

Star Wars

Fan Fiction

Ebon Mortis Book II

The Hunt for Holocron Theta

First edition

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E-book: 978-0-359-19003-4

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.

Characters:

Quintano Roo - Human Rogue
A'Den Verda Fett - Mandalorian Bounty Hunter
R2-0 - "Aro" Astromech
Quia Vaal - Human Archaeologist
Darth Ablao - Sith Lord
Valas - Imperial Agent
Lieutenant Draks Kelen - Imperial Lieutenant

Ships:

Audacious - Orion Dreadnought Class
Ebon Mortis - X-70b Phantom Class
Wraith - Fury-Class Imperial Interceptor

Planets:

Xarus - Black desert, cool, black crystal
Korriban - Hot desert, Sith temple ruins
Shili - Togruta home planet
Hypori - Discarded manufacturing planet
Nar Shaddaa - Hutt controlled city planet.
Taris - Jungles, swamps, old ruins
Hutta - Hutt home planet
Dromund Kaas - Tropical jungle planet, new Sith home world
Quesh - Poisonous gasses and polluted wastelands
Hoth - Frozen planet of snow and ice
Voss - Temperate outer rim planet
Corellia - Temperate planet
Illum - Frozen planet of snow and ice
Raxus Prime - Machine junk planet

Book: The Awakening

Chapter: Lord Darth Ablaof

The fine red desert sands of Korriban kicked up loose as the ship known as the Solar Tempest, a Lambda-class Imperial shuttle, started to touch down. The shuttle's engines blasted up a cloud of red dust and sand to the point that visibility was momentarily lost by the pilot and copilot and for a short time the red dust cloud hid the small ship from view (that was if anyone were to be around to watch the ship's arrival landing). However, out here, in the middle of nowhere, there was no one to witness such a thing, and that was exactly how the occupants wanted it.

If the occupants of the ship wanted to remain unseen by the general public, they didn't need to worry. This part of Korriban was in the middle of one of the most remote and desolate deserts on the planet. This was the middle of nowhere. No one came out here, at least not for long. There was no sign of any civilization for as far as the eye could see. It was so remote, beyond the red sand dunes, that there were often radio problems from time to time.

The only reason why anyone would even want to be out here in the first place was the fact that a couple of archaeologists had a theory that a tomb might be located somewhere in this area. They were right, of course. They found it. They never returned. However, unlike the archaeologists that had come prior and had disappeared, these newcomers were prepared for what they would encounter, or at least thought that they were prepared for what they thought they might encounter.

The two Imperial stormtroopers that had been in charge of landing the ship ignored the brief lack of visibility and continued to push their buttons, adjust their trajectory, and enable their landing gear with full and complete competence. They continued to read their instruments and followed them with the expertise and training that they had. Their full intense training and their top placement in their class was the reason why they were handpicked for this mission. They trusted their instruments with complete confidence and within moments their skill had paid off.

As the Lambda-class shuttle made its descent, its side wings started to move. Instead of being out and down, like the wings would be during its flying routine, the wings were brought upward and continued to fold at

their seam with the ship until they came out of their downward position and were pointing skyward. This allowed the streamlined shuttle to make its three point landing with perfection.

The ship landed giving out a last blast of exhaust as if the vessel were a beast that had labored during its flight and was giving out a final sigh of relief now that its journey was done. The landing gear slightly gave way as they started to bear the weight of the ship, then, when their hydraulics found their purpose, the ship came to its complete landing.

The boarding ramp lowered with a hiss sending steam and more loose red dust from the plant's surface up and outward as if they were trying to escape the presence from those aboard. Even before the boarding ramp had completely finished its descent, two more stormtroopers quickly made their way down with their weapons drawn as if they were expecting some opposition upon their arrival. They were ready for combat with their blaster rifles at the ready. They were ready to lay down suppressive fire and even their lives if necessary to ensure that the mission would be a success.

The wreckage from the previous shuttle, from not too long ago, could barely be seen from all of the red sand and dust that had covered it during the last sandstorm, a sandstorm so bad that there were no rescue attempts made believing, and rightfully so, that everyone had perished. Even the small station that was here was covered to such a degree that only those who knew what they were looking for would have found it, and even then with some difficulty. Nothing had been untouched from the massive sandstorm that had come through here. Everything had been ravaged, ripped to shreds, pitted with holes, and buried.

Lieutenant Draks Kelen walked down the ramp with authority between the two stormtroopers. Unlike the troops that he had brought with him, he was completely confident and wasn't concerned about security. He had, in fact, chosen these stormtroopers for their abilities and he had told them that they were required for security reasons, but he knew that they were merely for show, there was someone he wanted to impress and he knew that he never got a second chance to make a good first impression. He knew something that these stormtroopers didn't. Despite the fact that the last shuttle had been blown up, that the Imperial guard that was running the station had been shot, the first group of archeologist had also been shot and the last search party had never been heard from again, Draks knew that there was nothing to worry about. The individual that they were picking up could easily take care of any situation that could arise

and he was no threat to them, unless any of them had the misfortune of upsetting their new guest.

Lieutenant Draks signaled for his troops to remain where they were, there was no need to have a show of force and have their new guest be put ill at ease. The only real reason why these troops were here was to have a show of respect, a type of pomp and circumstance, not as troops to guard against the unknown. The later would only be a lack of faith toward their new arrival, an insult that would not go over very well.

Lieutenant Draks continued his journey from the landing site toward his destination, and at first glance that destination seemed to be toward some remote sand dune off in the distance. There was nothing out here. However, he knew exactly where he was going; the image had been burned into his mind a hundred times over again by the one that had called him. His destination was a recently uncovered tomb. The whole set of ruins had been buried by sand and it was only by accident that this remote tomb had been found at all. The only sign that something was here was the uncovered entrance that had to be dug out. Even then, the red sand dunes that were starting to pile back up were in the process of covering it up again. It wasn't going to be long before this tomb would be lost once again and nearly impossible to find.

Until recently, Lieutenant Draks would have only passed this site off as an accidental find of no importance. Nothing else was out here. Nothing had been known to be out here. No known Sith Lord tombs were in this area and it had been devoid of all artifacts. It was only by sheer luck that it had been found. However, recently Draks started to believe that there wasn't anything that was done by accident, that there was no such thing as sheer luck. In this case he had been correct. There was someone driving the whole archeological find, someone that urged the team forward to uncover the tomb. That someone was the individual that he was going to go greet.

The Sith Lord Darth Ablaoof stood beside the computer console that was in the front most section of the tomb, the tomb that had been his prison for far too long. It had been a long time since he had been able to even stand on his own two feet, but the two search party Imperial agents that had come down here recently, had been able to correct that. He was able to siphon the life off of the first one just to give him a physical body and the second Imperial agent gave him the strength and vitality to bring

his new body to its fullest peak. Now he was in his prime, despite the fact that he was thousands of years old.

He easily stood over six feet tall. His body weight was equality proportionate to his size with muscles that suggested that he kept his form perfectly honed; a much needed requirement if one wanted to stay a Sith Lord for any length of time. His short raven black hair was kept in a military crop style, less out of the necessity of military requirements and more out of his desire to keep it maintenance free. His tunic, pants, boots, and hooded cloak were jet black and matched his hair.

As Darth Ablaoof flipped his fingers across the computer console it didn't take long for him to understand that this had been placed here as a warning to all who might find this area. It was meant to keep everyone away. It had been built to give off warning signals that this area was to be quarantined. It would help keep the laser traps active. I would do its best to keep unwanted guests out. It had failed. Now Darth Ablaoof had a different function for it.

The Sith Lord knew that he would have been banished for quite some time and that many years might pass before he would be found again. Now that he was back to his physical form, it was time to see what had transpired and changed since his departure and banishment. He would be a fool to think that the galaxy would just sit still while he was away. The computer verified his suspicions.

The Dark Council of the Sith, the ten most powerful Sith Lords under the Emperor, was no longer in existence. They were gone. The whole council was no more. Instead there were now only two. The rule of two was now the Sith standard and from what he could tell, there were already two. They would have no room for another entry into their fold. This would prove to be fatal for at least one of the other two.

He had to shake his head in disbelief. The Sith had become weak both in power and in numbers. They were no longer feared. They no longer numbered in great amounts. They no longer ruled the galaxy and kept order with an iron fist. Yes, the two that were in power now were trying to bring the galaxy under control, but they were sloppy. There was too much faith in recruited troops and belief that the systems that they did control would stay under their leadership. The more they tightened their grasp the more systems were slipping through their fingers.

Also with the lack of other Sith Lords present, these two weren't as sharp as they should be. He doubted that neither one of them were looking over their shoulders, something that kept the council ready for anything. He doubted that they continued to train like they should. He doubted that neither one of them truly understood what it was like to be a true Sith Lord.

He had to shake his head again. These two were an embarrassment and he doubted that they would survive if they were back in his time, the time that he had left behind. Yes, they may be powerful; however he doubted that they were cunning. It wouldn't take long before council members came together to take them out, and he should know, that's what the council did to him.

However, this embarrassment could easily be corrected. He would bring back the council of the Sith and they would all answer to him as the new Emperor and those that didn't, wouldn't live much longer. Once he got the power that he desired, he would personally train the next set of Sith, not too much though, not enough to surpass him, but enough to take care of several planet systems each. This would ensure that everything remained in control while he furthered his studies into the dark side.

As Darth Ablaoth looked throughout history, he couldn't find his name anywhere. Nowhere, in the historic archives, was his name mentioned. Not only had the Dark Council defeated him and buried him, leaving him to rot for all of eternity, they had erased him from history. He no longer existed. He had never been. This was a major insult to him. He had worked so hard, had achieved so much, and had shown so great a potential as to challenge the Emperor himself and the entire council, and now he was just written off as if he never mattered. This was something that he was going to have to correct. He would rebuild a name for himself and he would personally etch the information into every data disc he could find. The planetary systems would either praise his name, or fear it, but either way, he would be known from one side of the galaxy to the other and his deeds would be unparalleled for all time.

However, despite how agitated it made him, he still could understand why the council did this. It was a wise decision actually. If no one knew that he even existed then no one would come looking for him. If no one came looking for him then he wouldn't be able to pull their life force from them and come back to the land of the living. Too bad the council was short sighted and underestimated his power in the dark side.

Despite how upsetting this was, this erasure of his existence could work to his advantage. With his presence and his abilities unknown, he would be able to strike against those that didn't know what was coming and didn't know how to defend themselves against him. He was sure that the present Emperor knew that he was alive, they had felt each other through the force, but the Emperor wasn't fully aware of what he could do and just how powerful he was. This would soon be rectified.

There were a few historical points of interest which he took note. Darth Ablaf put to memory which systems had pledged their allegiance to the Republic and which ones pledged their allegiance to the Empire. This would be crucial and would tell him just how his plan was going to come into fruition. He would start with the systems that were loyal to the Empire and loyal to the Emperor. He would show them that he was far superior than their current leader and that it would be in their best interest to follow him instead. Of course he would have to make an example of at least one whole system to ensure that the others would fall in line.

There were two things that he needed for his full and complete success. The first was the information that he had hidden. It was vital information. It was information that had been kept from him by the council itself. It was information that he eventually procured, or at least part of it. This information would lead him to the energy source that he needed, an energy source that would reshape the whole galaxy and make him a powerhouse to be reckoned with.

The second thing that he needed was a ship, and he didn't need just any ship, he needed one that was specially designed. Finding such a ship wasn't the problem. Finding one that he could easily confiscate and retrofit was. No one was willing to just give up their ship; that was why he had to reach out and manipulate the situation to get one. This led him to the individual that was coming to see him, the individual that was now coming down the ramp, into this very tomb.

“My Lord.”

Darth Ablaf didn't need to turn around to know that Lieutenant Draks Kelen had knelt down on one knee to give him the respect that he deserved and was finally, after all of these years, was receiving. During his height of power he would have thousands, if not tens of thousands, of individuals calling out his name, chatting in a religious fervor. Now, he was reduced to a single person. It was a start.

Lieutenant Draks waited a moment for an answer. He didn't want to repeat himself out of fear that he might upset his new ally. When no response came, he continued.

“We have a shuttle waiting...”

Darth Ablaoth scanned over the last bit of information that he wanted to gather. He wasn't going to work his schedule around someone else's. He was the most important individual here and his plan was the only thing that needed to focus on, and he needed to make sure that everyone knew right where they stood with him. He was going to leave when he was good and ready and satisfied with his findings, and only at that time, no sooner.

Without even speaking to the lieutenant that had come all this way, with the ship that he needed, Darth Ablaoth walked past his new guest without even giving recognition to the man. He continued upward, up the sandy ramp that had been cut out of the desert to the entrance of this tomb. He only stopped once to allow his eyes to adjust to the brightness of the surface, a brightness that he hadn't seen for such a long time. Although the sun would have been blinding to anyone else, Darth Ablaoth simply tapped into the force, the energy that bound the planet and everything on it, and became attuned to his environment. Once that happened he was able to adjust quickly and his eyes were no longer sensitive to the blazing sun.

“Where is my ship?”

The Sith Lord's voice seemed to resonate and echo everywhere and pull from the environment as if the world itself was the one making the decisions and the physical person was only a mere conduit. His voice was more inquisitive than angry and yet it was full of power as if he were attuned to being followed without question. His voice carried the weight of one in full command without losing temper, and perhaps that was more frightening. There was an undertone of what the consequences would be if the answer wasn't to his satisfaction. No threats were needed. No display of force was required. His tone itself sufficed.

Lieutenant Draks had stayed in his kneeling position not knowing what to do. He didn't know if getting up and following this Sith Lord would make him upset and if he was expected to stay kneeling for the time being. Now, with the question directed toward him, it was best if he got

up and spoke directly to Darth Ablao. He had to at least show respect, if not fear, toward his new boss lest the consequences of no longer being needed would befall upon him, and even though it frightened him to his core being, Lieutenant Draks answered.

“The shuttle is right over here, my Lord, awaiting...”

Darth Ablao turned toward the lieutenant and for the first time, he spoke to him directly. When he did, Draks felt a chill run down his spine. It felt as if something dark and rotting had crawled into his soul. This Sith Lord didn't just have power of his own authority; there was something that emanated from him, something dark and sinister, something foreboding.

“I am fully aware of the shuttle that you have brought, as well as I'm aware of the Orion Dreadnaught Class that is in orbit. No, I'm in reference to my ship, the Ebon Mortis.”

Lieutenant Draks felt his blood run cold. No, he was sure that it wasn't due to anything that the Sith Lord had done, it was simply his own doing of stress and fear. Not only was he sure that he was going to come to the realization of what happens when this Sith Lord became disappointed, he also had no idea what he was talking about. There wasn't any other ship. He had to come up with something. Draks let his mind quickly run through the logs that he had read, perhaps there had been a mention of a ship. Then, it dawned on him.

“We did find an old X-70b Phantom Class. We believe that it was taken by a Mandalorian who was charged with obtaining the seal that...”

Darth Ablao put his hand up to stop the lieutenant from speaking. He didn't need any excuses. There was no need to speak about things in the past, things that can't be changed. What was done was done. There was only looking forward and what events needed to be taken so that everything could fall into place.

He also didn't want the lieutenant to mention anything more about the seal that had kept him buried all of these years. Like his name that had been written out of history, so too would the only process known to banish him also be written out. There would be no records of his weakness. It would never be discussed again.

“If you need another personal ship, I'm sure that we can retrofit the...”

This time Darth Ablaoof turned toward the lieutenant and gave him a look as if to state that it was unwise to speak any further.

“It isn’t my nature to have to explain myself. Explanation breeds familiarity and equality, and believe me when I say that we are not equal. However, I shall do so only for your sake so that you have an understanding of the depth of the situation. I need something aboard the Ebon Mortis. It is essential that we find it. That is all that you need to know. Do you understand?”

Lieutenant Draks nodded his head. “I can hunt it down for you. We’ll be able to retrieve the ship and will spare no expense to do so. All I have to do is call in the Mandalorian again and have her turn it over.”

Darth Ablaoof stopped to think for a moment. He let his mind wander through the possibilities. He calculated each action and reaction that could happen. He had known far too many Sith Lords who only acted upon instinct and passion. While these gave strength, they often lead to mistakes. While his mind went through his calculations, he let his soul enter a visionary trance. He moved his conscious across the time lines and between his mind and his soul, between military calculations and force visions; he came up with the best possible plan. He was right, there would be time for power and passion and strength later, but this situation required cunning first and far most. Anything else would lead to a premature discovery and that would lead to disaster.

“No, wait,” Darth Ablaoof stated. “We don’t want to tip our hand and reveal our presence too soon. The more that our presence is known, the more likely the Emperor would know of my involvement. He’s currently involved in another situation and we don’t want his immediate attention. His entire fleet is currently at his disposal and that would be too much to take on at this moment. We need to remain in the shadows for now, striking later when it is beneficial to do so. Meanwhile we can have others do our hunting for us. There is no need to expend troops, ships, or resources if we can let someone else deplete theirs. Then, when it is time, I will take what is rightfully mine.”

Lieutenant Draks had to nod at that. There could be too much resistance from planets associated with the rebels and even neutral planets if there was a show of force and they could lose the very thing that they were looking for. He had to admit that he had chosen wisely when he

decided to mutiny against his previous commander. This new one thought first before acting.

What they needed was someone who could be in the field without being noticed, who could stay in the shadows, and could make individuals do his whim. Of course the individual had to be loyal and there was always the stipulation that he spoke to no one about this and that there were no questions asked. A smile came across the lieutenant's face.

“I know someone who will be able to meet our needs perfectly.”

Chapter: Valas

“*F*or the last time, Palpatine, the answer is no!”

Senator Arc Roza slammed his fist down upon desk as he stared back into the image displayed upon his screen. This wasn't the first time that he denied Palpatine his request and despite his insistent outburst, he doubted that this would be his last. The new “Emperor”, as he liked to call himself, wasn't an individual that took “no” for an answer. He was sure that Palpatine would call back with yet another “persuasive” argument as to why he, and everyone that he represented, should remain under his “guidance” and authority.

He had to scoff at that. He had seen the guidance that the Emperor had offered. The entire planet of Alderaan had been destroyed. Fear wasn't going to guide his cooperation and he wanted nothing to do with an Empire that struck fear in the hearts of those that they wanted to rule. Senator Roza had watched the Emperor and his apprentice try to tighten their grip and the more they did, the more systems seemed to slip through his fingers. Roza wanted to make sure that he and his planet and his people were among those that not only slipped through, but were part of an alliance that would fight back.

Senator Roza was a male Togruta. As such he stood less than a meter tall. His dark blue skin was rare for his species as was his light blue coloring around his eyes. He was sure that he had some arctic heritage somewhere in his past when his people would be able to blend into their surroundings to either hunt or to stay hidden from being hunted. There weren't many that had been known to have come from the arctic areas and most of his species were red with white markings.

His two montrails protruded from his head and gave him the appearance of having horns. His three headtails flowed down from his skull and had a similar coloration as the rest of his body.

Despite the fact that Palpatine had dismissed the Senate, Senator Roza continued, and would always continue, to believe that he was still a representative of his people. It was going to take more than some off-worlder's decision to prevent him from being the voice of those he cared about. He worked hard to get here. He believed in what he was doing. There was nothing that Palpatine could do to stop that.

Of course he had heard how the Empire had destroyed Alderaan with their colossal moon sized weapon. This had only solidified his hatred toward the Empire as a whole and the Emperor as an individual. Arc was not going to live his life afraid and intimidated. He would find a way to stop the Empire from continuing its rampage.

Then, someone else had solved the problem for him. The small rebellion that had been able to pull together had destroyed the massive moon sized weapon. Now, the Empire was without its prized destructive power. Without that, there was nothing else that Palpatine could do to try to persuade him or his people to join. The answer was “no”, like it had been the time before, like it always would.

“Do not force my hand,” Palpatine’s voice snapped back over the commlink. “That would be a fatal mistake.”

“Your empty words do not frighten nor impress me. Now, do not call again.” With a push of a button, Arc shut off the commlink and ended the conversation.

Senator Roza took a deep sigh. The “Emperor” always found a way to get under his skin. He was like a form of parasite that simply wouldn’t let go and irritated his life beyond any form of tolerance. He knew that despite his request and his abrupt ending of the call, he hadn’t heard the last of the “Emperor”.

Lightning flashed again outside followed by the sound of thunder. It was as if the weather was mimicking his turbulent emotions that were set by his call. The summer storm was just gearing up and it looked like it might be a strong one this year.

Arc moved toward his bed for the evening. The call with the “Emperor” had left him weary and tired. It was time to call it a night. He would find his strength again tomorrow at which time he would call a few other senators and put together a strategy to stop the Emperor and his Empire once and for all.

The sky flashed again and Arc had to stop for one brief moment. He was sure that the light from the lightning had lit up a shadow on the building not too far away. He shook his head. It was only his imagination and the fact that he was tired and frustrated. It was time to turn in.

The shot was never heard over the thunder that rolled across the land. The blaster rifle bolt was shot with complete accuracy and struck Arc Roza in the head, dropping his lifeless body to the ground. The senator never knew what hit him.

Valas waited for a moment while still looking through the scope of his sniper rifle. He could still see the senator lying motionless on the bedroom floor. He was pretty sure that his shot had completed his “one shot one kill” policy, but he wasn’t going to let his previous body counts play upon his pride. He didn’t come out here to be fairly certain of his job, he was a well paid assassin and this was what he did. He was proud of his work and he wasn’t going to leave anything to chance.

