to the ground and spun from its momentum. Its light threw nightmarish shadows across the walls, each bringing a new horror to light before stopping in place, lifeless. Its beam shone across the ground and revealed only the dust that had settled upon it.

Suddenly the light's beam was briefly interrupted by something passing in front of it. For the shortest amount of time, darkness came to claim the room once again before the illumination was allowed to continue to shot its beam across the floor.

"Davin? Davin?"

Arwen's voice was filled with fear. He wanted to run but was paralyzed with terror. He wanted to do something, anything.

His scream of agonizing pain cut through the empty tomb before silence came at last. The slightest footfall could be heard heading back toward the center of the crypt. Then a foot was raised before it came down hard upon the flashlight, destroying the illuminating device. Its light, like the life of the two Imperial officers, was snuffed out. Darkness once again engulfed the tomb, but this time, it wasn't alone.

To be continued in:

Star Wars: Fan Fiction

Ebon Mortis

The Rise of Darth Ablaof

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