The imperial agent continued to stay in his crouched position between two stone pieces of art work on the narrow ledge on the building about a block away. His muscles were starting to ache from being in this position for far too long. The awning didn’t quite give him the protection from the rain that was coming down to the degree that he had wanted. Rain was dripping from his hair and down his face. His clothing was starting to get soaked. Yet, despite it all, he didn’t mind. He had been in far worse and had still made his shot.

When he was satisfied with his kill, Valas waited again for the lightning to flash. He didn’t want an unexpected blight light to illuminate the skyline while he was climbing down. He may have made his kill, but his mission wasn’t over. He still needed to get away. If he was caught, or if this mission could be tracked back to the individual that had hired him, then the mission was a failure no matter who he killed. As soon as the brilliant light of the lightning was gone, he quickly made his descent down the grappling hook and cable that he had set up.

Once he reached the ground, Valas gave a quick tug on the cable. The movement dislodged the grappling hook and the tool was reeled into its holder only to be stashed away. Then, before the lightning came again, he was off.

Valas’s muscles moved with precision and perfect coordination. His arms pumped and his legs carried him with the training that he had given himself throughout the years. He always prided himself at being at his physical peak at all times and this was one of those times where being physically fit had paid off.

Valas found his way from one shadow to the next. He moved between two buildings and then behind a speeder until he found his way to the spot where he wanted to be. Here, between two trees, he was able to see the home of the victim in front of him while keeping the small bit of forest behind him.

Without hesitation, the imperial agent reached into one of his many pockets and pulled out a small box. A quick adjustment brought up a small antenna and then a flick of his thumb snapped up the lid. Within a heartbeat, Valas clicked the small button under the lid.

The house that belonged to the late Senator Arc Roza blew in an explosive display of an incendiary inferno. The fireball blasted through the ceiling and shattered the windows as the flames forced their way beyond the confines of the building. The vision of the explosion alone could be seen for miles. The blast was so hot that two nearby speeders also exploded, adding to the nightmare that rocked the whole neighborhood.

Wood, metal, glass, and rock flew in all directions, shooting material into various other buildings. Structures were pockmarked with flying debris and nearby windows were shattered and walls were damaged. Several speeders were ruined as they were torn apart, ripped to shreds, and tossed as if they were nothing at all.

As sirens, alarms, and cries of horror and dismay rang through the night, Valas closed his small box and slipped it back into his pocket. His mission was complete. Now, all he had to do was make his way back to his ship and wait for another assignment.

His job was not only to assassinate the senator if he didn't cooperate, he was also sent to strike fear and terror into the hearts of those that didn't want to step in line with the Emperor. It wasn't the fact that he was loyal to the Emperor or even the Empire itself, he was just hired to take care of business and that was what he did. And, even though the pay was good, it was more the personal reward and satisfaction that drove him onward.

He understood that he could have just simply killed the senator and left it at that. A simple blaster shot from a distance would have been all that would be needed. The villagers would find out soon enough and the message would have gotten across. The Emperor demanded obedience and anything less would be harshly dealt with.

However, a single shot alone might have been counterproductive. Anyone who found the senator dead in such a fashion might brand him a martyr and might have picked up his cause with more fervor than he ever had. Valas needed to break their spirits. He needed to bring nightmares to their dreams and panic during their waking hours. This would start the process. He might have to come back another time or two to set yet another example, but he was sure that this village and even a few others would see reason fairly soon.

Finally, the explosion would cover his tracks as he escaped into the night. The villagers would be too busy trying to put out fires and running for their lives. The last thing that they would be looking for would be a ship leaving in the opposite direction.

Without further delay, Valas started his jog back through the small copse of trees. The mud splashed under his boots. Branches snapped under his weight. Yet, he wasn't concerned about leaving a trail behind; his escape route would be washed away by the rain. It would be as if he were never here.

It didn't take long to find his ship, his Fury-Class Imperial Interceptor, where he had left it. He had found a small clearing in the copse of trees where he was able to put the ship down, right under the cover of their branches. It would be almost impossible to see the craft from overhead, its deep black color helped it blend into the night, and since no one was out during this rainy and stormy time, Valas was certain that no one would find his ship.

Valas didn't bother to change his clothes. Although he was sure that no one would find him, at least for a while, there was no need to hang around any longer than needed and take his chances of being caught. It was time to leave, luxuries would come later. He was sure that there would be nothing that would stop him from leaving this planet with all due haste. That was when the call came through. He was already half way through the preflight sequences and had the call come any later, it would have had to wait until he at least left the atmosphere. As it was, it could be important.

Agent Valas pulled out his personal commlink. This call wasn't coming over the usual channels but instead was coming over a dedicated frequency specifically to his personal commlink. Only a few individuals had this frequency and had the scramble code to decipher the messages. This only meant one thing. He had another mission.

A quick look at his screen and Valas was able to tell who it was and it had confirmed his suspicions. He had doubted that it was the Emperor. News might travel fast, but it didn't travel that fast. Besides, the Emperor never called him to congratulate him on a job well done; there was either success or death. There was no need for communications. This meant that it was one of a couple of other individuals and he was sure who it was before he even looked. He was right and he was grateful that the call hadn't come earlier. He would have hated to have had to tell the Emperor that the mission had failed because on an incoming call, especially since that call was coming from a lieutenant that he was sure had committed mutiny.

The call was coming from the Audacious. This was rather unprecedented since he had already recently done a job for Lieutenant Draks and the only reason that he had been called in was so that they could go around his previous commander, who was now dead. There shouldn't be any reason for Draks to call him again so soon, unless the lieutenant had proven to be incompetent already. However, if it was another job, then it would always be a pleasure. The lieutenant still had deep pockets through the Empire, especially since the Empire didn't know that Draks wasn't working for them anymore, and the pay was always good. Valas punched a couple of buttons on his commlink. Suddenly the holo-image came to life from the round disk.

“Hello.”

Despite the fact that this was a personal frequency and the commlink were scrambled, Valas still took no chances when communicating on them during the initial response. He would wait until he was sure who he was speaking to before indulging in any information.

“Agent Valas, this is Lieutenant Draks from the Audacious. First, the Empire wants to thank you for your previous assignment. You have done a service well beyond what you can imagine.”

“Now, there is a need for your services again. As always, your need for discretion is required. You shall be given your usual fee as well as reimbursement for all of your expenditures, of course. Here are the details.”

Valas listened to the task that was needed. It was simple really. All he had to do was ensure that the Mandalorian that he had been assigned to

previously was continually motivated and manipulated to do what Lieutenant Draks wanted her to do. The last time he did this, all he had to do was make sure that she kept chasing the smuggler without actually catching up. Now, according to Draks, it sounded as if these two were working together instead of against each other, although there was no proof of this. He was sure that Draks was only jumping to conclusions since the last he knew was that they weren't working against each other and that they both had left the scene after General Brakin Fess's death. Be it true or not, the idea of them working together was an interesting idea. Both the Mandalorian and the smuggler were very resourceful and if he could bring them together and make them work together then they might have better odds at accomplishing the task that was needed. He would have to think of some way to ensure their cooperation without pitting them against each other.

There was something else that he had to think about. Lieutenant Draks had mentioned having these two lead them to the legendary item known as Holocron Theta. This thing was a myth. Only the desperate and the drunkards believed in such a tale. There was more likely a chance that another Zillo Beast was out there somewhere than the existence of some long lost artifact called Holocron Theta.

He, like everyone else that has ever heard a drunken tale or two knew about the story of Holocron Theta. The story only grew and grew with each telling. The treasure that it would lead to would fill a sarlacc's bottomless pit of a stomach several times over. Its location became more and more difficult to find and was guarded by a beast large enough to swallow planets whole. Of course he knew that all stories have some basis of truth. What was probably true was that some old Jedi or Sith Lord or someone had lost a personal data cube that didn't have anything to do with anything. Even if it had some old data on it, it was probably so corrupt that it would be impossible to read.

Going after this item was a fool's errand and only fools and drunkards would search for it and most never came back, usually because they ended up digging in the backyard of a very angry Gamorrean, was eaten by a Rancor, or just ended up being lost on some asteroid. There were things in this galaxy that one just didn't mess with and it wasn't worth facing these while hunting down an item that probably didn't even exist at worst or so degraded that it wasn't worth finding at best.

However, just because he didn't believe in the item's existence, it didn't mean that no one else disbelieved it as well. There were too many

individuals who did believe and that made this mission very dangerous. Many would kill for even a remote clue. Many already had. Between not being real and those that would try to kill him over this unreal item, it was almost better to refuse the mission, something he had never done before.

On the other hand, if Lieutenant Draks wanted him to follow a couple of individuals on this chase and was willing to pay him handsomely just to make sure that they didn't lose interest, then that was on Lieutenant Draks. Draks wasn't paying him to believe, he was just paying him for a mission. Payment was payment. Of course there would be a few hidden conditions. The first would be that if this continued for too long, he would have the unspoken agreement to pull out. He wasn't going to spend the rest of his life hunting down shadows. Payment was worthless if he couldn't enjoy it. Second, he wasn't going to risk his life over this. Even if he were to be paid for hazard pay, there was no reason to risk his life for something that didn't exist. Finally, if this did pan out to be anything of worth, then he was going to take a portion of it for himself, including having first pick of the prize. He wasn't going to just be a lackey that leads everyone on a treasure hunt only to not be able to have any part of it.

Valas had to think about how he needed to ensure that the two in question would even want to go after this folklore. He was sure, after the brief dealings with the both of them, that neither one of them believed in Holocron Theta. Even if he could convince them that it might exist, he still needed to persuade them to purposely and deliberately search for it, despite any challenges that they might find. This would take an art of manipulation, another skill that he prided himself in having.

The problem was how to manipulate someone who didn't want to be manipulated. Neither one of them struck him as fools. Then it dawned on him. There were others that he could manipulate that would set the whole thing into motion. One call would be all that would be needed. With a smile on his face, Valas opened the commlink on his ship, the one that wouldn't lead back to his personal one, and made his call.

Chapter: Hypori

“...**a**nd that’s when I pulled out the commlink and said...?...are you looking for this?”

The burst of laughter from the drunken men around the table could be heard all across the cantina. The amount of ale that had been consumed made the laughter louder than it normally would have been and it seemed at this point that all of the men at the table would have laughed at anything that was said rather it was funny or not. The anecdote wasn’t that funny, but the men were enjoying themselves as well as the rot gut that was being served.

The Chance Cantina, or at least that was what it was known as, was as seedy as they got. Half of the lights around the whole tavern were out and had been for quite some time. The owner either had never bothered to replace them, was too lazy to replace them, or hadn’t the money to replace them. Perhaps it was due to the fact that they were in one of the most remote planets known in the galaxy and supplies were hard to come by, and even when they did, they were expensive.

No one knew what the real name of the cantina actually was. There was a sign outside that was broken and the first portion was no longer attached. It was unknown if this was the “First Chance” or the “Last Chance” Cantina, and perhaps no one would ever know. Not even the current owner knew since he had bought it this way. He hadn’t bothered to fix this either.

The bar was in the back of the room where the owner and bartender could watch the patrons come and go. Despite the fact that there hadn’t been any problems, ever, the bar was still under complete scrutiny. This was a peaceful bar, neutral to both the Republic and the Empire and that was the way they liked it.

The cantina had a high vaulted ceiling in the center of the room, high enough for Geonosians to fly about when this tavern was operated by them. A second floor could be seen through the open ceiling. There were no stairs leading up and the only accessible means to the floor was by flight, but there was no need to gain ingress. The second floor was only full of empty crates and containers that were left behind. Since there was no current way to get up to the floor and the cantina had never made

enough money to clear out the space and put in new tables and chairs, the current owner left it the way it was.

The bartender was a male Yuzzum. His name was Jam Lutza and he was tall for a Yuzzum at two and a half meters in height. He had been brought here, along with at least twenty other Yuzzum, while the planet was under the control of the Geonosians. Most of them were simply hunted for the sport. Jam had been able to show that he had an ability to sing and entertain. This had saved his life. When the Geonosians eventually left, Jam had stayed behind. Yuzzum were known to be enslaved by the Hutts and since the Hutts were known to do business with both the Empire and the Republic, Jam decided that he would stay away from either side of the war. And, although the Republic wasn't into slavery, Yuzzum just weren't accepted into normal society like most of the other species. Racism was rampant on both sides; no matter if it was more obvious from one side than another, it was still racism.

Jam was proud of his cantina. It wasn't much and still needed a lot of work, but it had come a long way under his care. His patrons were happy and he usually made just enough to keep his business open. Out here, in these parts, keeping something going for this long, even if it wasn't completely successful, was still something to brag about. Despite that, Jam was hoping that one of these days he would be able to make it big and do some major renovations.

None of the dishes matched. The stools weren't comfortable. The tables weren't the same and some were chipped and even lopsided. Upholstery was torn, plaster had peeled off of the wall, and there were cracks in the floor.

The cantina only had about three different watered down drinks available and if the patrons didn't like it then they could always go elsewhere. They were so remote out in the system that it was difficult at best to get supplies, especially for a planet that no one cared about anymore. There was nothing here that appealed to anyone and with the Republic and the Empire fighting each other on the other side of the known galaxy; this was now the furthest place where anyone wanted to be.

The planet of Hypori used to be full of manufacturing plants for the Geonosians who used to mine the raw materials. However, since the Clone Wars, the place had practically been uninhabited. The only thing that was left was a few settlements that no longer served any purpose

except to house those that just wanted to get away from everyone else. Even the raw materials that had been mined had been stripped away. There was nothing here of interest.

Today had been no different than yesterday or the day before. The clientele had basically filled the cantina and there were only a few seats that were unoccupied. Individuals were half drunk and no one was taking anything seriously. There were no fights, since there was nothing to fight about. There weren't any deals, since it was too far out of the way to make a deal. The only thing that this cantina was known for was just a few good drinks and a few good laughs and a temporary escape from a hard day's work just to get by.

Quintano Roo slammed his mug down hard upon his table, perhaps a bit too hard, harder than he normally would have. He had to admit that he had one too many drinks and he was already slightly buzzed. The joke that he had just told really wasn't that funny, but everything seemed a little funnier than usual.

He had come here after his run-in with the Empire and the entire deal with that stupid seal and the Mandalorian. He wished that he had never seen it, the Mandalorian on the other hand he wouldn't mind seeing again, albeit on different circumstances. Yes, he had been paid well, but now he was a wanted man in several areas. It was best if he just left and found a place where he could settle down, somewhere where no one would know who he was or what he had just been involved in.

Quintano had ditched the T.I.E. fighter that he had acquired, with the war between the Empire and the Republic it was best that he avoided an easily identifiable ship. He was sure that the Empire would eventually want it back and it might have had a tracking device on it enabling the Empire to find it, and therefore him. He also didn't want to get shot down by the Republic while thinking that he was some lost stormtrooper. No, it was best to ditch it. He had acquired an A-Wing from an unsuspecting pilot, which wasn't much better but with the Empire mostly on the other side of the Galaxy, he felt that his chances of survival was better with this ship. He hoped that this one didn't have a tracking device on it, the last thing he wanted was anyone coming after him and throwing him in prison for theft for the rest of his life. After a few adjustments to his course to ensure that no one was following him, he came here.

Now all he wanted to do was eat, drink, and sleep. He was done with adventures. He just wanted to tell them, or at least embellish them.

Quintano picked up his next mug, a mug that he was no longer sure if it was his or not, but since it was within reach it had quickly become his next drink. "...and then she said..."

"Quintano!"

The voice from the front of the cantina interrupted the story that he was about to tell. Yet, despite the fact that his name had just been shouted from across the room, a name that no one on this planet knew, the smuggler continued.

"No, that's not what she said."

The fist hit the man's face hard enough to knock him from his chair and send him sprawling onto the floor. Out of pure muscle memory, Quintano rolled with the punch and came up to a kneeling position, a position that would allow him to move in any direction or even pull his twin blasters if needed. His eyes immediately took in the scene.

The drinking buddies that had been around the table, listening to his tall tales and enjoying the free drinks that he would provide, had shown just how loyal they really were to him. They were nowhere to be seen. They had taken off, having nothing to do with the conflict that had come upon them. Quintano was sure that when this was over, they would either come back for the drinks or they would find another drinking partner that would prove to be of safer company.

The Mandalorian who had struck him hadn't followed up with the attack. Instead his aggressor continued to stand where the attack had happened. A blaster hadn't been pulled, although the attacker had one on each hip, a sniper type rifle slung over the shoulder, and missile loaded upon a missile pack. There was even a good sized dagger strapped to the individual's belt. Although the Mandalorian hadn't followed up with an attack, there was a stance that seemed to tell him to stay down. He never did like to follow orders.

For one moment Quintano had considered following up with an attack of his own. No one knocked him down, at least not twice, and he never knew when to quit. If this Mandalorian wanted a fight, then he was going to give him one.

Then it dawned on him. The color variation of the Mandalorian armor and the voice, even if it was slightly digitized by the computer enhancement in the helmet, was familiar. It was when she took off her helmet and let her blonde hair flow down her back did she prove his suspicions to be correct.

“A’Den?! What did you do that for?”

“You betrayed me. You’ve betrayed my trust and so help me I should shoot you where you stand.”

“What? What do you mean? What did I do? I haven’t mentioned your name or anything that we did together.”

“Then how did they find me?” A’Den asked with a bit of doubt in her voice. She was sure that she had found the culprit and that Quintano was either stalling or was trying to lie to her to simply make her go away, after all he was a smuggler and lying to individuals was part of his trade.

“What do you mean? Who found you?” Quintano asked.

“How do I know? All sorts of ships have been on my tail at just about every move that I’ve made. Every stop has been filled with bounty hunters, smugglers, and any hired hand that could be scrounged up.”

“Then it’s not the Empire or the Republic?”

A’Den shook her head which made her blonde hair fall about her shoulders. “No. There were rogues, bounty hunters and the like. But still...”

“Look,” Quintano stated as he stood. “I’m not so stupid as to brag about what we’ve done. Anything that leads anyone to you would lead them to me. Wait...how did you find me?”

“I’m a bounty hunter, that’s what I do.”

“Well, if you can find me, then so can...”

“There they are!”

The sound from the other side of the cantina brought everyone’s attention toward the door. There was at least a half a dozen of individuals

that had come through, each armed with various blasters. There were two smuggler types, a Twi'lek, a Chagrian, a Gand, a Weequay, and a Gamorrean warrior.

Jam immediately let out a high pitched scream, a scream well known to come from Yuzzum when they were terrified, that bounced across the walls and echoed back. It was a vocalization of absolute fear and terror from the bartender. He may have thought of himself as a survivor, but he knew that he was no warrior. He also knew that if any firefight started then he would be the first casualty; his legs just would allow him to move fast enough to get out of harm's way. Jam quickly ducked under the bar and hoped that this didn't end up getting serious. Not only was he scared for his life, he was scared for his cantina.

The rest of the patrons had taken the cue from the Yuzzum and had also ducked for cover while those who could, backed all the way to the far walls, giving as much space between those who had come in and those that they were seeking. Nobody wanted to be in a crossfire. Their eyes were constantly looking for the door to bolt out of, the very door that was now crowded with individual with lots of weapons and the look on their faces that they were determined to use them.

Both A'Den and Quintano turned to those that had entered. A'Den slowly put her helmet back on. If things started to get ugly then she needed her armor to protect her. Both A'Den and Quintano moved their hands to their sides, each making sure that their blasters were ready and within reach. Like the patrons and the owner of the cantina, these two were sure that this wasn't going to end in a friendly fashion and they had to be ready if and or when communicative negotiations broke down.

“Perhaps you have the wrong people,” Quintano stated.

A'Den let the smuggler do the talking. She had to admit that he had a way with words and could negotiate his way through almost anything. That was his trade. If anyone could stop this from being a firefight then it would be him. If it were up to her then she would have already started shooting. She still might have to pull her blasters, but she would rather not if she didn't have to.

Quintano knew that he had to try to communicate with these individuals, although he was sure that they weren't going to back down. He knew individuals like this, he was one of them. When these type get wind of any rumor, no matter how unlikely, they would lock on and never

let go. Perhaps it was too much booze, perhaps it was too much desperation, or perhaps it was just for the thrill of action, a thrill that never could be quenched. It didn't matter. This conversation was only going to end one way. However, before that happened, Quintano wanted to know what he was fighting for and why.

"Doubt it," said one of the smugglers.

The Gamorrean only snorted, as if trying to impose itself upon the conversation and Quintano wondered if that was actually part of its language or there was something wrong with its respiratory system.

"You must be Quintano Roo and A'Den Verda Fett. They say you have a map," the smuggler went on.

Quintano looked upon the one speaking. He had watched every twitch he made and was ready for anything; well almost anything. The mention of some map had caught him completely off guard. The only maps that he knew were the ones in his head and those that Aro, his astromech, had stored in its data banks. With the exception of a few good trading routes, none of these maps were of any importance; that was unless Aro was holding back. He would have to have a talk with that droid, another long conversation filled with bleeps and clicks that would only annoy him that much more.

A'Den shifted her eyes between Quintano and the rogue that was speaking. They were both becoming twitchy and one of them was going to draw a weapon soon. The only question was, who was going to draw first. Her eyes caught the movement of the others as well. They were looking for a fight and were trying to size up the two of them. The Chagrian started to move to one flank while the Gand was starting to move to another. She was sure that the firefight wouldn't start until these two got into place. They had to get answers before blaster bolts started to fill the room.

The Mandalorian also had to consider Quintano. She had come to respect the man, perhaps even like him and probably wouldn't mind seeing him again, for a drink, nothing more. Then, when the smugglers and rogues and bounty hunters started to show up, she was sure that Quintano had betrayed her. Now she wasn't so sure. However, if he did have a map, and he was holding out, then she needed to know what she was risking her life over and why she wasn't offered a cut. If there was something to be found, something worth the attention that they were

getting, then she wanted in. She would have to keep Quintano alive, at least long enough to know what he knew.

“And what map would this be?” Quintano asked. His tone showed nothing but confusion but the others didn’t buy it.

“It’s the map to some long lost treasure, to untold riches. They say it’s a map to Holocron Theta.”

Quintano shook his head. “That’s a myth. Everyone’s heard of the map to Holocron Theta. It’s the map of some Sith Lord’s long forgotten treasure. No one’s been able to find it, and no one will because it’s made up. You’ve had too much to drink or had listened to far too many stories. Either way, I don’t have a map. Go home.”

“We wager that you do have it and even if you don’t, you still got a ship so the way I see it, we ain’t leavin’ empty handed.”

“I’m telling you one last time,” Quintano stated as his hand drew closer to his two blasters, one on each hip. “I don’t have a map. If I did, why would I still be here?”

“I think you’re holding out and hiding out. Why don’t we just search your ship, your droid, and you while we are at it?”

“Over my dead body.”

There was only a brief moment of silence where everything seemed to hold still before blaster bolts started flying everywhere. A’Den didn’t know who shot first, and it was no longer relevant. They were outnumbered, outgunned, and outflanked. It was time to tip the odds.

An activation of the jetpack sent the Mandalorian upward while she brought out both of her blasters, one in each hand. Her sudden flight had caught several of the invaders off guard and those that were trying to outflank them were now trying to take cover. Their attempts were in vain. A’Den opened fire at both the Chagrian and the Gand keeping them pinned down.

The Chagrian moved to the far side of the tavern, away from the center opened area. This put a more difficult angle for the Mandalorian to take a proper shot. If the Mandalorian wanted to come after him, she would have to drop lower and then be easier to hit. In the meantime, he had a

fairly good shot, even if the Mandalorian was flying about. All he had to do was keep his flying target occupied while the Gand continued to outflank. He started to shoot his blaster upward, toward the Mandalorian. Bolts ricocheted off of the ceiling or even flew up into the higher section of the room.

The Gand dove behind the bar and sent Jam running for his life. The Yuzzum ran out from behind his cover in absolute fear while he continued to let out his annoying scream, letting everyone know where he was at any given time. At first the creature merely ran in circles out of total confusion about which way he should go. Then when his mind was made up he headed for a group of tables that were already flipped over by a few other patrons who were ducking for cover, but stopped and headed a different direction when blaster bolts smashed into the table in front of him. Again, he screamed and headed for another blockade only to find the same result. It seemed that there was just too many blasters being shot in too many directions and there was only one thing that he could do.

Quintano dove behind a table while drawing both of his blasters and started to lay down some suppressing firepower. Bolts went everywhere, knocking over drinks, shattering dishes upon impact, and blasting legs off of chairs. He had to keep them busy until he either got a clear shot or was able to find a way out and make a run for it.

The screaming Jam caught Quintano's attention and at first he thought that the poor creature might actually have been hit while being caught up in the crossfire. Instead the Yuzzum had charged toward the back where he disappeared. Here, the screaming Yuzzum could no longer be heard and since there weren't any shots being fired toward that area, it could only mean one thing; he had found the back door.

Jam had ducked and ran for his life. He wasn't built for a fire fight. He had no weapons to fight back and no desire to get to be part of this skirmish. He didn't believe in weapons. There were other, more non-violent ways to settle a resolution, at least by his line of thinking. However, despite that this was a neutral area, a safe zone, and no weapons were allowed, his patrons insisted on bringing them in. He had given no qualm since he wanted to avoid conflict. Now they were shooting up his tavern and he was caught in the middle of the crossfire.

Jam found the electronic computer controls to the back door. This door was only meant to bring in supplies and wasn't meant to be an escape route; there wasn't a need for one. That, and with the fact the

clientele here on Hypori could get a little rowdy, he had kept the metal door locked when it wasn't in use. All he needed to do was punch in the correct code and he would be off.

His small fingers found the buttons that were needed. He quickly punched in the code and as soon as the door swung open, he ran for his life. Although the tavern was his livelihood and he had poured everything into it, it wasn't worth saving if he died in the process. If these individuals wanted to shoot it up then he would let them. He would come back and salvage what he could later and rebuild. Right now, escape was his only priority.

More bolts continued to blast up the tavern. Lighting fixtures blew apart. Tables were shot to pieces. What used to be barriers were now starting to be riddled with holes and being turned into debris. There was no escaping the blasts that were being shot.

A'Den increased the power to the jetpack. With the Gand on one side and the Chagrian on the other, they had her in a crossfire, and although she had the higher ground, she was still in the open. She needed more cover and after the jetpack kicked in, she was able to fly higher into the opening and into the second level of the cantina.

For a moment A'Den was able to have a reprieve of the firefight that was raging down below. For one moment she thought if it was worth it to actually continue this fight and simply leave. Then she thought better of it. If Quintano actually did have something, even if it wasn't the map to the legendary Holocron Theta, then it was best to keep him safe and in sight, at least for now. With that in mind, it was time to change tactics.

A'Den snapped her twin blasters back into her holsters and pulled a couple of small explosive devices. She made a quick dip in altitude, just enough to come back under the ceiling level of the rest of the room, and tossed her two explosives. Then, before they had a chance to go off, she flew upward toward the supply areas overhead.

The blasts of the two devices shook the whole tavern to its foundation. The bar had been struck by the first blast and was decimated into nothing but flying shards and debris. There was nothing left to give any evidence of what it used to be and nothing more was seen from the Gand. The second device had blown away a few of the tables that had been gathered to give protection to the Chagrian. What used to be furniture was nothing

but scrap for the junkyard. When the explosion had stopped and the smoke cleared, the Chagrian had fallen

The concussion of the twin blasts rocked the tavern to such a degree that everyone had taken cover and for one moment the firefight had stopped. The blaster bolts stopped flying. There was a brief moment of silence. It was the moment that Quintano needed.

Without waiting for another opportunity to present itself, the smuggler bolted from his position. He laid down a few blasts of suppressive fire to ensure that those who had come after him had stayed down. Then, without looking back, Quintano took off toward the back door.

The Gamorrean, Xob by name, saw his opportunity. There had been too many blasters being fired for him to successfully charge the rogue with his Arg'garok, a Gamorrean vibro-axe. He had fallen many opponents with it and he was looking to fall one more by the end of the day. He knew that if the rogue named Quintano did fall under his axe, then he wouldn't be able to give up the information that they were seeking. Maybe the smuggler would give up the map as a form of negotiation for his life. Maybe he could get the map from the Mandalorian. But no matter how this went down, he believed in one thing, and that was if someone tried to kill him, then he was going to try to kill them right back.

Xob rushed the fleeing smuggler. He had to get to him before Quintano was able to reach the back door and bolt away. There was no telling how quickly the smuggler would be able to hit the streets and disappear. For all he knew, Quintano had a ship waiting for him and he would be able to be off of the planet within a short amount of time. He was going to stop him, no matter what it took, and he would get the information from him or would chop the smuggler up for good measure.

Quintano went down hard as the Gamorrean slammed into him. The blow alone knocked the wind out of him and the fall to the ground only made it worse. Quintano saw stars. When he was able to bring himself about to see what had hit him, all that he saw was a large green fist slamming into his face. Blood flowed freely from his nose.

"Where is the holocron?" Xob shouted as he leaned over the fallen smuggler.

"What?"

The large green fist hit him again. This time Quintano was ready and was able to move slightly, just enough to not be hit squarely by the incoming paw. He had only been clipped, yet the blow had been strong enough to leave a nasty and long lasting bruise.

“Where is Holocron Theta?”

“What in the blazes are you talking about? How in the world should I know? I don’t have a map and I haven’t a clue. If I did have a map do you think I would still be here, on this planet?”

The Gamorrean had to think about that. The smuggler had a point. Perhaps he wouldn’t be here. However, that meant one of two things. Either the Mandalorian knew about it and hadn’t shared the information with Quintano yet, or the information that he received was false. Either way, the smuggler was no longer useful. It was time to deal with Quintano once and for all. It was time to remove him from the battlefield and focus on the Mandalorian. He raised his massive vibro-axe for the kill.

The blaster fire seemed to come out of nowhere. The pain in Xob’s chest caught him by complete surprise. It was only then did he realize that he could have ensured that Quintano didn’t have access to any of his blasters. It was a revelation that came too late. This would be his last time that he brought an axe to a gun fight. His dead body fell over with a thud.

Quintano wasted no time. He rolled to his right and bolted toward the open back door. As soon as he cleared it, he slammed it closed behind him and blasted the computer controls. Now there was only one way out and that was through the front door, at the opposite end of the tavern. Anyone that wanted to come out after him would have to run all the way around. This would give him time to get to his ship and get away.

A’Den dropped back down in altitude with blasters firing. She needed to get a clear idea of her situation before she started trying to figure out what her next move was going to be. As she came down, she was able to watch as Quintano bolted out the back door. The sparks from her side of the door told her that the computer hatch had been destroyed and any hope of using it to escape his firefight was no longer an option.

“Damn him,” A’Den stated aloud, not caring who had heard her. The smuggler had basically left her in the middle of a firefight to take care of herself. It wasn’t like she needed his help; she had survived this long

without him. However, being abandoned during a time like this didn't go over well at all.

The blaster fire coming up from below brought her back to her surroundings and back to reality. She could be upset later. Right now she had a situation that she needed to take care of. The only way out now was the front door and this was blocked by a individuals that were trying to kill her.

That was it. She had enough. It was time to deal with them the way that she should have from the beginning, and she would have except for all of the innocent bystanders that might have been hurt. Now that these bystanders were either dead or had been allowed to flee, there was nothing stopping her from dealing with this her way.

A'Den turned on her thrusters again and flew back up into the raised ceiling. With Quintano no longer covering the ground level now that he was gone, the raiders would be able to surround her only means of achieving the higher ground. Here, she would be trapped. She had to move fast.

The Mandalorian brought up her wrist controls and started to punch in a few commands. She had already made an estimate of distance between herself, the ground, and the front door. Now all she had to do was punch these coordinates into her computer and the rest would be history. When she was done, she fired off her preprogrammed missile.

Her rocket launched from her backpack and took off, upward at first, then corrected itself and followed the preflight pattern that it had been given. It swooped around and then headed downward until it cleared the upper area and then flew into the tavern proper. Here it launched itself straight toward the heavy guarded front door.

The explosion rocked the whole tavern and sent debris flying in all directions. The barrier that had been set up to protect those that were guarding the door was completely destroyed and blown to bits. The remainder of the light fixtures around the tavern had finally lost their last bit of integrity and fell to the ground. Any table that hadn't been turned over was now flipped several times and those that had already been displaced were now thrown to the very edges of the tavern. Nothing had gone undamaged.

The intruders that had hoped to either gather information or shoot down any who oppose them fared no better than the barrier that they had set up. Their bodies were decimated in the process. Their dead corpses were tossed aside as easily as were the table and chairs. No one survived.

This initially had brought the desired results. The physical barriers were cleared and those who were guarding the front door, her only means of escape, were dead. However, the blast had been too powerful for its own good and had become counterproductive, especially against the old tavern that needed a good deal of repairs.

The entire frame to the front doors caved in and fell upon each other creating a huge pile of rubble and debris blocking the door that A'Den wanted to exit through. With the door frame collapsing, the rest of the walls attached to them also started to lose their structural integrity. Wall after wall started to collapse and the roof that they held started to come down with them.

Somewhere a fire broke out. Flames started to kick up and eat everything that they touched. The fire went up first. Small explosives that had been carried by the intruders went up next. Tables and chairs were engulfed. The fire grew and grew, taking the whole tavern with it.

The thick black smoke from the flames made their way to the top of the building and started to flood the higher level. The billowing black cloud made it difficult for A'Den to see; even her increased sight was being interrupted. The smoke was also getting into her armor and was starting to make her eyes water and her lungs burn.

As the fire started to eat up the oxygen in the room, it started to have adverse effects upon the Mandalorian and her armor. A'Den was having troubles breathing. The air was too thin and with the smoke already starting to fill her lungs she was starting to become dizzy. Her vision was fading in and out and it would only be a matter of time before she passed out, fell from this height and either died from asphyxiation or from the fire itself.

To make matters worse as the air was becoming thinner the fuel mixture in her jetpack was becoming compromised. The jets were starting to sputter and were threatening to unceremoniously throw her to the ground. She had to do something and fast.

She couldn't go down. The flames had built themselves to a feverish pitch. Her Mandalorian suit might be flame resistant, but it wasn't necessarily completely heat resistant. It might be able to protect her from some of the heat, but not all of it. She could still be baked alive before she even made that door. And, although she hadn't seen the damage to the door, if the falling walls and ceiling were any indication of the damage below, then she doubted that she would have access to the door anyway. That left only one option, up.

A'Den activated her thrusters and pushed their throttle to their maximum. She knew that she only had one shot, by using up all the compromised fuel mixture that she had left, in a desperate attempt to blast up and out. If she failed, it would be a long way down with no means of escape.

The Mandalorian shot upward with a momentum that shook her to her core. With the decreased amount of oxygen that she was getting into her lungs and the gravitational force that she was now pulling, all she could see was a blurred vision of the ceiling up above her. Consciousness started to fade and she hoped that she had set her course correctly and that there were no other obstacles in her way. There was no turning back.

A'Den shot through the damaged ceiling like a missile. The Mandalorian armor crashed through the ceiling and took the blow from the debris as A'Den continued skyward, and it was just in time. Her forced escape through the already weakened roof was all that was needed to destroy what was left of its integrity. The building collapsed under her leaving nothing but burning rubble where she had just been.

A'Den's landing was less than ideal and she unceremoniously hit the ground. She rolled with the impact as well as she could but it still took the wind out of her and with her lungs already burning from the fire and the smoke and the lack of oxygen. She had to lie there, on the ground, for a short bit to catch her breath before figuring out what to do next.

Chapter: Ebon Mortis

“**A**ro! Get the ship ready!” Quintano stated into his commlink.

Quintano had hoped that the little droid had stayed out of trouble. The astromech had a bad habit of hacking into things that he wasn't supposed to. Of course many of these hacked proved to be of value and had been a good steady source of income. However, this would be a very bad time to have the droid be caught.

The smuggler had sprinted out the back door and ran down a few alleyways between buildings. There were others with blasters moving about, some seemed to be other smugglers like him, probably following the lead of the first group and were trying to hunt him down. Then there were those that passed as security. These individuals didn't want to hear about who started what fight and who shot first; everyone was going to be arrested and the details were going to be sorted out later. To make matters worse, because this area was full of those who didn't get along with any authority, these security troops had a bad habit of shooting first and asking questions later, if there was a later. A dead body was easier to deal with than paperwork. With these things in mind, Quintano knew that it was best to keep his head down, stay out of sight, use the back alleys, make his way to the landing pads, meet up with Aro, and leave this planet as quickly as possible.

He had to shake his head at that. All he wanted to do was find a nice quiet place and settle down. Hypori wasn't necessarily nice or quiet, but it was quiet enough, more so than most planets that were caught in the middle of the war. Although he had hoped to settle here, deep down he doubted that it would happen. First of all he knew that he wasn't really the settling down type. Secondly he was sure that something would happen along the way that would force him to move on. He was actually surprised that it had lasted as long as it had. It was too bad, though, he was really starting to like it here.

“Bleep...bleep...bleep...woo.”

“I don't have time to explain, just remote the ship to be ready for lift off.”

“Blurp...twirl...twirl...beep.”

“No, we’re not coming back.”

“Zip...burlp...bleep...tweet...whirl.”

“What do you mean ‘not again’? This hasn’t happened before.”

“Bleep...boop...boop.”

“That doesn’t count. Now get the ship ready.”

“Zip...bing...beep...beep.”

“No, don’t bother packing my things, there isn’t enough time. We need to get off of this planet now.”

“Whirl...zing...zip.”

“What do you mean ‘This is par for the course’? You know you have a horrible disposition for an astromech. This is exactly why I always flew alone.”

“Woop...woop...beep...bloop.”

“I don’t care if you’re not a protocol droid, a little less lip and a lot more ‘GET THE SHIP READY FOR TAKE OFF’ would be nice.”

“Zit...blurl...beep...tweet...zert.”

“Well, apparantly I do need to shout since you aren’t doing it.”

“Bleep...boop...bleep...boop.”

“What do you mean ‘you are already doing it’?”

“Zwirl...blurl...bleep.”

“You could have told me this earlier you little rust bucket of faulty parts.”

“Meep...beep...zip.”

“You know, you and I are going to have a very long talk after this. Now meet me at the docking bay and ready for immediate lift off or we’ll both be sent to Kessel to work in the spice mines, and I’m sure neither of us would like that.”

Quintano gave a deep sigh as he rounded the corner. Sometimes he really hated that droid. He had a good mind to just jettison the astromech into deep space the next time they left orbit, which looked like it would be very soon. If the little droid hadn’t bailed him out of enough scrapes then he would have every intention of doing so. But, as it was, he had to admit that he would miss the company.

The landing pad had presented itself up ahead. From Quintano’s vantage point, he could see his ship and, as the astromech had promised, the ship’s engines were already primed and ready to go. All he had to do was make a break for it, cross the landing pad, climb into the cockpit and take off.

A quick look around told Quintano all that he needed to know. This docking bay area wasn’t heavily guarded. It usually wasn’t to begin with, but there were less guards here than usual and he believed that was due to the fact that most of them had gone to the cantina to secure the area. This meant that his quick dash across the open area would more than likely go unnoticed.

The movement on the other side of the docking bay caught his attention. There, he was able to see Aro moving toward the ship. They would meet up about the same time. They would be off of this planet shortly thereafter.

Valas moved from behind one of the pillars. He knew that once the riffraff had been contacted about a potential unclaimed treasure of all of eternity, they would immediately seek out the only two individuals that might have the map. Sure enough, the rumor had spread faster than the historic Rakghoul plague and a small fleet of personal ships had descended upon Hypori quicker than he had anticipated.

Following the logical course of action, two things would happen. First, both A’Den the Mandalorian and Quintano the smuggler, would come together to try to figure out what was going on with the amount of pressure that they were receiving. Here they would either give up the

knowledge that they had and he could then take it from the smugglers. However, his bet wasn't on the smugglers. Both A'Den and Quintano had proven to be too resourceful to allow any group of second rate smugglers to get the best of them. The appearance of Quintano on this docking bay proved him right.

Second, they would try to escape the planet. From his research, A'Den and Quintano had gone their separate ways. Since he didn't know which one might have the "map" that Lieutenant Draks was looking for, it was best to make sure that these two stayed together until this was all sorted out. Besides, the two of them working together would mean better and faster results. This meant that he couldn't allow them to go their separate ways. He needed them together, at least for now. That was where his device came into play. The Ebon Mortis could hold several while Quintano's acquired A-Wing could only hold one. So, it had to go.

Valas reached into his pocket and pulled out a small case. He pulled out the small antennae and with the flick of his thumb he snapped open the lid. Another flick of his thumb and the button that had been revealed was depressed.

The explosion of the A-Wing rocked the docking bay. Metal fragments flew in all directions impaling themselves into nearby buildings, docked spaceships, and even a few lifting cranes. Everything was riddled by the flying hot debris.

The explosion was so powerful that it put a crater in the middle of the landing pad where the ship had been sitting. The very foundation that was supposed to hold tons of weight from each ship that it supported was now destroyed beyond repair.

Flames shot up into the sky as the fuel from the ship caught fire. The whole inferno could be seen from miles around and caught the attention of every emergency crew that the whole city had at their disposal.

The heat was so great that two other nearby ships, ships that had already been rocked by the explosion and riddled with hot debris, were overheated beyond their ability to handle. Their diminished integrity could no longer hold the intense heat. Their fuel tanks also went up as easily as the A-wing. Two more explosions shook the area, making this a nightmarish inferno.

Quintano rolled to one side and caught the back of a support pillar. He used it to shield himself against the heat and flying debris. Still, despite the impromptu shielding, he was still able to feel the intense heat and the disturbance through the ground with each explosion.

It was when he realized that it was safe to come out from behind his cover did he take in the scene. The landing pad was in complete devastation. There was nothing left of his A-wing and he was glad that it hadn't exploded when he was any closer or he would have gone up with it. Another quick look across the other direction of the what was left of the docking bay told him that Aro had fared just about as well as he had. The astromech had been knocked back up against a side wall, but was otherwise undamaged.

As Quintano caught his breath, he came to the understanding that this couldn't have been a mere accident. Someone knew what his ship looked like and had deliberately stopped him from leaving the planet. He had nowhere to go...

He let his mind wander for a moment.

There was another way off of the planet and if he wanted to survive then that was his only chance. A'Den had only recently shown up. Hopefully there hadn't been enough time for anyone to piece together her arrival, her ship, and her connection to him fast enough to place a bomb on board. If he could catch up to her, perhaps he could convince her to give him a lift.

Then it dawned on him. If the explosion happened just as he started to arrive then the individual who had planted it might be close by or at least within viewing range. If this was the case then he would have to move fast before he or they closed in. On top of this, there would be emergency crew that would be coming soon. The quicker he left the better.

"Aro, Aro, come in."

Quintano was quickly talking into his commlink, the quickest way to speak to the astromech without shouting across the ruined docking bay.

"Bleep..." Aro commented weakly.

“I know, I know, but snap out of it. You’re an astromech, I’m sure you’ve had worse. Now listen, I need you to find the Ebon Mortis. I need you to find A’Den’s ship. Can you do that?”

Quintano was sure that the little droid would be able to accomplish this without a problem prior to the explosion, now he wasn’t so sure. Aro had taken quite a hit and there was no telling what programs were scrambled or hardware had been affected.

“Bleep...bleep...boop...boop...boop.”

“Great, let’s head there right away.”

Valas smiled as he put his remote detonator back into his pocket. The players were coming together quite nicely. They would work together out of fear and desperation and once they find the map that Draks thought that they had, then they would be further motivated out of greed.

He started to quickly make his way back toward his ship, the Wraith. He needed to be ready to follow the Ebon Mortis as soon as it took flight. Although he trusted the tracking device that he put on it, he still wanted to make sure that he wasn’t too far away so that he could make his move whenever it was needed. His job wasn’t just to tail these two, his job was to keep them motivated and alive long enough to finish their job for Draks. He couldn’t do that if he wasn’t close enough.

A’Den stumbled toward the docking bay where she had landed her ship, the Ebon Mortis. Now she had wished that she hadn’t landed so far away. She had hoped by landing here, she wouldn’t cause too much attention and she would be able to get the drop on Quintano, under the assumption that he had double crossed her. Neither had been true. She hadn’t really gotten the drop on him as they had been interrupted and he hadn’t been the one to double cross her in the first place. This wouldn’t have too bad to have to deal with, if she could just use her jet pack and fly here and leave this planet and all of her problems behind. However, now that her fuel mixture had been saturated with too much carbon dioxide from the fire and most of her fuel was gone anyway, the whole trip ended up being a very long walk, and in the condition that she was in, it was far too long for her liking.

At least she knew that everyone would be running toward the Chance Cantina in the effort to put out the fire or at least to try to stop the crowd of smugglers and scoundrels that were starting to gather in a desperate attempt to get a map that didn't exist. Then there was the second explosion, the one that seemed to be coming from somewhere near one of the other docking bays. With all of the commotion that had been left behind, she was sure that finding her ship and taking off wouldn't be a problem.

The sight of her ship upon the landing platform brought a smile to her face. She was sure that nothing could diminish the joy that she had felt, the thought of just leaving and not turning back, the thought of finding a place to rest and recuperate. She was wrong. She saw him.

"What do you want?" A'Den asked Quintano as she moved closer to her ship.

Both the smuggler and his astromech were waiting for her near her ship. They were obviously waiting for her to show up. They both had some nerve and she wasn't impressed or in the mood.

"A ride would be nice," Quintano stated.

"Helping me out in the fire fight would have been nice. Helping me get out of the burning building would have been nice. Is that all you do is think about yourself?"

A'Den's anger didn't even faze Quintano. It wasn't that he didn't care; he could simply tell that she wasn't really that angry to begin with and he was sure that his charm would be able to smooth things over if she would just give him a moment or two.

"I see that you made it out alright," he stated. "And as I recall you've never needed my help in the first place. I had no doubt that you could have taken care of yourself. I'm sure you gave them hell."

"Yes I did, but that's beside the point. Pushing your unwanted, unsolicited, or even unneeded help is one thing; not being considerate of others is something entirely different."

Now A'Den's ire was starting to rise. If he was trying to impress her by flattery, it wasn't working. She had never been nor ever will be one of

those that would fall for his smile or that twinkle in his eye that he was trying to give her. That wasn't going to work on her and it was rather insulting that he was even trying that hard. She was smarter than that and far too independent, and quite frankly she really didn't care what he thought of her.

"Look," Quintano stated, trying a different approach. "I would love to continue to have this argument about rather I should or shouldn't be able to read your mind as to when you want my help and when you don't, but in case you haven't noticed, we are being hunted for reasons that don't make any sense. Now, if we can have this discussion another time..."

"Fine."

"Fine."

"So I take it you need help getting off of this rock?" A'Den asked with a bit of sarcasm.

"That would be nice, yes, please, and thank you," Quintano stated with an equal amount of sarcasm.

"...and since these guys think that the both of us have this 'map' I suggest that we stay together, for the time being, at least until we figure this all out. Then you can drop Aro and I off on some planet or even an orbital station. We can take care of ourselves from there."

"Wait," A'Den stated as she went to put in the access code and open the ship's door so the landing ramp could be lowered. It had finally dawned on her why he was asking for a ride, and it had nothing to do with the fact that the two of them were somehow connected to a map that neither of them knew anything about.

"Where's your ship?" She asked.

"Well it's...it's kind of a long story."

"Don't tell me," A'Den said coyly. "Yours wasn't the one that blew up, was it?"

"Well...you see, it's like this..."

“Let me get this straight, you only need a lift because your ship blew up?!”

“It wasn’t my fault,” Quintano insisted.

“Like it wasn’t even your ship?”

“No, it wasn’t, I had acquired it. But that’s beside the point. Someone blew it up just as I was getting to it.”

A’Den stopped for just a moment then realized the implications of what Quintano had just said. “Which means someone might be targeting my ship next because of you. Why is it every time I meet up with you, someone ends up shooting at us?”

“There they are. Get them before they get off the planet. If they leave we’ll never get that map.”

The sudden vocalization of the new arrivals at the docking bay had caught A’Den’s and Quintano’s attention. They turned from their “conversation” and found that another small group had gathered at the far end of the docking bay. They were outnumbered and out gunned yet again. Every one of them was carrying blasters. Every one of them seemed more than capable and willing to use them

“Aro! Get us inside!” A’Den had given the command as she dropped and rolled to one side. As she came up she drew both of her blaster and opened fire. She was able to catch a couple of the individuals off guard and they dropped to the ground dead quicker than anyone had anticipated.

Despite A’Den’s speed, accuracy, skill, and the fact that a few of them were already dead, it didn’t slow anyone down. They seemed to be prepared to lose as many of their numbers as was necessary since the split of the bounty would be split among fewer individuals. They also seemed to have no problems with the concept of searching dead bodies. Their desire to negotiate or threaten had been replaced by their decision to shot back.

A’Den took a quick look over her shoulder to see how Quintano was fairing. She may have been annoyed with him periodically and he may have been nothing more than a frustration, but she didn’t want him dead. As a matter of fact, any help to shoot back at these individuals was much

appreciated and she wanted to ensure that he was pulling his weight instead of running off yet again.

Quintano had twisted around until he found one of the landing gear braces for the Ebon Mortis. He used this as cover as he returned fire. It wasn't the most ideal, but it was the best he had.

Blaster fire covered the docking bay. Shots struck the Ebon Mortis sending an array of sparks in various areas. The smugglers had no problem shooting at the ship to ensure that it didn't leave. However, it would take more than just a lucky shot to disable the Ebon Mortis. It had been made of a Mandalorian alloy and could easily repel mere blaster fire. It was designed to hold off starfighters so a blaster wouldn't do much damage unless it hit a very sensitive spot and even then that couldn't be hit from the angle of this battle. An individual would have to be much closer and basically right under the ship to find anything that could be vulnerable to blaster fire and that was when the ship had its landing gear down. Once it was in the air, it would be sealed tight.

As soon as the engines started to go into their preflight warm up, Quintano spun back around and ran up the landing ramp. Blaster fire followed him all the way up and even hit a few walls on the inside of the ship.

A'Den waited until Quintano had cleared the landing ramp until she turned to join him. Two minor bolts struck indirectly against the back of her armor, finding only resistance. The bolts only bounced off and ricocheted elsewhere. Yet, despite the fact that these weren't even direct hits, A'Den was still able to feel them through her Mandalorian armor. She stumbled the rest of the way in knowing full well that although the armor had saved her life, she would still be bruised quite heavily across her back.

Quintano was able to find the controls for the landing ramp and had it closing just as Aro was launching the Ebon Mortis from the ground. A few more shots blasted across the ship's opening as the hatch started to close and it only told Quintano that he had been just in time. Any later and those who were trying to get the drop on them would have been able to find their marks.

"Aro," A'Den said as she spoke into an intercom system that allowed her to speak to the various parts of the ship. "Set the coordinates to..."

The explosion on their port side rocked the ship and tossed it off course. It hadn't been a direct hit, but it had been close enough to throw off their trajectory. They were jarred so hard that both A'Den and Quintano were thrown into each other and were momentarily tangled together.

"Get off of me," A'Den complained.

"Don't pretend you didn't enjoy it," Quintano snapped back.

"Why, I ought to..."

Another blaster shook their ship again and A'Den had to stop in mid sentence. It was no use having this conversation if neither of them were going to be sticking around to finish it. It was time to take matters into her own hands.

As A'Den made her way to the cockpit she had to wonder rather or not the droid could really fly, or at least if it knew how to fly, her ship. It wasn't that difficult once she had gotten the hang of it. However, her opinion of the astromech completely changed as soon as she was able to see the outside view.

Several small snub ships had come upon them and were chasing them down. There were two old Republic A-wings, a V-wing, A Naboo Starfighter, and an old Delta 7. They had just gotten away from being outnumbered and outgunned only to be put right back into the same position. This was starting to be a very bad habit, a habit that she was hoping to break very soon.

From what A'Den could tell, the other pilots weren't very skillful. They had problems even flying in a straight line let alone trying to stay up with the counter measures that Aro was trying to perform. Yet, what they lacked in skill, they made up with in numbers. Each time Aro banked to get away from one, there were two more trying to prevent them from maintaining any sort of course.

On top of trying to use their ships to push the Ebon Mortis out of the sky, several of them were firing upon them. Their warning shots were awfully close and if they came any closer then there was the risk of the whole ship going down, perhaps not after the first hit, but too many hits would knock anything out of the sky, including the Ebon Mortis, no matter how tough it was. A'Den was sure that they only wanted to nick

the wing or throw off the navigation system. However, at this rate, there would be nothing left of the ship and whatever they thought that they might be getting out of this endeavor would be going up in flames.

“Aro, can you make the calculations to make the jump through hyperspace?” A’Den asked as she went over a few of the monitors to see how well the ship was holding up.

“Bleep...boop...boop.”

“You know, I don’t need your attitude right now. I don’t see how Quintano could put up with you for so long. Can you or can’t you?”

“Whirl...beep...woo.”

“Good. Set the coordinates to...”

“Woo...woo...xxizt.”

“What do you mean you can’t? You just told me that you could.”

“Whirl...beep...bloop...beep.”

“Well, if the other ships are in the way, why didn’t you tell me that in the first place?”

“Zim...xixtt...boop...bleep”

“I shouldn’t have to ask. Honestly, you are the worst astromech ever.”

“Woop...wewo...beep...bloop.”

“Of course I’m going to shoot them down so we can have a clear shot. Now keep the ship steady and...blast it.”

A’Den fiddled around with a few of the controls, shook her head and tried again. When nothing seemed to work she slammed her fist down upon the control panel.

“What’s wrong?” Quintano asked as he entered the pilot station of the ship. The Ebon Mortis was rocked hard again with another nearby blast and then tossed to one side as Aro tried to compensate.

“The targeting system was hit. I can’t get the weapons online.”

“Woop...woop...beep...bloop.”

“Then why didn’t you tell me that earlier?” A’Den asked with complete frustration toward the droid.

“Weboob...boop...bleep.”

“I shouldn’t have to ask about that either.” A’Den patience with the astromech had worn thin. “Where did you get this hunk of junk anyway,” she asked turning toward Quintano.

“Would you believe in a pile of junk? Would you also believe that the reason that I have him is because of you?”

“Me? What...?”

“Yes, if you weren’t chasing me all the way through the galaxy then I wouldn’t have needed to be in such a hurry to take the ship that actually had this astromech.”

“Well, if you hadn’t stolen the seal in the first place...”

Another blast rocked the ship again bringing the both of them back to the reality of the situation.

“This damn droid isn’t worth its weight in scrap!” A’Den shouted out of frustration. She knew, as soon as she said it, that she really didn’t mean it. It was merely out of frustration of the situation, not of the droid itself. For all she knew, the astromech was still having problems with the ship or there might be problems with the navigation system or even the stabilizing engines. In a desperate attempt to fix what she had said while still trying to save their lives, she turned to Quintano.

“Can you fly this?”

“Yeah, sure, but without weapons, what are you...?” The answer came to Quintano before he was able to finish his sentence. “...and here I thought that I was the crazy one. Yeah, go ahead, I’ve got this. Aro, see what you can do to fix the targeting system.”

As A'Den took off deeper into the ship, Quintano took the pilot's chair. He gave a flick of a switch, taking the ship out of Aro's computer control and shifted everything to manual. While he didn't completely agree with A'Den's assessment with Aro, she did have a point. Astromechs were great with navigations, but they weren't so great with wartime maneuvering. This took gut instinct, not a programmed set of maneuvers. The pilot had to gauge his opponents, anticipate every move, and then try to do some stunts that weren't "by the book". This was another reason why he never wanted an astromech.

Quintano pulled back on the throttle and dropped the trust of the engines. Immediately the ship came to an almost crawl and as it did, the other ships blew right past them. If he could keep them off of their tail long enough then A'Den would have enough time to be able to get herself ready for whatever it was that she was going to do.

As soon as the other ships shot past him, Quintano pushed the throttle forward again and turned the maneuvering engines on full blast. The sudden thrust had caught the other ships by surprise again and as they were trying to turn around and catch up, he put the Ebon Mortis right down the middle of the small group of ships. The amateurs were too jumbled and weren't coordinated enough with each other to brace themselves for that move. They were too unprepared to realize what they were doing until it was too late.

Two of the ships collided with each other in a desperate attempt to get back into a pursuing pattern. One of the A-wings and the old Delta7 had struck so hard that parts of their wings were destroyed. Their navigational engines sputtered and the two ships spun out of control. They were last seen spiraling towards the planet below.

A'Den was able to make her way to one of the storage units that the ship had available. It seemed that this one was initially used to keep additional firearms for a landing crew. She had another idea for it. She had been able to buy a few more rockets for her backpack. She quickly gathered up one of them and armed herself with it. When she was ready, she made sure that she had her EE 3 Carbine rifle ready; she was going to need all of the fire power that she could get. She had a plan and she would need both of these items.

A couple of rolls of the ship knocked A'Den from side to side making getting to her location difficult at best. Yet, she was able to make her way

to the hatch of the ship. Without dropping the landing ramp, A'Den braced herself before opening the airlock.

There was an immediate gust of wind that ran through the ship as the ship's interior started to depressurize. Not only was the air thinner this high up, but the air turbulence created by the ship itself was whipping about making it difficult to stay in the ship let alone remain steady. With all of the air pressure, A'Den had to hold on tight. She had jammed herself into one of the supporting structures to help keep her from being sucked out of the ship, yet even then it was a strain upon her body. She had to make her shots fast and accurately before her body's strength failed her and, since her jetpack wasn't working at the moment, she would find out what falling from this altitude would do to her in the most horrible of fashions.

The Mandalorian first brought around her EE 3 Carbine rifle. The blasters that she had weren't powerful enough to do the amount of damage that she needed done and they weren't designed for longer range shooting. They would be useless in this situation. Not only was her rifle more powerful, its longer barrel would require her to use both hands and would help her hold it steady easier than just a blaster.

When she was ready, she brought the rifle up and focused through the scope. It wasn't easy getting one of the ships into her sights since they wouldn't stay in one place for too long and Quintano was doing his best to keep putting the other ships on her side while trying to stay away from the from the shots that were being fired at them. Yet, she waited patiently. She let her body go still. She became one with her rifle. Her muscles started to strain and eyesight became blurred, yet she continued to wait patiently. Then, when she had her shot and one of the ships flew into her sight by mistake, she took it without hesitation.

The blast struck the Naboo Starfighter's fuel injection intake converter. The small explosion blew out the side of the ship and sent the vessel into a downward spiral. There would be no escaping the death plunge that it was about to take, not with its engine out of commission. The last that was seen of it was the thick plum of black smoke spinning out of control.

The last two ships realized their mistake. They had come upon a ship that could fire back. They were already down by half. Their assumption that this would be an easy ship to take down and that it wasn't going to fire back, had all gone up in smoke just like the Naboo Starfighter had done. It was time to rethink their position. Both ships dropped back.

A'Den smiled. She had figured that the remaining ships would drop back out of the range of her rifle and that was exactly what she wanted them to do. If they blew up too close to the Ebon Mortis, this ship and its crew ran the risk of being harmed as well. Now that they were further away, it was time to put her next plan of attack into motion. She leaned slightly outside and after a brief programming; she fired the missile on her backpack.

The deadly projectile flew from her backpack and took off toward the preprogrammed position behind the Ebon Mortis. Once it did, it switched on its scanners to start looking for the closest heat source. By the time this had happened, the Ebon Mortis had flown further away. On the same note, the other ships were already that much closer to the missile. The targeting system was locked. There was no escaping now.

The V-Wing had been the closer of the two ships and because of that this was the ship that the missile had locked on to. The missile turned on its secondary thrusters and shot forward with purpose. There was no mistaken its deadly intent.

The pilot of the V-Wing instinctively banked hard to the port side and flew under his wing man in the A-Wing. Miggs might have been his drinking buddy, but when it came down to it, he really wasn't his friend. The reality of it was that if the two of them found the treasure at the end of this map, there wasn't going to be any sharing anyway. He had hoped to hang on to Miggs for a little bit longer, but now, out of desperation, it was either him or Miggs.

As the V-Wing flew under the other ship, the missile changed its trajectory. The second ship's heat source was now a whole lot closer. A slight shift in its flight pattern was all that was needed.

The explosion could be seen high above the planet. The fireball couldn't be missed by those who were watching with anticipation and high hopes that the Ebon Mortis would be brought down and the bounty would be shared by all. Now their hopes were going up in flames just as the A-Wing had.

The shots fired by the last ship exploded too close to the airlock door that was open for A'Den. Out of pure instinct, Quintano had banked the ship hard to stay clear of any more shots being fired in that area. He banked too hard.

A'Den lost her grip and rolled back into the ship. Her body smashed against one of the hard and unforgiving metal support structures and if it hadn't been for her armor, she was sure that the impact would have broken something. As it was, she was still going to be bruised for some time to come. But that wasn't the worst of it.

As soon as Quintano banked back the other way, to put them back into position, A'Den rolled back toward the open door. Her eyes went wide as soon as she saw that her death was quickly approaching. As soon as her form went out that door, her life would be forfeit.

A'Den desperately started to grab at anything that she could find as her body continued to accelerate towards the open hatch. She tried to grab one of the support beams, but had lost her grip before she could even catch hold. She was sure that if she didn't have her suit on then her grip would have been better. The very thing that had ensured her safety, that had saved her life, was now condemning her to death.

As A'Den's feet were swept out of the ship, her hands reached out one more time and grabbed hold of the door frame. Her shoulders felt like they were pulled from their sockets and tears of pain swelled in her eyes as she held on for dear life.

For one moment she thought that she would let go and that her body would freefall to ground so far below. Then, when she thought that she could hold on no longer, she found the inner strength to make one desperate attempt. She pulled as hard as she could.

Her body rolled back into the ship.

She lay there for one moment, trying to catch her breath. All she wanted to do was lay there. Every ounce of her form screamed at her and she would have stayed there, until it dawned on her. Another roll like the last one would send her flying back out the door and there would be no stopping her this time. Without delay she rolled to one side, quickly got up, and used the control panel to close and seal the door.

Another set of shots made Quintano maneuver the ship in another set of erratic moves. He banked hard from one side to the other in an attempt to ensure that the blasts didn't hit something critical, like the engines or the cockpit, or anything else for that matter. He was hoping that he was able to make sure the last ship remained on one side so A'Den

could have her shot. He wasn't expecting to see her coming up to the cockpit area with the other ship still flying around outside, shooting at them.

"I thought that you were going to get them," Quintano snapped as he banked again.

"I thought that you were going to fly better," A'Den snapped back.

"Well, in that case, hang on."

These were the only words of warning that Quintano gave as he plunged the controls.

"Bleep...boop...xxrt."

"Because I'm trying to get away from the other ship, that's why," Quintano snapped back at the astromech

"Wee...woo...meep...mop."

"Because we don't have any weapons, don't you remember? Hey, weren't you supposed to be working on the targeting systems?"

"Bzzt...bloop...woo...woo."

"Great work...wait a second, just how long ago did you fix them?"

"Beep...boop...beep...beep."

"We've had weapons for how long? Why you little...why didn't you tell us sooner? Never mind, don't answer that. Let me guess...you didn't ask. Alright everyone, hold on."

A'Den had been able to find her way to one of the seats and strap in. She wasn't used to being a passenger, especially in her own ship. She held on and hoped that Quintano knew what he was doing.

Quintano banked hard and pushed the throttle down. The Ebon Mortis responded and followed his commands as it flew to the starboard side and downward. He increased its speed to put some distance between them and the more maneuverable snub starfighter. Just before the ship crashed

into the surface below, Quintano pulled up on the throttle and pulled the Ebon Mortis out of the power dive.

The other ship hadn't followed, and this was what Quintano had hoped for. He had hoped that his erratic flying had scared off the other pilot to not follow so closely and now that it had paid off, it was time to follow through with the next part of his plan.

Quintano reached across the control panel and flipped on the targeting system. By the time the other ship had come to the realization that the Ebon Mortis was targeting him, it would be too late. Quintano didn't even give the A-Wing a chance. As soon as the targeting system came online and found its one and only target, the target that was right in front of them, coming at them as they were coming up, Quintano opened fire.

The A-Wing exploded into an array of flying debris and a burst of flame. The sudden burst of inferno combustion filled the cockpit window.

For one moment the entire display had blotted out the view of the Ebon Mortis from the spectators below. For one moment it seemed as if the exploding A-Wing had taken down its attacker at the same moment it had exploded. Then, the moment was gone as the Ebon Mortis flew through the fireball and the scattering debris before it took off to escape the gravitation pull of the planet and into the depths of space beyond.

"Let's set a course to..." A'Den had tried to put in her desired destination between gasps of pain, but was cut off by Quintano.

"Wait a second. Are you just going to leave?"

"Yes," A'Den snapped. "That's exactly what I intend to do. I'm going to put myself and this ship as far away from this planet as I can. That's where I'm dropping both you and that bucket of bolts off and blasting away to parts unknown. I'm tired of having to watch my back every time."

"Aren't you just a bit curious?"

"Curious about what?"

"About the map."

“There is no map. If you believe that there is...”

“I’m not saying that there is a map. I’m just saying that they think that there is. There’s got to be some truth to this rumor.”

“Well, I don’t have a map.”

“How about the ship? This isn’t yours, right? What if something was left behind?”

“I’m sure I would have...”

“But how well did you search? Look, I just want to make sure that we haven’t stumbled upon anything major. If there’s nothing here, then there is nothing here and I’ll be glad to go our separate ways. However, if we find something, maybe we can just get rid of it or give it to someone and leave this whole mess behind. Either way, I would rest better if I knew what this was all about, either it was just some odd rumor that had been spread or that there was some ring of truth behind it all.”

A’Den had to think about that. Although she didn’t really believe in some long lost map to so incredible treasure beyond everyone’s wildest dreams, it wasn’t impossible that there was something here, something that if they got rid of, it would make their lives a whole lot easier. It was worth a search. Besides, as soon as Quintano’s curiosity was sated, he would quit bothering her about it and would finally leave her alone. The sooner the ship was searched the sooner she could get rid of Quintano and his bucket of bolts astromech.

“Fine,” A’Den finally responded. “But we do this my way. We’ll search the ship for an hour, no more. If we find nothing then I’m dropping the two of you off and we go our separate ways. Even if we do find something, it doesn’t mean that you are any part of this. This is still my ship and everything I find aboard it is mine. I will decide what to do with it from there. Understood?”

Quintano was taken aback. He wasn’t sure how to respond to her trying to get rid of him so quickly and it seemed to him that she was trying to call all the shots. He wasn’t sure how to take it all in. After all, it was his idea and she wouldn’t have thought to search the ship in great detail if it wasn’t for him. He gave a shrug and nodded and hoped to figure her out some day.

“You can take the engine room,” A’Den stated flatly. She doubted that anything would be hidden there. If there was something important hidden aboard this ship it would be kept in a place where it could be kept an eye on.

“Aro,” A’Den continued, “I’m sure you can at least put us in a holding pattern over the northern pole, can’t you? No, don’t answer that, just don’t disappoint me. Keep us there until further notice. There may be other ships looking for us and we don’t want to be found until we know what these guys are after.”

A’Den left both Quintano and Aro to do their assigned tasks. From the cockpit, she made her way straight to the room that she had started to call her own. This was the main stately bedroom of the whole ship and would have been the main quarters of whoever had owned the ship before her. He must have been someone very important to have this kind of luxury ship, or at least thought that he was important. If this was the case, then anything of value of his would be hidden here, in this room.

The room was spacious enough with plenty of closet space and niches to store a vast array of personal items. There was even a weapons rack. She had already looked through all of these spaces when she had picked up the Ebon Mortis. Besides, if there was anything to find in these obvious places, then the historians and archeologists would have found it, bagged it, tagged it, and shipped it off to some museum or perhaps would have even claimed it for their own. That means that if there was something important here, it would be well hidden.

A’Den started to carefully search every spot. She ran her fingers over every contour to look for secret panels or buttons. She simply had to find what they were looking for, and although she didn’t believe that it was a map to some treasure, whatever it was must be important enough to make people believe that this was what was actually hidden. If she could either prove that there was nothing or if there was something and it wasn’t that important, or if it were that important and she could get it off the ship, then she could go back to...

‘...to what?’ She thought.

It had been nice to have a ship all to herself. It was nice to be able to set her own destiny, to be her own boss, and to set her own pace. She could go anywhere she wanted. She could leave her past behind, her past of hunger and loneliness.

If that was true, then why did she feel so empty? It wasn't like she needed a relationship to make her feel successful or to have an enriched life. However, a little company every now and then would be nice. It wasn't that she was weak. She was still independent and always would be. She was still strong and always would be. She had proven that. She had worked so hard for this. But the real question was, what was she going to do with it now that she had it?

The answer was going to have to wait. As her fingers danced across the headboard of the bed, she had found a small button, something that would have gone unnoticed unless it was known or deliberately sought after. She could imagine sleeping here and being able to reach up with her right hand and be able to depress that button at any given moment. This meant that the person that had this secret compartment built wanted to hide something that could be fetched even if woken up from the deepest of sleep. It was time to find out what that was. She pressed the button.

A hidden panel just above where her pillow was laying opened up. It was only several inches high and maybe a half meter in length. It wasn't very deep and from what she could tell the niche that was behind the door had been specially made for the item that was inside. She reached in and pulled it out.

The item seemed nothing more than a...

"Find anything?"

The voice at the doorway caught A'Den off guard and almost made her jump. In the process of not knowing rather she should pull her blaster or not, she fumbled with the item before catching it again. She turned to see Quintano standing in the doorway of her room.

"I thought I sent you to the engine room." A'Den snapped.

"Which is why I was sure that I wouldn't find anything there. Meanwhile, you took a straight shot here, as if you had some suspicions all your own. It looks like you have found something. So, what is it?"

"How should I know? I haven't had the time to figure it out since you barged in here."

“First, I didn’t barge, the door was already open. Second, I’m not even in the room. So, what is it?”

She gave a scoff and flipped it over several times in her hand. From what she could tell it seemed to be no more than a metal tube with extra controls. In the middle of the tube there seemed to be a place to grip it, like a handle. If she gripped it there then the opposite ends of the pipe seemed to do nothing.

“What is this...?” A’Den stopped mid-sentence. She really had no idea what this was or why it was so important, but there was one way to find out. She pressed one of the buttons.

A stream of laser plasma shot out from one side and stabilized, creating an energy blade, a weapon so powerful that she was sure that it could cut through anything. The push of the second button shot another energy blade out of the other end of the metal tube. When she pushed the buttons again, both energy blades ceased to exist.

Quintano’s eyes went wide. “I’ve heard of those. I know what that is. It’s called a lightsaber. They used to be weapons of an old ancient religion. I’ve only heard about them in stories, stories that I doubted were true, but now after seeing this... This isn’t good. Whoever’s ship this is will want it back. Rather it really is a weapon or it’s just an archaic artifact from the past, it’s too valuable and its best that we just pass it along to whoever wants it.”

“Well, this is a far cry from any map, but if that’s what everyone one wants...”

A’Den had started her sentence and as she did she had taken the object in her hand and had pointed it at Quintano as if to drive home her point. At about every other word she had given the item a shake as if to further make a statement about the obscurity of the whole situation over an ancient weapon that no one cared about. It was only when she was about half way through her sentence did she realize that each time she shook it, it rattled.

A’Den stopped talking and gave the lightsaber a curious look. She gave the item another shake only to ensure that what she had heard wasn’t her imagination. Once she was convinced that there was something loose inside, she gave a closer look at the center handle and found what she was

looking for. This wasn't just one item; it was two items that were screwed together. With a simple twist she pulled the two pieces apart.

The small data chip fell out from between the joining of the two hilts and dropped to the ground. For a moment the both of them stood there, staring at it. It was Quintano who acted first. Before A'Den could react, Quintano had retrieved the data chip.

"Hey, hey, where are you going with that? That came out of this lightsaber, which was about this ship, all of which I claim. Give that back."

"Don't worry, your highness," Quintano stated as he made his way toward the front of the ship. "I'm not going to drop it or break it. And it's not like I can run away with it while still on this ship. I'm just as curious as you are and it's about time we get some answers as to why we're being chased. Like it or not there's only one individual that can help us now."

By the time Quintano had finished speaking he had reached the bridge where Aro was still piloting the ship in a holding pattern over the northern pole. The droid had found a small polar storm that he was able to stay on top of. He was sure that between the magnetic influx at the pole, the radioactive flares of the borealis, and the electrical discharges of the lightning from the storm, they wouldn't be found.

"Any sign of any other ship in the area?"

"Bzzx...bleep...boop."

"I'm sure you are that good. Never mind, now listen. I've got an old data chip. Can you read it?"

Aro opened a drawer panel that from inside his frame, decided that this was too big and then opened another. A third was opened and closed and then a fourth. Finally he opened a slot that that seemed just big enough for the data chip.

"I don't know if you did that just to show me how inept you are at figuring out what size input device you needed to use or you just wanted to show me how many you had, but either way, it was annoying. Now can you read what's on it?"

It took a little bit of time for Aro to process the chip that he had been given. He had given a series of tweets and chips that made no sense whatsoever. When he was done, he shot out a holographic image. The hologram image of the known galaxy came up. There were planet systems and stars. There was the great maw and various other known aspects of the area. There were also the strange symbols written in corner

“It’s a map,” Quintano stated.

“I can tell it’s a map. Do you always state the obvious?” A’Den asked.

“Yes, but it’s a star map. See?”

“Again...”

“And what are these markings?”

“You seem to be the one with all of the answers,” A’Den remarked. “You tell me.”

Quintano nodded. “This is it. This is it. This is the treasure map for Holocron Theta. We’re rich. Can’t you see?”

“All I see are a bunch of dots and symbols that don’t make any sense.”

“Then what we need is someone who can help us,” Quintano stated. “And I know just the person. We don’t even have to tell him anything, just have him give us enough information and we can take it from there.”

“Can you trust him?” A’Den asked.

“Only about as far as I can throw him, so I suggest that we tell him as little about this as possible.”

“Alright, we can go to your contact,” A’Den agreed. “But under these conditions. First, we only tell him what is absolutely necessary. Second, if this proves to be nothing more than a womprat chase then that’s the end of it. We give our findings to the first set of mercenaries or scoundrels that we find, let the rest of the galaxy know that there’s nothing to be found, sell off this lightsaber, and go our separate ways.”

“Fine, but I have a condition as well.”

“What’s that?” A’Den asked.

“If this does turn out to be something of significance, we stick together, watch each other’s backs, and split whatever we find.”

“Deal.”

“Deal.”

“Woot...woot.”

Both A’Den and Quintano took a look at the droid. Neither of them was going to share any bit of any long forgotten treasure with the astromech, especially with its personality. As a matter of fact, Quintano gave a careful consideration and a meaningful thought about the first thing that he would do with any form of treasure and that was getting the droid’s personality chip reprogrammed or even replaced all together.

“So, where do we go from here?” A’Den asked.

“To Nar Shaddaa.”

Chapter: Audacious

As the X-70b Phantom Class ship known as the Ebon Mortis rose from Hypori's atmosphere another ominous shape came over the planet's northern ice capped pole. The Imperial ship Audacious had used the planet's electromagnetic field to hide its presence from any and all ships that might arrive or depart. As an Orion Dreadnought Class it was still small enough to keep its existence hidden while still being strong enough to be a powerhouse when it was needed. Its strength wasn't needed at this point, but its stealth was and so it stayed hidden until now.

“Sir! The Ebon Mortis has left the planet's atmosphere.”

The announcement had come from the Audacious's bridge and was broadcasted from a lower ranking officer who wanted to make his presence known by stating the obvious. And the information was obvious before the statement had been made. The entire ship had been notified that they were on the lookout for any movement of the Ebon Mortis and all sensors were directed toward the ship. They knew the exact location of where the ship had landed and when it had taken off. There was no doubt in anyone's mind that the Phantom Class ship had left orbit, every instrument had told them this. On top of this, the Ebon Mortis could be seen through the front window from the bridge.

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 was the command station. Lights blinked, screens flashed with information, data and information was being collected and transmitted and individuals were talking into their commlinks to others around the ship. This was the brain center of the Audacious, the Orion Dreadnaught Class Heavy Cruiser.

Lieutenant Draks Kelen, the new commander of the Audacious since the untimely demise of General Brakin Fess, stood proudly behind his station and took in the scene before him. He had always dreamed about being promoted to this station. However, he was sure that the Empire would continue to overlook him since the Emperor was far too busy building his ultimate weapons. No one was getting promotions, except for those who were replacing senior officers that had upset the Emperor's apprentice. This was why he had chosen to betray the general and follow

the guide of Darth Ablaoif instead. The plan had worked and the general had been removed. Now, he wondered if it was worth it.

Draks had been followed, almost shadowed, by the Sith Lord come to life ever since his arrival. Darth Ablaoif wanted to oversee everything and make sure that all things were going his way. The Sith Lord didn't seem to trust him and he was sure that if he disappointed Darth Ablaoif then his fate would be the same as if he had disappointed the Emperor's apprentice.

The Sith Lord seemed to have his own agenda, and while this did seem to be a worthwhile endeavor, it wasn't necessarily what Draks had in mind when he inherited the Audacious. He wanted to carve out a name for himself. He didn't want to stay in someone else's shadow and that was exactly what was happening yet again. This time however, it was worse. If he had crossed the general, then the worst that could happen would be a demotion. Now, he suspected that it would be death.

Draks couldn't help but notice that Darth Ablaoif seemed to be preoccupied with the history of the galaxy ever since his burial. The Sith Lord looked over every ship log and communication log that the Audacious had before moving on to downloading information from libraries. Of course all of this had to be done under Draks's name so that the Empire wouldn't catch on to the fact that they had a "should be dead a long time ago" Sith Lord aboard his ship.

Darth Ablaoif made sure that he understood every alliance of every faction. He didn't want to step on too many toes in the beginning, instead he wanted to bring as many as he could over to his side. He also wanted to see what kind of technology had been invented and how he could use it to his advantage. Finally he wanted to see if he could recruit any Sith or even any force sensitive users to his cause. He was disappointed.

Despite the fact that there had been a great amount of time lapse between when he was banished and now, there hadn't been a great deal of leap in technology. Although ships were able to move faster and punch harder, for the most part technology hadn't grown, at least not as would be expected. Even the Emperor's Death Star wasn't an entirely new concept. It's vast volume was, but the concept of destroying a whole planet itself wasn't.

As far as allies were concerned it seemed that they had waxed and waned over the years. At one time the Sith dominated a vast swath of the

galaxy and had a strong hold over everything. Throughout history, that dominance had almost come to an end. It was good to see that the Emperor was attempting to recreate some of that strength, but still, this was a former shadow of itself. There used to be races from every corner of galaxy, and some from areas beyond. Now, there were just a few select races and the planets that had fallen in line still didn't play a large role. Without these races as key members the current Emperor was losing major resources and tons of fodder. Ablaof knew that he would have to pull these races into his inner circle and make them feel important and not keep them on the outskirts.

Finally there were the force users, or at least the lack thereof. There was no real mention of Sith Lords, even if the Emperor and his apprentice were Sith. And although there were no mention of any Jedi (there were some reports that there was still one in existence), there weren't any mention of any force users either. This meant that there wouldn't be a pull of resources to use to build up the Sith Lords and the council once again.

Darth Ablaof had to shake his head. The rule of two had all but decimated the Sith and their hold on the galaxy. What was once a force to be reckoned with ended up hiding in shadows, and even if the remaining two Sith did make an impact, their faith in one weapon was misplaced. One weapon the size of a moon could easily be seen and targeted. A dozen of Sith Lords with their apprentices and their fleets with their allies would not so easily be beaten. It was time to bring back the glory of the Sith Council and he would be the new Emperor and the leader of the council.

“Do we have a heading?” Lieutenant Draks asked. He wanted to ensure that everything was running smoothly.

“Yes Sir. They are heading for Ossus.”

Lieutenant Draks nodded. “That would make sense. They would want to use the various libraries, ancient texts, and possible relics found there. This would more likely give them the information that they seek including maps and history. Good. Set a course for...”

“No.”

Darth Ablaof's words cut through air and brought silence to the bridge. All eyes turned to the man and then back to Lieutenant Draks. The crew was sure that there was going to be a conflict of command and only one

of these two were going to come out of this with any form of dignity. They knew that it was best to delay their order until this was settled one way or another.

“They are heading for Nar Shaddaa,” Darth Ablaof continued flatly as if his information should have been well known.

“Not to question your insight,” Lieutenant Draks started with caution, trying not to upset his new commander. “But how would you know where...”

Darth Ablaof turned to the lieutenant. He normally wouldn’t allow anyone to question his abilities or authority. Yet, he understood that he didn’t have enough allies, at least not yet, to start killing them. He needed to gain their respect and once he showed them that he was, in fact, in control of everything, then he would no longer tolerate their questions. Until then, he would allow such trivial inquiries, at least for now.

“I can feel their deceit, combined with their exotic flight plans that the both of them took to get here in an attempt to throw off unwanted followers, they are planning to change course. Nar Shaddaa isn’t too far off of their trajectory and is Quintano’s home. I have found that when a prey has been frightened, it will try to head to a familiar place. Nar Shaddaa will give them that safe haven feel that they are looking for.”

“The planet is also a neutral territory, while Ossus is not. Although there is a greater chance to get the information that they seek on Ossus, that planet is currently controlled by the Empire and they would run a greater risk at being caught, especially with the ban of information coming out of it by the order of the Emperor himself. Not only would they have to go through a vast amount of paperwork and would be under heavy scrutiny, their ship would raise far too many flags. This would only be a fool’s errand.”

“With Nar Shaddaa being a neutral territory ruled by the Hutts, a cartel that no one wants to upset, these two would be able to move about without the fear of being brought in by either the Empire or the Republic. Nar Shaddaa would also provide a larger crowd where they could blend into and would offer more places to hide and hold up.”

“Finally, Nar Shaddaa is one of the best places to buy and sell anything with no questions asked. Information could easily be passed from one

individual to another without anyone knowing a thing. This would be their best choice.”

Darth Ablaoth knew that he could have simply told them that his connection to the Force allowed him to see into the minds of those he focused upon. However, he doubted that any of those here would buy into his claims, at least not at this point. He had found, through the databases, that the Force was now considered some sad devotion to some ancient religion. Besides, he wanted to show that he wasn't just some individual that had come along to demand their obedience. He wanted to show them that he was smart and a capable leader. They would follow him out of respect, not just fear. This would lead to a better sense of loyalty, not that he wanted them to befriend him, but they needed to respect him enough to follow him and then fear him only when there was disobedience. He found that the combination of both respect and fear created the best results.

Lieutenant Draks couldn't argue with the Sith Lord's reasoning. He also didn't want to argue with the Sith Lord at all. Besides, if he made the wrong decision by going to Ossus, then the blame would be on him. However, if Ablaoth made the wrong decision by going to Nar Shaddaa then it was the Sith Lord's fault, not his.

“Set a heading to Nar Shaddaa, but stay out of the normal trade routes, we don't want anyone knowing that we are on the way. Once we reach the planet, stay in their polar regions to continue to mask our presence.” Lieutenant Draks continued to give orders with the confidence that he couldn't go wrong.

“Nar Shaddaa will eventually find our location and try to contact us. Once they do, let the spaceport authorities know that we have a meeting with Vogu Hutt and if they have a problem with not going through the normal protocols then they can take it up with Vogu themselves. This will keep all further communications offline and all other ships to keep their distance while we are in orbit.”

“Open a secure channel with full encryption to our agent.”

“Channel open, Sir.”

“Agent Valas, this is Lieutenant Draks from the Audacious. We have a heading on our prey. They are heading to...”

“They are heading to Nar Shaddaa, yes, I know.” The voice from Agent Valas didn’t sound as if he were impressed with the Lieutenant’s assessment of the situation.

“How did you...?” Draks asked out of complete curiosity. He had only now been given the vague impression that this was where they might be heading and even then it might be wrong. Yet, Valas seemed more certain.

“First of all,” Agent Valas’s voice stated over communication station. “That is why you’ve hired me. Second, I’ve overheard their conversation. Third, I already have my tracking device installed. There is nowhere in the galaxy that they can go without me knowing.”

“Don’t worry,” Valas continued. “I’ll make sure that I’m at Nar Shaddaa before they are. Their ship will have to take a different route to through off anyone who might be following them before making its diversion. This will delay their arrival. From the spaceport and forward, I’ll keep complete and full tabs on them, collect every bit of information needed, prevent any further delays that they may have, and keep you informed, as per our agreement. Now, if you will excuse me, I’m making the calculations to hyper drive. I’ll report back if there is a need.”

The commlink went silent after Valas’s statement as if to say that the agent didn’t want to be interrupted any further and that he knew what he was doing and didn’t need to be micromanaged.

Valas shut off his commlink. He didn’t care if the lieutenant wanted to speak with him any further or not. He was a professional and he didn’t need to be treated as one of the lieutenant’s incompetent men. He prided himself with his work. It was an art form. It took finesse. It didn’t take following orders. As a matter of fact, it was probably best if the lieutenant didn’t know what he was doing, as long as he got results.

Valas went through the motions of his take off sequence. He flipped a few switches and turned a few dials. He programmed his computer to make sure that his course was set, but then stopped and readjusted. Once he went into hyperspace he was going to use a set of meteor showers to further hide his approach. Then, when he was ready, he waited.

The Gamorrean freighter to his port side started to take off and as it did, Valas flipped on his engines and slid his ship, the Wraith, right under

the other ship. He adjusted his engines to momentarily mimic the same frequency output as the freighter. It wouldn't be a perfect match, but it would be close enough that their heat signatures wouldn't be so easily differentiated between each other. This coupled with the fact that he was almost right underneath the ship; he doubted that he would be seen by any radar. Even if he was, he would only be thought of as no more than a glitch.

Valas expertly piloted his craft under the freighter with ease as they managed their way through the atmosphere. He had done this many times before and there was little to no risk, as long as the Gamorrean stayed on his course. Then, just as they broke the atmosphere, Valas activated his preprogrammed coordinated and went into hyper drive.

“Sir,” one of the lower ranking officers stated. “We still don't have radar contact for our agent. Should I open the commlinks again?”

“Perhaps he's just...” Lieutenant Draks's statement was cut short.

“No,” Darth Ablaoof stated. “Your agent has already left. Retain communication silence until absolutely needed. Until then, let's head to Nar Shaddaa.”

The lower officer gave a look toward Lieutenant Draks as if to ask for his permission. He didn't want to be caught between two individuals while they were having another power struggle. Once he received the nod from the lieutenant, he engaged the engine and sent the Audacious through hyper drive.

Lieutenant Draks couldn't help but notice that this new stranger seemed to be more and more at home with authority. He hoped that the Sith Lord understood that this was his ship and he was hoping that Darth Ablaoof wasn't taking over.

It was then that Draks remembered the way the Sith Lord had been able to get into his head. If Ablaoof could do that, if he could feel the deception of those he was chasing, and if he could feel the Wrath take off when their instruments couldn't find the ship, then it wouldn't be too difficult for the Sith Lord to read his mind. It was best if he changed the subject before Ablaoof got any ideas.

“Now that we are underway,” Draks stated as he turned to the Sith Lord. “May I endeavor to ask what it is that we are really after?”

“As I’ve stated before, lieutenant, we are setting out to retrieve the relic that is now known as Holocron Theta.”

Lieutenant Draks turned to the Sith Lord and looked upon him as if he were mad. He no longer worried about whether or not Ablaof could read his mind. When Lord Ablaof mentioned the Holocron Theta to their agent Valas, he thought that he was just using this to pique the interest of some rogue smugglers and anyone else who might believe in such nonsense. He hadn’t realized that the Sith Lord was actually serious. Perhaps Lord Ablaof had stayed asleep for too long. Perhaps he had hit his head one too many times.

If the Sith Lord wanted to chase these individuals down just to get his ship back that was one thing. If the Sith Lord wanted to claim something off of the ship without being noticed, then sure he would go along with it. If the Sith Lord wanted to play a game with those that took his ship and wanted an agent to follow them for awhile, then he could do that as well. However, he didn’t think that it was prudent for him, an officer that has worked hard all of his life to finally get what he wanted only to end up chasing down fairy tales.

Draks understood his problem. He couldn’t just tell this Sith Lord, who had come back from the dead, that he was crazy. Yet, he had to approach the subject with tact and reason and hopefully this entire thing would just blow away.

“I thought that was just a rumor,” Draks stated.

Lord Ablaof shook his head. “Oh no, it’s real. I should know. I spent a great deal of my life trying to hunt down the treasure that lies within it.”

“Then it’s aboard your ship? If that’s what we are after why don’t we just...”

Again Lord Ablaof cut off the lieutenant mid sentence. “No, it isn’t aboard my ship. The council was wise to keep its location hidden. They knew that if I got my hands upon the information that lies within, I would be able to eliminate all of them and rise to become the next emperor.”

“The holocron has a map showing the location of planet in the unknown regions. When the council realized that I was close to obtaining the map that held its location, they took the map and split it into ten layers. Only by combining the layers together could the full map be seen. Each of the ten council members had a piece and each one hid them in order to ensure that I couldn’t get all of the information from just one of them. This also brought together their unity. They had to work together if they wanted the prize at the end, and they couldn’t do that with me in the picture. So, they hid everything before coming after me.”

“I was able to obtain the whereabouts to the first piece of the map when I was attacked. I had managed to wipe out at least half of them before they managed to seal me up.”

“From what I can gather, the Emperor got wind of the council’s hidden weapon and tried to get the information from himself. I can only surmise this since there is no mention of these ten council members anywhere. The Emperor must have written them out of history as well, and with them went the last knowledge of the holocron and its map.”

“Now that I’m back, I can guide us along the way. the information that I stored on a data disk, hidden within my lightsaber, will lead the way to the first map, and from there the second. Each map piece will lead to another until all ten are found. Then Holocron Theta will be found and the knowledge within it will be unlocked. That will be the time when we swoop in to take it from them.”

“I do not want my presence known, at least not yet. We will hang back and let our prey do the hard work for us. Meanwhile, your Agent Valas will keep them on their journey, ensure that they stay on it, and ensure that they remain as safe as possible, until said time that we no longer need them.”

Chapter: Eons Ago

The mention of Holocron Theta, its tale, and the story of the council brought back the memories that went with them. Darth Ablaoof couldn't help remember the events that lead to this. It had seemed like only yesterday, and for, it almost was.

The loose red dust of Korriban kicked up under the descent of Darth Ablaoof's personal craft, the X-70b Phantom Class ship known as the Ebon Mortis. The silver ship glided in through dust cover as if it had been built specifically for this, as if it were a Frist Shark coming in for its kill. It finished its descent and landed, sending another plum of red dust to add to the already settling cloud that had been disturbed earlier.

Before the engines had a chance to completely power down and before the ship had gone through its full landing process, the landing ramp lowered and two guards immediately descended and flanked the entryway. No one was going to get into this ship without going through them first. They would die protecting their master's private vessel.

The two were female Dathomirian Zabrats, Xobra and Bava by name. They stood almost a head shorter than their master, Darth Ablaoof, but that had never deterred them in their abilities. They were vicious in all accounts and were not to be trifled with by any means. Their skin color was a pale blue gray and as for hair, they were bald. They wore their full armor, a set of red chest plate with matching red shin guards, boots, and arm guards. The metal of the armor was a Mandalorian iron alloy, and while this wasn't necessarily lightsaber proof, it was resistant to enough of a degree to give the two of them an edge against any other lightsaber user. They each were armed with dual lightsaber, like their master, and also like their master, their sabers combined to become a saber staff.

Darth Ablaoof, himself, exited the ship shortly after his two Sith guards. He couldn't have been more proud of the two of them. They had risen very quickly in their ranks (mostly by killing off the opposition) and had proven to be quite effective when working in tandem with each other. Usually he took them wherever he went. But this time he was going to leave them with the ship. He may have to make a quick getaway and he

would hate to have to leave either one or both of them behind. Besides, this was personal and he would treat the situation as such.

Sith Qutxu, who was known to be training under Darth Tentigo one of the Sith Council members, was rumored to be here, on Korriban at this location. His last transmission was picked up here and the information had been relayed through the usual spy ring. The spy ring could be trusted, and Ablaof was sure that the information was accurate, but Ablaof also knew a trap when he saw one. If the council was going to make their move and bring about his demise, they would bring him out to a remote area and ensure that he wouldn't be able to use his dark force ability to drain the life of those around him so easily. A heavy populated area would give him all the life energy he needed to stave off an army. Out here, he would be greatly hindered. He also knew that the council knew that he had broken the codes on the frequency that they transmitted on. They thought to bring him here to kill him. He would reverse the trap and kill them instead and then follow the map backwards and find the energy source that they were hiding from the Emperor and keep it for himself.

Darth Ablaof motioned to his two Sith to wait by the ship. He moved with purpose and determination toward the fairly small structure ahead. He had only sensed one life form inside and he was sure that it was the individual that was designed to be the bait. The Sith Lords were probably in orbit over the planet waiting for him to come here, and despite his best efforts to utilize the stealth ability of his ship, he was sure that he had been spotted. It was only a matter of time before he was outnumbered. It was only a matter of time before they were outmatched by him.

The building was made of sandstone, made from the very red sand in this area. It would have naturally blended in to its surroundings and if one was flying over head, it could easily have been missed. There were several columns that flanked the front entrance, but beyond this there was nothing that gave the building any importance.

As Darth Ablaof made his approach, he had to give this building some consideration. Not only was the trap that was being sprung out in the middle of nowhere, so would be his burial place, if they were ever able to strike him down. This would be the best place to store his body so that he would never be able to regenerate. This place could be buried and long forgotten about or even have a warning signal given stay away. Yet, despite this, the prize that was being offered was too great. He still had to take the risk, no matter how great.

Once Ablaof entered the building he was able to see the very person he was looking for. The Sith known as Qutxu was standing over a data console with his astromech by his side. If Ablaof could have guessed, the younger Sith had probably transmitted the message, initiating the trap to commence.

“Tell me, where did Darth Tentigo hide the first piece of the map and I promise your death will be swift.”

“You’ll never get that information from me. Darth Tentigo will strike you down...”

Ablaof didn’t even wait for the younger Sith to finish his sentence. The information he was looking for wasn’t just inside the individual’s mind, information that he could eventually withdraw while frying the younger Sith’s mind given time. However, time was of the essence.

Ablaof reached out his hand and felt the force around him. Within a heartbeat he felt his connection and acted upon it. The astromech, the one that had served Qutxu, the one that had followed Darth Tentigo from one place to another, flew from its current location and was hurled toward Ablaof. Within the next heartbeat, Ablaof had drawn his lightsaber, ignited it, and made three quick slash through the air, slicing the astromech into pieces that no longer resembled what it used to be.

Without skipping a beat, Ablaof twisted his outreached hand and caught the core computer chip that was deep within the astromech’s form while allowing the rest of the pieces to fall to the ground. Now, the information of every location that Darth Tentigo had recently visited was his. It would only be a matter of time to find which location was the one that would lead him to the first piece of the map.

While the computer data chip was still levitating in the air, Darth Tentigo snapped forth his second lightsaber. He quickly summoned the chip toward him, and when it arrived, he brought the two hilts of the sabers together, encompassing the chip, and gave a quick twist. The data chip was now in his lightsaber and it would have to be taken from his cold dead hands.

The sound of Qutxu’s lightsaber igniting caught the Sith Lord’s attention. It hadn’t come as a surprise. If the fool wanted to die, then it

was his suicide. Ablaoof answered by ignited his second saber making his saber staff complete.

Ablaoof waited for Qutxu to make the first move and he didn't have to wait long. Qutxu made a short dash toward him before jumping into the air and coming down with an overhead chop. Ablaoof took a step back from the foolish attack and brought his saber staff up and around, blocking the chop.

Ablaoof knew that no Sith worth the title would expect the maneuver to work, at least not initially. He brought his staff back around to block the true attack that came in from his side and then brought up the backside of his staff to block the blow from the other side. It was a series of aggressive moves, meant to keep the defender off guard and on the defense and Ablaoof continued to watch the moves unfold while continuing to block one move after another.

Qutxu spun in place and let his blade lead him. His attack was blocked as he spun to the right and then again when he spun to his left. Then, when he made a feint to come back to his right, he reversed his grip and thrust his lightsaber backwards.

Ablaoof continued to keep up with the younger, less experienced Sith. He blocked the first and then the second spin with ease. He waited for Qutxu to come back around for another spin and when Qutxu made his move to do it, Ablaoof made his move. Quickly he leapt up into the air, flipped around, and when he landed, he came in low.

Qutxu's eyes went wide open when he realized that his lightsaber hadn't met any resistance. In a split second he realized where his prey had gone. In another he realized he fatal mistake. Ablaoof's light saber staff sliced through his leg with the first pass and as his body started to fall his head was taken off with the second.

Ablaoof left the building and moved toward his ship with due haste. He had no desire to continue his journey deeper into, what he suspected, would be his tomb if he waited any longer. He had retrieved what he had come for and there was no need to delay any further. Then he felt it; the disturbance in the force.

The feeling was as if something had rotted and its decaying body was coming closer and closer. He knew the feeling of a Sith Lord, he was one of them. However, this was stronger and he knew that the entire council

was on the way. They had probably hoped that Qutxu would hold out longer or at least stall him long enough to make their way here sooner.

Ablaof stood and focused. He let his mind wander through the possible outcomes of the approaching battle. Although the dark side and deep emotions made seeing into the future more difficult, it wasn't beyond his ability. He didn't get this far in life by taking the easy way.

Fleeing into space was out of the question. He would be shot down before he could leave the atmosphere. This meant that his body would never be found and all would be lost. He would have to stay and fight, yet that result, no matter how he looked at it, always ended with failure. He was going to die one way or another. The only thing that he could do was ensure that it all ended the way he wanted. He had to play the long game and ignore the immediate threat.

He knew that he couldn't let the council take him down too easily, they would get too suspicious. He would have to put up a good fight and let them think that they had won. Then, when the time was right, he would rise again. With this in mind, he had to get ready.

Darth Ablaof brought his two sabers up and unscrewed where they were connected. Here he placed the data chip that he had obtained before sealing the weapons back together. When he was finished he turned to Xobra.

"Hide this in my room, in its usual spot. I'll take your saber and you and Bava will share hers. We have company."

Xobra nodded and traded her double staff lightsaber with Ablaof. She had to admit that she didn't like the feeling of having to give up her weapon, she felt naked without it. She also didn't like the idea of sharing with Bava. They may be like 'sisters', if there were such a thing among Sith, but they would easily kill each other if the need and opportunity arose.

Also, if they each used only half of a double staff lightsaber then each would only get a single piece. This was not her fighting style. She used the double staff lightsaber fighting style, a style that allowed many twists and flips of the staff that often confused an opponent and kept them off guard. She had perfected her ability to fight like this. On top of this, she could separate the two and fight with two lightsabers. She hadn't

perfected her ability to fight with just one saber. She found that this kept her off balance and it just didn't feel right.

However, she wasn't brought aboard Ablaof's company because of the way she felt. She was brought aboard due to her ability to fight and follow commands. There was no questioning her ability to fight and those that did usually fell dead at her feet. However, she only followed Ablaof's commands because of his rise to, and promise of, power. This was her lust. She craved power beyond all things and when Ablaof became the new Emperor, and she was certain that he would, then she would be right there by his side, to either rule over the galaxy with him or to assassinate him and take the reins of leadership for herself.

Ablaof watched as the young Dathomirian Zabrak bounced off toward the Ebon Mortis to hide his prized possession. He couldn't help but remember all of the times that he had spent with her and he couldn't help but have a smile come to his face with such pleasant memories. But he also knew all about her ambitions. It was too bad that she wasn't going to see them come to fruition. If only Xobra knew what was really in store for her.

It was only a few moments later did she return and when she did Bava tossed her one half of her lightsaber staff. All they had to do now was wait. They didn't have to wait long.

The red sands were disrupted by the approach of ten different personal ships. There were no mistaken their designs or various makings on them. These were the personal ships of the each council member. They had all come, as Ablaof had suspected. The trap was being sprung. Now, there was only one course of action.

Each ship took its time to find the best place to land. As they did, they disrupted more of the red sand that surrounded the area. It took a short while for the dust to settle and when it did all of the ships had landed around the Ebon Mortis and its crew. Darth Lord Ablaof was now surrounded.

Before the engines of the ships had come to a complete stop, the landing ramps had dropped and the owner of each ship stepped down the ramps. There were no troops. There were no apprentices. There would be no need. Everyone knew that these individuals would only get in the way and end up being slaughtered. Besides, it wasn't there business. This was

the business of the council members and they were going to deal with it personally.

“It looks like I have gotten the attention of the council,” Ablaof stated with sarcasm the moment the others were in earshot. “I’m touched and honored to make such an impression.”

“Your actions have not gone unnoticed,” said one of the council members. Ablaof did know his name, but in the long run, it wasn’t going to matter.

“We have willed it to be,” stated another. “But now they are counterproductive. We can’t allow your actions to continue.”

Lord Ablaof smirked at the last remark. “And you have only brought the ten of you to stop me? I thought that I would have warranted a larger contingent. I will have to try better next time.”

“You will find that we are formidable enough to stop you,” said a third council member.

“If you are talking about your scheme to defeat me,” Ablaof answered back. “Then I’ve already figured it out and am already one step ahead of you. But do tell me, does the Emperor know about this?”

“The Emperor doesn’t need to know about the council removing an insignificant insect of a threat that might oppose his power. We are in full capacity to deal with the like of you.”

It had become obvious that a few of these Sith Lords from the council had taken this to a personal level. Then again, anything that threatened to take away power from any Sith Lord was considered to be dealt with on a personal level.

“Oh, I didn’t mean this, this hypercritical dance that we will do today,” Ablaof retorted. “I mean, does he know about the power source that you have discovered? Does he know that you are trying to overthrow him with it as a group? Yes, I am trying to overthrow him, but so are you, so let’s not pretend that you are here on behalf of the security of the Emperor.”

The Sith Lords look at each other. Yes, they had let him know of the newly discovered power source and had used that to lure him here. They

had even divided it up so that he couldn't get the full information from just any one of them. However, they had never mentioned that they were going to use it against the Emperor.

"Oh, I see my suspicions are accurate. I'm also sure that you can't control the energy source just yet; otherwise you would have done so already. When the Emperor finds out, and he will find out, then he will hunt you down one by one just for the pure pleasure of it, just like I would have done to retrieve these crystals. Now, you have saved me the trouble by coming here."

"You will never get your hands upon the information of their location", snapped one of the council Sith Lords.

"I'll pry it from your cold dead hands," Lord Ablaof promised.

"That is why we have taken precautions and hidden each map piece so you can't take it from us." It was a smug remark from one of the other Sith Lords, a smug remark that didn't impress Ablaof.

"It doesn't matter. I can go through your ship records, pull the information from your mind and fry your brains, or I can just absorb the knowledge when I absorb your life. Either way, I will get what I want and I'll be the new Emperor and you will call me 'Master'. Your heads will bow before me even if I have to cut them off from your shoulders. There is nothing you can do to prevent me from my destiny."

"Some of us wanted you to join our coup against the Emperor. Now we know that you cannot be trusted."

"Trust is for the weak," reminded Lord Ablaof. "It is for those who cannot take care of themselves. It is not for the Sith."

"Trust is the only way to take out the Emperor."

"I agree with you that the Emperor should and will be taken out, but it won't be through trust, it will be through war. It won't be through peace, it will be through blood. I aim to be the one to do it. It is the way of the Sith."

"You will only get in our way. We cannot allow you do that," stated the first council Sith.

“You are a perversion that should have never existed,” stated the second.

“Well,” Lord Ablaof said with a sneer. “It’s obvious that you have come to kill me. The question is, are you going to try to do it by force or by boring me to death with your words?”

The other Sith Lords looked at each other again. They had to admit that they really didn’t want it to come down to this. They feared this Sith Lord and they knew of his power. He could, in fact, live up to his promise and hunt them all down, one by one, until he got his prize. The only way to really stop him was to work together.

The problem was, if any one of them died in the process, the rest of the map could be lost forever. They each knew that their trust would crumble as each one would try for a power play for another piece of the map. They may have had an alliance, they may have talked about trust, but they also knew that it was going to take time to establish that trust. It was an uneasy alliance and anything could topple it. The only way to ensure that they held the alliance was to ensure that they all lived. They had to take out Ablaof or everything that they had planned would crumble before them.

The ten of them split up. Three of the council members moved toward Xobra while three more moved toward Bava. The remaining four stepped toward Ablaof. These four doubted that they could kill off Ablaof even with their combined efforts. However, if they could stall him long enough for the others to take out his apprentices, then they might have a chance all together.

Lord Ablaof watched as the four Sith Lords that had chosen to come after him started their advance. He knew that they would try to fight as wisely as possible and that meant that they would all try to rush him all at once. There would be no way that he could defend himself against every one of them at the same time. He would have to beat them to the trap.

Ablaof waited. He watched their every move, their every twitch. He had to catch them at the right moment. Then, as soon as they started to move, he bolted toward the first council member to his left.

Darth Ablaof brought his first blade in for a forward thrust. It was easily bashed aside as he knew that it had to be. The momentum pushed him to his right and as he maneuvered in that direction, he spun and

brought his second lightsaber around to lead the way. His opponent brought his blade back around and blocked that attack quickly.

The other Sith Lord snapped his wrist and brought his lightsaber around, up and down. But Lord Ablaof was too quick for him. He brought both of his blades up in a cross to prevent an untimely death. His opponent only smiled.

Darth Ablaof spun to his right as one light saber came down upon the spot where he had been; ducked under the second and spun back around after a third saber almost cut him in half. Now he was right back where he started, surrounded by all four again.

Two of the other Sith Lords came at him from his sides in an attempt to outflank him. Darth Ablaof brought up both lightsabers and blocked both attacks while he ducked under the attack that came from behind him. They had all been feint attacks and he knew it. While he was still ducking from the attack behind him, he kicked out and caught the belly of the one coming in front of him.

Darth Ablaof took a deep breath. This was going to be a long and drawn out battle and it would take all of his skill to stay alive long enough to not give up his forward thinking advantage. He had to stay alive as long as possible and give the best fight that they could imagine.

Xobra did a feint kick out toward her first opponent and then a jab toward her second. It was when she had pushed the first two away did she go after the third. She gave a forward slash and then a backward slash to keep him off balance. Then she came down low, stopped, and reversed the process. The wild display had confused him and she was set to take his head clear off.

One of the other Sith Lords had come around and blocked the killing blow. He then came after her with a few slashes of his own. She had seen these as feints and it was only meant to drive her into their center one more time. She couldn't let herself be surrounded. With a quick kick off, Xobra jumped up and over the group and landed behind them all.

Bava followed the opposite approach. While her "sister" was busy trying to keep her opponents off guard and at arm's length, she let her three come in. The three Sith Lords may have trained well together, but she doubted that they understood close combat together like she did. Unlike Xobra, Bava loved to see the look in her opponent's eyes as close

as she could while she inflicted pain. This was going to be her battle tactic and it wasn't going to be so easily countered while each of the Sith Lords got into each other's way.

Bava waited for the three of them to close in. When they had, she watched the eyes of the one that was in front of her. He would tell her when the one behind her would attack. She was right. His eyes went slightly wide and she moved like a wraith.

Quicker than had been anticipated Bava took a step back and shoved her elbow up and backwards. She connected with the Sith Lord's nose before he was able to bring his lightsaber up. Then, while the Sith Lords made his anticipated move, Bava ducked and spun while letting her leg lead the way. The sweep was enough to knock her opponent down. Without hesitation, Bava sprang into the air, reversed her grip on her lightsaber, brought it up and over her head and came down upon her fallen enemy.

The force shove upon her back wasn't hard, but it was hard enough. It sent her off balance and her attack went astray. She had to tuck and roll to bring her back into position before she sprang to her feet to try again.

Darth Ablaoof could see that the four that had come up against him weren't really trying to attack him but rather trying to keep him at bay, to keep him occupied. They were waiting for the other six to join them to ensure that their full attack upon him would be successful. It was a solid plan. They were keeping him busy while the others killed off his apprentices, and easier kill and his backup; then, and only then, would they come after him. He had to try to even the odds, or at least make it look as if he were trying. He already knew the outcome; he just didn't want the others to know that he knew.

He was already getting winded from moving so much in the sand. He had attacked and counter attacked. He had blocked and ducked and blocked again. He had spun away and back again. Every move was a counter move and at this level they all knew the battle sequences. There was nothing new that the others didn't already know and this battle was only going to be lost by a mistake rather than greater skill.

Darth Ablaoof kicked off and propelled himself through the air as a slice came at his torso. He let his body fly over his attacker and let his form land behind him so that for one moment he had all four of his opponents ahead of him. Then, in one swift move, he reached deep into the force

and felt the life force of the planet. When he was ready he reached out his hands and let loose.

The dark bolts of lightning shot from his hands. It flew through the air and leapt across the desert sands. It snaked its way from him to the others and as it did, it split and split again and again until the whole area was nothing more than black lightning. This wasn't ordinary lightning, this was life stealing lightning that threatened to suck the life energy from any of those that it touched.

Two of the Sith Lords were able to get their lightsabers up quick enough to block the incoming onslaught. This had only deflected the energy back toward the ground where it bounced wildly and added to the attack that was already bearing down upon the other two.

The two that weren't fortunate enough to block the attack were struck by it. The black lightning danced over their forms and wrecked havoc upon their bodies. Their forms convulsed and shook on their own accord. Sweat poured from their foreheads. Pain coursed through their bodies.

But it was worse than just the feeling of electricity striking their nervous systems. The dark energy sapped their life and started to drain them. They could feel their own life force start to slip away. They knew that if they were to continue to be subjected to this barrage then there would be nothing left of them but ash and dust.

The first two who had been able to protect themselves knew that their only hope was to keep each other living long enough to finish the job. If any one of them fell then the rest of them may fall as well. They had to save their allies in order to save themselves. They rushed Darth Ablao in a desperate attempt to stop him.

Darth Ablao smiled. He could feel the first two lives start to drain. As they did he could feel that very life force flow into him. He could feel himself become more energized, more powerful. He felt younger and stronger. He could feed off of their lives and add it to his. This was how he outlived everyone else and this was how he was going to continue to do so.

For one moment he thought that his premonition had been wrong. For one moment he believed that he could actually win. Premonitions in the force weren't always accurate, especially when dealing with the dark side. All he had to do was take out these two Sith Lords and the whole battle

would change. Then Darth Ablaf saw them. The other two came at him with deadly and accurate attacks. He would either have to stop his energy drain and defend himself or he would lose the battle here and now.

Xobra took a step back as she kept her three opponents in front of her. All she had to do was ensure that they didn't surround her and keep her off balance. If she could at least get to one of them then she would have a chance.

Xobra understood that it wasn't just the fact that she was outnumbered. It was the fact that she wasn't fighting the way she had dedicated her training to. She was a two weapon fighter, not a single weapon, and now that she had three opponents with only one lightsaber to defend herself she was feeling clumsy and off center. If only she could just take down one of them and take his lightsaber. Then she felt it.

Xobra almost jumped when she felt her "sister's" back against hers. It was then that she realized that the six Sith Lords had been coordinating their attacks to circle the both of them. The two of them had been completely surrounded and now they were fighting back to back. Once the Sith Lords decided to move as one, there would be no way to prevent the attack; that was unless she did something drastic.

Xobra flipped her lightsaber in her hand and reversed her grip on the handle. Then, with a quick move, she shoved the lightsaber backwards. She smiled when she felt the resistance of Bava's body. Before her "sister's" body hit the ground, Xobra reached out and caught hold of the lightsaber. With a quick snap of her wrist and a quick twist of the two hilts together, Xobra had the weapon she needed.

With another quick twist of her wrist, Xobra sent the double staff weapon into a spin. With power she kicked off to her right and came upon her attacker. Here she sent in a series of quick and fast blows that came on hard and furious. She had caught the Sith Lord off balance and with her fast display he had no way to keep up with her.

After a few slashes that had meant to keep the Sith Lord off guard and off balance, she made a quick thrust behind her to keep one of the other Sith Lords from her back side. Then, in a sudden move she kicked off again and came up and over yet another attack. As she landed, she brought her double staff lightsaber down and pushed the first attack away while bringing her weapon backwards to ward off yet another attack.

She kept this up. She did a series of feints followed by a series of blocks and then a quick jab or two. Nothing was serious, at least not yet. She knew that if she went in for the kill on one of these then the other five would finish her off. She had to bide her time until one of them got sloppy and that time was coming soon enough. She could tell that the Sith Lords were having a tough time following her and it was only a matter of...

Her eyes went wide. She had lost count of the attackers. The blow came out of nowhere, pierced through her back, and came out her chest. She felt her life start to flow from her as her lightsaber dropped from her hand.

Lord Ablaof brought up both of the lightsabers and blocked two more attacks coming at him. He was just barely staying two steps ahead of being cut in two. His attackers had learned not to let up least he would have enough time and distance to unleash his dark lightning. They weren't going to make that mistake again.

He was tired. The sand was slowing him down and the constant barrage of attacks was exhausting him. If they kept this up then he would be the first to make a mistake. He wondered if it was time to surrender to fate and let it end at least for now. Then he felt it.

Suddenly there was a shift in the force. The world became slightly colder. He knew that meant. It meant that one of his apprentices had just died, or at least was in the throes of death. It was his chance to turn fate. He needed a moment.

Lord Ablaof gave a sudden sweeping motion with his right hand. As he did the sand came to life. It was as if a sudden small dust devil had struck. The sand came up and slammed against the four opponents and temporarily blinded them. It wasn't going to give him enough time to follow through with an attack without being overpowered immediately, but it was enough time to what he needed to do.

With but a thought Ablaof reached out through the force again and came in contact with Bava's energy. Then, before her light faded, before her energy was released back into the living force, he pulled it into him. He felt her power and her life feed his.

All of his exhaustion was gone. His strength had come back to him. Purpose was restored. He was fresh for battle once again. His hope of

building a new fate for himself came to mind and he nodded. He could do it now. He could beat fate after all. But he would need more.

Within a heartbeat, Ablaof took in the scene that had surrounded Xobra. He gave a smile. She had been his favorite. He appreciated how she moved and even now with grace and balance mixed with fury and power, she was a force that he was proud of. It was too bad really.

Ablaof gave a sudden flick of his wrist and sent his lightsaber sailing through the air. Her back had been turned. She never saw it coming.

Ablaof gave another smile as Xobra's life drained and flowed into his body. Now he had the strength of several. Now there was a possibility of winning. With renewed energy Ablaof started up the battle once again.

The Sith Lord charged into battle as the sand cloud lifted. He came in low against his first opponent, halted halfway through his follow up and came back the opposite direction. Then he gave a jab backwards and did a flip over an oncoming attack. He gave two quick jabs out to his right and then followed through with forward and then a backward slash. A quick roll to his left put him under an incoming attack and he was able to come up with a head bash against his opponent. He was the first to draw blood as the other Sith Lord's nose broke.

Ablaof continued on the offensive. He no longer had four of the most powerful Sith Lords in the entire galaxy trying to kill him, he now had ten. They may have had him outnumbered, but they didn't have him out powered. Time and again he was to stay on the offensive. Time and again he was able to get just inside someone's defenses to do some damage. He was able to break an arm of one opponent and had shattered a kneecap of another. He had struck out and caught one torso of one Sith Lord and the hip of another.

Ablaof continued to dazzle the other Sith Lords with his display. His twin sabers were sometimes separated while he attacked two at a time. Then, in the next moment, the blades were connected. Here he would spin his weapon and come on at different angles and quicker than could be deflected. He had them on the defense. They were slipping up. They would...

Ablaof's eyes went wide. The lightsaber pierced through his back and out his chest. He had never seen it coming.

They all stood there, tired and sweating. It had been an ordeal and a close call at times. There were far too many times that the battle could have gone differently and it was only by their combined efforts were they able to defeat the atrocity. Now all they could do was catch their breath. But there was no time for that.

“Quick, let’s get him down into the tomb before he starts to regenerate. If we don’t act quickly then all will be lost.”

Lieutenant Draks Kelen nodded after Lord Ablaof finished his story. He had listened to every word that was said and even those that were unsaid. Now he had a better understanding of the Sith Lord come to life that was standing before him. Now he knew his passion and his drive. Now he knew that this man wasn’t short sighted, he had a goal and he played the long game. Now he knew that nothing would stop this man, not even death.

When Draks spoke, he spoke with more respect than he had before, not out of fear like he had, but a true respect for a man that was willing to sacrifice everything to gain everything. This was a man he could follow.

“I may not be able to completely understand all that you have gone through, but I do know what it is like to be passed over.”

“I’ve been in the special forces unit for many years. I’ve learned contacts, smuggling routes, trade routes, and every alliance, shady or otherwise. I’ve come to know who can be trusted and how much would be needed to buy that trust. I’ve trained myself to look after this sector and every planet in it. I was supposed to be assigned to this ship. Instead it went to an incompetent buffoon.”

“The Emperor that we have now is so blinded by his ambitions that he has lost sight of how to control the very realm that he desires. This war that he has going has only isolated the empire that was started. Our once allies have been pushed aside. The armies and droids that we had are now all gone. The financial traders have turned against us.”

“The more the Emperor squeezes his grip, the more systems slip through his fingers. We don’t need a war monger; we need someone to pull us together. We don’t need threats, we need encouragement and

unity. We can't rule this galaxy if there is nothing left and we won't have any allies if they all become our enemies."

"We need a new Emperor and we need someone who knows the ins and outs of every political player. If you can lead us, then I will be more than willing to help bring in the systems that we'll need and you will have a loyal army at your disposal."

Lord Ablaof smiled. He had Draks right where he wanted him, eating out of the palm of his hand. Draks did have a few valid points, that some systems would and should follow them out of faithfulness. However, there would be some that would have to be made an example of and he would see to that personally. Once that happened then everything would fall in to place and the galaxy would be his.

Chapter: Nar Shaddaa

“**H**ow much?!”

Quintano’s voice cut over the commlink and echoed throughout the pilot cabin of the Ebon Mortis.

“You heard me,” the voice answered back. “If you don’t like it, I’m sure you can park your piece of junk on another planet and walk here.”

“Why you little...” Quintano’s quip was cut short.

“What’s the hold up?”

A’Den’s voice announced her presence on the bridge. Quintano could tell that she was at least slightly annoyed if not completely unhappy. She had been upset ever since they took off from Hypori. He couldn’t imagine why she might be upset when he had offered to fly the ship to Nar Shaddaa and that he had told her that it would be fun to work together and how seeking the long lost treasure of Holocron Theta would be beneficial to the both of them. Well, he did have admit that he hadn’t give up the pilot controls since they shook off the ships that were attacking them on Hypori and that he had punched in the coordinate to Nar Shaddaa before A’Den could completely agree with it, but he was certain that she would get over it. After all, they were going to be rich. He just didn’t understand why she couldn’t be a little more enthusiastic about the whole adventure and why she had to basically sulk in her room during the whole time on their way here.

“It’s the spaceport. They have increased their docking fees since the last time I was here. It’s downright robbery I tell you. There’s absolutely no reason to have such an exorbitant fee. With that kind of money I can buy my own spaceport.”

“Tell him you will pay it,” A’Den simply replied ignoring Quintano’s whining.

“What?!”

“You heard me; I said ‘tell him that you will pay it’. And ask him if he’ll take credits.”

“You can’t be serious. We shouldn’t have to pay...”

“Oh no! Don’t give me this ‘we’ bit. This was your plan, you took over this ship, you flew us here, and you used my fuel. You pay him. Let’s get this straight, I’m giving you one shot at this endeavor and if something doesn’t pan out soon then I’m leaving you here on your own, you got that? Now tell him that if he won’t take credits then you will gladly pay him in Hutt currency.”

“Where am I going to get...”

“It seems to me that you can trade your credits. Do I have to think of everything for you?”

Quintano gave a sigh. A’Den did have a point. They didn’t want to make a scene and he should have expected an increase in rates, especially since the Empire and the rebels were fighting again. It seemed that every time there was a war, the Hutts would increase their fees just for the sake of making more money. She also had a point about exchanging for Hutt currency. They didn’t want to leave a trail for others to follow, and of course he was going to do this, but he had been too upset about the increase in price. However, he just couldn’t understand why A’Den wanted him to pay. She seemed to be upset and he still couldn’t figure out why.

“Fine,” Quintano stated back into the commlink to the individual on the other side.

“Make your way to landing pad seven.”

Quintano had to shake his head. That would give them quite the walk to the spaceport agency where he would have to make the exchange of credits at an incredible rate before finally paying for the fee just to land the craft. Of course there would be fuel that had to be purchased and there would be an additional fee if he wanted a hired guard to ensure that nothing happened to the ship while they were gone. He could always leave Aro, but the droid had proven to be far too valuable during their last trip here, so a hired guard would need to be paid for as well. Finally there would have to be food, lodging, and the occasional bribes. He hoped that the treasure would be worth it or he would be running out currency and fast.

Valas watched as the Ebon Mortis landed on the landing pad next to his. He was glad that he was able to get a few of the spaceport authorities to see things his way and have the Ebon Mortis land here where he could keep a better eye on it. He had also hired someone to watch both his ship and the other while he was away and to apprise him with any information regarding any inquiries or unusual activities that might arise.

Of course all this meant spending a little extra, but it wasn't his money that he was spending. He had convinced the spaceport traffic advisors to take it out of Quintano's pocket by up charging the docking fee. Everything else would be tacked on to his fee that he was going to collect from his employer, which was going to be paid in full before he gave up the location of these two and the information that they acquired.

This was why it was essential that the Audacious didn't contact him. If they were able to locate the source of his communications then they would be able to find him and get the information that they wanted without paying him. He needed to be in control of the contract if he wanted to ensure that he would be paid.

"Where to now, oh great fount of knowledge?" A'Den's tone hadn't lost its bite.

Quintano stopped and looked around. The spaceport was just as busy as he remembered it. There were so many ships coming and going that he wasn't sure how anyone could keep track of them all. And perhaps no one really did. Perhaps the spaceport authorities simply collected their money and never kept any records, unless told otherwise.

All along the various landing bays there were mechanic crews fixing ships, fuel suppliers, lift loaders, and cargo carriers abound. There were security agents and those that wanted to be security agents. There were those looking for work and those looking for a handout. There were children that had come to see the newest arrival and children who wanted to see how much they could scam out of their next victim. There was a viral containment crew, complete with their containment outfits that completely covered their entire forms, power washing a ship that had to be quarantined.

Various droids were moving all about. There were droids that were showing holograms of nearby services, there were astromechs standing guard over ships, there were loader droids that were loading and unloading, there were even some droids that Quintano didn't recognize.

There were signs and billboards and flashing lights. There were sounds of engines being turned on. There was the exhaust and the smells of odd creatures that had probably never taken a bath. Everything was a sensory overload and he wondered why he even left. This was more his home than anywhere else.

"I know a guy down in the industrial area."

"Is there anyone here you don't know?"

Quintano ignored the quip. "We'll get a personal shuttle to take us there."

"Whirl...beep...beep."

"No, Aro, you aren't going to drive it."

"Zzzt...mmh...bzzz."

"I know you enjoyed driving the last time we were here."

"Bleep...bloop...bloop...whirl."

"Yes, I know you didn't get to fly the Ebon Mortis, but it isn't your ship."

"Zzzt...whirl...whirl...bloop...beep."

"Now, don't give me that, you tin plated piece of junk. I'm still considering just dropping you off somewhere. You would still be in that junk pile if it wasn't for me, so how about some gratitude. And to let you know, I'm not a...anyway look, you can't fly the shuttle."

A'Den smiled. Now Quintano was beginning to understand just how she felt. If only he could apply this conversation to the two of them then he would start to see just how pushy, arrogant, and demanding that he really was.

They found their way to the shuttle area where several shuttles were already docked on an overhang that looked out over the rest of the city. One bad slip from here and it would be a long drop to the bottom of the city, a bottom that many individuals never knew existed and many others never wanted to know. The various shuttles seemed to be more catered to certain clientele these being more expensive than others. The pilots to these shuttles immediately turned away from the three of them as if they didn't exist. There were other shuttles that looked like that they would fall out of the sky and they were owned by individuals that looked too incompetent to fly in a straight line, a warning that getting into their vehicle would wind up with a one way trip across the side of the nearest building. In the end there was only one that would accommodate them.

“Welcome to Nar Shaddaa,” said the Gran. Its three eyes blinked in unison as it spoke. “First time here? I can show you the sites. A grand tour perhaps. Only three...”

“To the industrial area,” Quintano stated, cutting off the pilot.

The Gran stopped mid-sentence. Its three eyes blinked rapidly as a cold stare came over its goat-like face.

“The industrial area isn't the best place for tourists. Perhaps I can take you to the floating casino of...”

“The industrial area will do fine, and no questions asked.”

“That would be a little extra,” the Gran pilot stated with a bit of hesitation in his voice. Honestly, he hoped that his new client would either reconsider or find another to take him.

Quintano only nodded. Of course it would be a little extra, it always was and always would be. No one did anyone any favors unless it was for a little extra, and even then there was no guarantee.

“We'll pay you when we arrive at our destination.”

“No,” the Gran stated with finality. “I want payment now.”

Quintano wasn't going to let some individual just drop him off in the middle of nowhere after he had paid full price. He knew all of the schemes, he had done them himself.

“Half now, half when we reach the industrial area.”

The Gran had to nod at the offer. The pay was good and he needed the money. And, although the industrial area was known for its less than desirable atmosphere, the main shuttle launch bays were usually safe, at least relatively speaking. All he had to do was drop them off and leave as quickly as possible. With another nod the Gran signaled the group to get aboard his shuttle and once he received half the payment promised, he started his craft, unhitched from the launch bay, and sped off.

The shuttle flew over several layers of traffic, each another layer deeper than the last until they could no longer be seen, fading beyond sight, somewhere in the lower levels of the planet city. Each layer was carrying many other vehicles with their passengers heading to and fro. Their destinations were known only to them.

Buildings whizzed by as they sped along. The buildings continued downward to the planet’s surface, a place where few even dared to go. Some of the structures even went further upward, blocking out the natural sunlight. There were neon lights and holograms displaying all sorts of businesses, in languages that were known and unknown by the vast majority of the planet’s population.

To Quintano, this was home. This was the hustle and bustle that he was used to. Everything was in constant motion. It was as if the entire planet was alive and the traffic of the shuttles were just the veins, the lifeblood of the vast creature. There was a continual white noise of everything that could be imagined, but mostly of the traffic that went by. He thought himself fortunate to be called a part of this city planet. He was as much a part of it as it was of him.

To A’Den, this was a nightmare. She couldn’t keep track of anything. She was used to being able to be in control, but here, there was no control. Everything was chaotic at best and she simply couldn’t find her rhythm. She also couldn’t forget the last time that she was here and how humiliating it was. The last thing she wanted was a reminder of how she was pulled across the landscape in front of everyone’s view. The sooner they got off of this planet, the better.

To the Gran this was just life and the only life he knew. All he wanted to do was drop off his customers and head back to a safer part of the city. His stomach churned with each passing second now that he was getting closer and closer to a more dangerous part of the city. He had to

acknowledge that there were other parts even more dangerous; he simply preferred to be in the safer areas, if there really were any. He had to take his mind off of his fears and on to something else. He had to pass the time and conversation with his clients usually did the trick.

“We had a great spectacle not so long ago,” the Gran stated trying to find his courage. “We had a great chase between two of these shuttles. They raced around the city like wild men as if they were suicidal or that this was some kind of swoop race. The both of them were weaving in and out of traffic. It was hysterical.”

“It’s fortuitous that you are a Mandalorian. ‘Couse you see there was a Mandalorian flying one of the shuttles. At one time the Mandalorian was being pulled along and ended up flying through the air. It was the funniest thing that I’ve...”

The Gran was tossed out of the shuttle with all due haste. The last that was seen of him, he had landed in a shuttle beneath them, heading in the opposite direction.

“Why did you...?” Quintano started to ask but was cut short by the look from A’Den, a look that told him not to question her any further.

Quintano gave a deep sigh. “Well, Aro, looks like you are going to be able to pilot this thing after all.”

Aro was able to navigate through the winding traffic areas and between the buildings. With his ability to tap into the shuttle’s navigation system through his armature, they were able to find their way with ease, even after both Quintano and A’Den suggested that they not take a direct route out of fear of being followed.

They docked at the main docking station in a part of the industrial area well known to Quintano. Any further down could result in running into press gangs, cartel members, or even smugglers, and where a few of these individuals could be dealt with by bribe or by force, there were some that were just best to be left alone. There were reports of Mynocks breeding in various levels, that fed on power conduits and any droid that had the misfortune of being in their area. Vrbthter, an unintelligent bipedal species with claws and horns, were known to hunt in packs in the lower levels. There were even rumors of Gundark, a very strong four armed two meter

tall beast, roaming some sections, a species that had gotten loose from being pets of the Hutts. With all of this in mind, it was best to keep to the area that was safe and leave as soon as possible.

It was after Aro had locked the controls to ensure that no one else could take their shuttle and to ensure that they had a ride back did the three of them moved deeper in the area. Despite the fact that this was probably the safest part of the industrial area, both Quintano and A'Den were constantly on the alert with their hands near their blasters. They knew that they couldn't be too cautious.

Unlike the more prestigious areas of Nar Shaddaa, the industrial area was less accommodating than most. There was still the feeling of being enclosed since there was a perpetual ceiling above their heads and there was still some semblance of a street that bisected the businesses, wide enough to allow small personal vehicles and loaders, but beyond this, the similarities between this area and the rest of Nar Shaddaa stopped.

First, there was a continual smell of oil, grease, and grime. The place needed a deep cleaning many decades ago and from the looks of things, no one was going to get around to it any time soon. The smell was so bad, that it watered their eyes and even Aro complained.

Next came the perpetual sounds of machinery running. It was hard to determine exactly where the machines were, or exactly what their purpose was, but there was no mistaking the fact that they were running. And it wasn't just one or two mechanisms, the entire place was alive with the sounds of many engines, turbines, generators, power operated cranes, conveyor belts, lifts and power presses. Somewhere down here ore was being processed into much needed parts. Manufacturing plants were producing weapons or hull pieces for ships. If a part was needed for something, it was made here, somewhere. It was doubtful that anyone knew what every machine did and it was highly possible that some were so long forgotten about that no one knew exactly what they did. Some probably did nothing at all. There were even rumors of some machinery that had become sentient.

The "streets" had rubbish pushed to the sides. There was loose paper and clothing and just pieces of junk that had been pushed aside into corners where "someone else" was going take care of it. Of course no one did. The homeless and the destitute would sometimes find something of value that they could use, but for the most part these items would just be

moved aside from one location to another just to be temporarily moved out of the way until they were moved back again.

Graffiti was everywhere. Each was a form of a tag from one gang to another, each proclaiming this to be part of one territory or another. Each gave warnings, in different languages, to stay out and the consequences of what would happen if the warnings weren't heeded. Of course there was very few gang related activities this close to the main terminal out of fear of Hutt retaliation, but there were plenty further onward.

The shops on this level looked more like scrap metal junk collectors who were trying to sell off parts and pieces of items that they had no idea what they were or even if they worked or not. There were shops with electrical items, shops with metal parts, shops with small engines, and shops with just broken pieces that they were hoping to sell as scrap.

There were a few broken speeders lying about. Some were being worked on by shop owners; others were being taken apart by gang members. Some were just tossed aside as worthless until another shop owner would swoop in and claim it for spare parts.

The major shipments of large products were transported on lower levels. This involved larger hauling shuttles and loader droids. This would allow the proper flow of heavier traffic to be moved away from the smaller shops and the residential area of this district. There was no need to go there. The individual that Quintano was looking for was on this level.

Quintano continued to lead the way further down the street and further away from the landing dock, despite the various tweets and whirls from Aro out of fear that he was going to be melted down and sold as scrap. He made sure not to make eye contact with anyone, a gesture that would have suggested aggression and authority, neither of which he wanted to announce. Yet, he continued to keep his composure, with a hand on one of his pistols at all times, announcing that he was still confident in his ability to use his weapon and to not mess with him. Quintano didn't bother looking back to see how A'Den was handling herself. This would only send a signal that he didn't have confidence in her and that would send the wrong signals to the wrong people. He was sure that she could take care of herself; he was actually more worried that she would tear this place apart if trouble started and he wouldn't be able to find his contact once everyone panicked.

After about a half a dozen blocks or so, Quintano was able to find the shop that he was looking for. It was an open stall packed with carburetors, small engines, regulators, environment controls, broken lights and even parts to old speeders that didn't exist anymore. These were neatly displayed upon racks and shelves as if the owner was proud of each item, and in fact he was. He was able to give accurate information on each item, how rare it was, and with what other parts it would work with. Given time, the owner would also be able to tell the consumer the history of the manufacturer, when the parts were first made, when they went out of business, and what parts were made after these.

The owner was found where he usually was, sitting behind his console studying old parts, looking through manufacturer catalogs, and trying to buy and sell outdated material to individuals who were in need. Brob-Zas was a Weequay, a bipedal humanoid with tough leathery skin, who was known to have sudden outbursts of anger if an individual wasn't specific enough in the order that was being placed. He expected everyone else to know the same "basic" knowledge that he had mastered throughout the years in regards to every item that was in question. Any inability to get the information correct would only incur his wrath. There were days where he could go off on one tirade after another when trying to deal with incompetent buyers or sellers. Today, he was in a good mood.

"Brob! Good to you see you. How's business?"

The Weequay looked up from his computer console and smiled. "Quintano. It's great to see a familiar face even if you can't tell the difference between a K001 and a K0861. And who is this lovely vision with you?"

"Brob, this is A'Den. A'Den, Brob. Brob is the best dealer in antique, old, and used parts that I know. If there is anything mechanical that you need, this is the one to turn to."

"The honor is all mine," Brob stated as he stood to reach his hand out to A'Den. He was sure that if she were to take his, he would be able to place a kiss upon her hand; a gesture that he had heard was a sign of affection. She wasn't having anything to do with it.

"Ah .. well .. business has picked up since the war between the Empire and the rebels are coming to a fever pitch. Everyone wants something. What brings you here? I don't suppose you are looking to sell your R-0 astromech, are you?"

“No, no, nothing like that. He’s been a great help. I think I’ll keep him?”

“What is this? Have my eyes and ears deceived me? Quintano, the great smuggler, is no longer running solo and now with an astromech as well? What galactic atrocity has happened to bring this about?”

“Nothing as grand as all that, I assure you,” Quintano answered. “I’ve come across a text from an old data chip that I can’t read. I know that ancient texts aren’t your forte, but old data chips are. Perhaps you might have had dealings with someone who would be interested? If anything pans out, I’ll be more than happy to share a part of the profits.”

This made A’Den tense. She wasn’t here to split profits on what might be a very large fortune. Nor was she here to bring in another partner. She just wanted half of what they found and then to be on her way. Her fears were removed once the Weequay spoke.

Brob shook his head. “You have helped business enough times, consider it on the house. There has been someone lately. I get a call every now and then asking if I’ve come across any old data chips or old computer storage files, only real old stuff, nothing new. The shop is in the data reclamation and storage section, of all places. I’ve never been there myself or have met the individual, I’ve just sent messenger droids or data transfers if I can. Here, let me write down the location.”

Brob was able to find some old parchment that he had lying around, scribbled the directions needed and handed it to Quintano. “Tell Quia I said hi.”

Brob made sure that all three had left and were well beyond earshot, especially the R-0 astromech who would be able to pick up his commlink, before making the call.

“Hey, it’s me, Brob. Yeah, I found him. He’s heading to the D.R.A.S.S. area; I’ll send you the coordinates. Remember, I get a cut of the action.”

Chapter: Library

*I*t didn't take long to find the area. It was in a part of the city where there was little to no traffic as this wasn't one of the most sought after places, at least not to personally visit. This was a section of the city that was dedicated to all forms of record keeping. There were mostly public records and forms that needed to be filled out such as licenses, deeds, and contracts. There were also old records and ancient tomes, although nothing too valuable as these would wind up with the Hutts before coming here. In essence, only a few record keepers and historians would come here themselves. Requisitions for the data in question would either be sent via commlink or through a droid. As such, few came here themselves.

Although the inside of the massive building was the same as all of the others, giving the impression that one was actually outside while offices lined the sides of the streets and a lighted ceiling gave some semblance of a sky, this section had a feel of its own. The streets were basically bare of any living life form. Only one or two could be seen at any given time and these were usually too busy reading over some data pad to even notice anyone else that might be around. If Quintano and A'Den had wanted to keep their presence unknown or at least low key, there would be no need to worry since they doubted that anyone here even noticed that they were there. There were a few astromechs plugged into data outlets downloading information. There were protocol droids walking from one location to another. Even a few mouse droids could be seen scurrying about. Beyond this, the streets felt empty.

The office wasn't too difficult to find. All of the offices were labeled and numbered sequentially and it was easy enough to simply follow the series of addresses until the right one was found.

The office itself seemed to be more of a small library than any office that either Quintano or A'Den had expected to see. They had thought that there would be data banks and data droids accessing computers. Instead this room had books on the floor in corners and shoved up against the walls so there was plenty of walkway. There were a few cabinets full of papers, documents, and maps, all on paper instead of data disks.

A star chart filled the back wall. It showed the known galaxy and a few planets that neither Quintano nor A'Den had seen or heard of before. There were even a couple of planets that the two of them had thought to be fictitious and made up. There were several known trade routes between planets and a few others that were suggested if one wanted to bypass certain hazards or even to avoid any undue attention.

In front of the star chart was an old wood table, something that look like it came out of an old museum, except that it wasn't necessarily in the best of conditions. It was beat up and scratched here and there, yet it still maintained a natural beauty. It bulk showed its strength and it was obviously build very well. It would have taken a lifter droid to bring it in here and by the looks of things this had been the case and they had not been very careful. The wood was from unknown tree. It had a reddish tint to it and under the right treatment its essence could be brought forward to its fullest potential.

The table was littered with several documents laying face up. It was hard to tell at first glance what most of them were, but at least a few of them were maps. There were a couple of small stacks of books on the side. The whole view looked like an organized mess that threatened to be a chaotic jumble with the exception that the person behind the desk seemed to have everything exactly where she wanted it.

The woman seating behind the desk had her face hidden behind a book when they had come in. Either she hadn't initially heard them enter or she had been too interested in what she was reading to look up from her book. It was only after a short time did she put the book down and greet those that had entered.

"I think you have the wrong office," the woman said flatly and without hesitation. Her hand moved slightly to something under her desk.

The woman seemed to be about the same height as A'Den, although A'Den would have been a little bit taller since she was still wearing her Mandalorian armor. She had shoulder length light brown hair; the lighting in the room gave her artificial highlights of a golden brown when the light reflected just right. She wore basic trousers and boots. For a top she wore a short sleeve solid black shirt under her dark brown jacket. She looked more like a smuggler pilot than a record's keeper.

The woman's sudden movement hadn't gone unnoticed. A'Den quickly let her right hand drop to her side and rested upon her blaster. Her trigger

finger seemed to have an itch and she was ready to start shooting. She had the philosophy that she lived by, “if something didn’t seem right, then it probably wasn’t”. She had another “shoot first.” The woman behind the desk was out of place. Something wasn’t right. They had been double-crossed.

Quintano could feel the tension building in the room. It was thick enough to cut with a knife. Blaster fire was about to fill the office and any clue as to what they had would go up in smolders. If they wanted answers then they had to settle this quickly before the firefight began.

“We’re looking for Quia. Brob sent us,” Quintano stated hoping that this would calm the situation down before it got stated. Yet, he was ready to drop his hands upon his blasters if it was needed.

The woman behind the desk relaxed and brought her hand back up to the top of the table. She stood and gave a slight smile of relief. With an extension of her hand she spoke.

“I’m Quia. Has he gotten the text that I was looking for? I know it was a difficult find, but the ancient tomb of...”

Quia stopped and realized that they had no idea what she was talking about. Suddenly she was aware that she had let her guard down. Tension started to build once again.

Quintano shook his head. “No, Brob didn’t say anything about an ancient text; he had just referred us to you. I have an old data text with an ancient language that I can’t read. We were wondering if you can interpret it for us.”

Quia gave another sigh of relief and both Quintano and A’Den had to wonder why the woman was so paranoid. She seemed far too jumpy to be a simple librarian. There had to be something more going on here than just someone keeping a few old records.

Again Quia smiled. This seemed to make her cheery and lively, as if this and old this was the one thing that she lived for. She immediately reached out her hand.

“Sure, I’ll take a look at it. Let’s see what you got.”

Quintano was hesitant at first. He really didn't want anyone else to know what they had, especially if someone was going to try to take it from them. Then again, this might be the only way of finding out exactly what they had and if it really was worth all of the trouble that they had already gone through.

"It's ok Aro, let's show her," Quintano stated to the astromech.

Aro gave a few tweets as a response out of protest. It was obvious that he didn't want to give up any secrets either. However, his reply had gone ignored and when he was done, he finally turned on his holo-projector and sent the image that was loaded upon the data disk into the room.

Like the last time, the hologram image of the known galaxy came up. There were planet systems and stars. There was the great maw and various other known aspects of the area. There were also the strange symbols written in corner.

Quia seemed to study the map and all of its features intently. Her eyes went wide a few times and she seemed to give some form of understanding towards what she was looking at. She traced the hologram image of the symbols as if they were some long lost friend that she hadn't seen in a long time.

"So, can you read it," A'Den asked with some skepticism and annoyance. Like Quintano, she didn't want to share any of the information that they had found and that the fewer individuals that knew about this map the better. They already had far too many coming after them for it.

"Where did you get this?" Quia asked.

"We got it..." Quintano's statement was quickly interrupted.

"It doesn't matter where we got it," A'Den snapped. She was now certain that Quintano would spill every bit of information he had to any pretty face that asked. It was best if she did the talking.

Quia looked up toward A'Den. She could sense the hostility coming from her and for more than one reason. It was best to keep the Mandalorian happy, especially since she had a rocket strapped to her back.

"Yes, of course I can. They are coordinates."

“We figured that much,” A’Den stated. “Can you tell me where they point?”

“Yes, but I want in.”

“What? Wait, no. No way.” A’Den was very adamant about her position. There was barely room for two and no room for three, especially with someone they just met over a map that could be very precious.

“I’m in or I’m not telling you what you want to know,” Quia said stubbornly “Look, I’m a historian. This is what I do. I study old and ancient languages and I have a degree in anthropology and archaeology. Imagine all of the data and artifacts that could be found because of this map. Besides, you still might need me if there is more to interpret. You would hate to get all the way out to where you are going just to have to turn around and find me again.”

“If that’s your price, then we don’t need your help,” A’Den retorted. “We can find someone else to interpret this for us and given time we just might be able to interpret this on our own. I’m sure Aro can tell us what this means.”

She turned to Quintano. “Come on, we don’t need this. This is just a waste of time.”

Quintano pulled A’Den aside and spoke low enough for Quia to not be able to hear. “Look, she’s already seen the map and knows the coordinates that we don’t. If we leave her behind, she’ll just go there herself or she could tell someone else.”

“Then we shot her here and now,” A’Den replied. “That will solve that problem now won’t it?”

“Besides,” Quintano continued ignoring the threat to commit murder. It was one thing to shoot someone who was trying to shoot him; it was another to just shoot someone in cold blood. “She’s right. What if we get there and we need her skills again?”

“I’m sure Aro can extrapolate some of the language...”, A’Den stated, although no longer believing herself. She saw the dangers of just leaving Quia and she had to admit that she really wasn’t a cold blooded killer. She had killed Imperials, but that was out of the knowledge of what they had

done across the galaxy. Killing a simple librarian just wasn't in her nature. Besides, Quintano had a point, rather he said it or not. There was something more about this librarian and it was best to keep an eye on her and watch her every move at every point.

"Fine, she can come with us," A'Den said with exasperation. "But she does exactly what we tell her to do and when we tell her to do it. She's only here for historical purposes, nothing else. Everything we find is split between the two of us and if she insists on any cut of anything valuable, it comes out of your share. Agreed?"

Quintano had to shrug. A quarter of a fortune was still far better than all of nothing.

"It's settled then," Quintano stated to Quia. "You can come along, but only for historical purposes and you have to promise not to get in the way. I also need to warn you that there are already a lot of individuals that are willing to kill and die for that map so..."

Quia put her hand up to stop Quintano from embarrassing himself any further. "Look, I'm not after any treasure, I'm more curious about ancient society so whatever you find of value you can keep. As far as protecting me, I can handle myself."

"Now as far as your map is concerned, it is written in ancient Sith. This is a long forgotten language that I doubt even the Empire has proficiency with."

"Your suspicion is correct. These are coordinates, but there's more than that. The first set of coordinates tells of a planet. The second set tells a spot on the planet. The last set of symbols say 'first of ten'. Do either of you know what that means?"

Both Quintano and A'Den looked at each other out of curiosity. They were sure that they were after just one holocron. Now it seemed that there might be ten of them.

"What planet are we talking about?" Quintano asked.

"Yes. Please tell us. We would all like to know."

The added voice caught everyone's attention and as all four of them turned to see where the voice had come from they were able to see that

not only were they not alone, they were outnumbered. There were six Rodians each armed with blasters, although their weapons were still in their holsters. By the looks of things, these guys were after one thing and they weren't going to ask nicely.

“While you're at it, just give us the data disc and no one...”

The Rodian never got his chance to finish. A'Den was already ready for a trap and this was it. They had been set up and when she was done with these Rodians, she would deal with Quia and then Brob. She let her philosophy dictate her next move.

Without delay A'Den switched on her jetpack as she spun in place. She was able to see their unwanted company as her form was lifted up off of the ground. She navigated her pack up and backwards to put as much distance between her and them as possible while staying in motion. At the same time she opened fire with her blasters.

Because she was in the process of flight and everyone started to move in all directions, her first shot went wide and ricochet off of the wall beyond the library's opening. Another shot made one of the Rodians duck for cover around the side of the wall, stopping him from retrieving his weapon right away. Her third shot found its mark and hit one of their opponents in the chest.

Quintano rolled to one side and came up with both pistols blasting. He was able to get a shot off from each one before he had to roll back again, behind the librarian's wooden desk. It had crossed his mind that this “Quia” if that was her real name might have double-crossed them, but he had no choice. The large desk was the only form of cover he could find. The Rodians had already started to return fire and he could no longer hold his position in the open.

Several bolts blasted at the spot where Quintano had been, each leaving a scorch mark from where they hit and a notice of what would have happened if Quintano had stayed. However, he was sure that he had just left one bad situation for another when he came up out of his roll only to find Quia also behind the desk. He had feared that she had found a weapon. He was right. It was two weapons, both very pointy and both very sharp.

Quintano froze. It was the first time that he could remember ever freezing, especially in a fire fight. The woman named Quia had the drop

on him. There was no way that he could get any defense up or any counter attack going. She would have him dead before he was able to move. He watched as she brought the two long-handled blades upward.

Quia slammed the two hilts of her weapons together and gave a twist. The two hilts locked into place making a doubled bladed staff weapon. Then, with a switch of a button her newly formed weapon hummed as they quickly shook in place. Her vibro-staff was now activated and there was almost nothing that it couldn't cut through.

Despite the fact that her new arrival thought that her blade was meant for him, she ignored him, put one hand on the thick table and pushed off. Her body flew through the air. She gave a twist, landed, rolled and plunged forward. Her blade caught the midsection of one of the aggressors and killed him on the spot.

Quia spun in place and brought her vibro-staff around a couple of times, stopping the incoming blaster bolts from striking her. She had created a temporary shield that prevented any fire blast from getting behind her. She hoped that it would be enough to give the other two enough time and cover to get to a better shooting position. Quickly she jabbed out again and this time caught one of the attackers in the neck.

Quintano came up from his cover and was able to see Quia take out one of the Rodians. Perhaps she really was on their side after all and hadn't called these individuals to take the data disk from them; then again, perhaps not. Either way it would all have to be sorted out later. Right now, he had a few Rodians to take out.

The smuggler brought up both of his blasters and returned fire. With the Rodians still stunned by the dramatic and dazzling display of swordsmanship by Quia, it wasn't difficult to find his mark. Two Rodians lay dead after his short barrage.

Aro let out a squeal of panic as a blaster fire shot one of its "legs". Although the blast was only a nick, it left an ugly scorch mark. Some of his plating had been blasted away and electrical wires were sparking from his side. There was a slight leak of hydraulic fluid upon the floor as if he were bleeding. All in all it wasn't that bad. His memory banks did recall a time during an earlier war when he was all but destroyed. This could all be fixed. Still, it was an upsetting thing to be shot and he wasn't going to just sit there and become someone's target practice.

The astromech rolled forward as quickly as he could and slammed into one of the Rodians. His momentum had built up enough force to knock the creature over, sending the Rodian to the ground. Without missing a beat Aro brought forth his aperture and sent forth an electrical blast that struck the downed creature. The Rodian's body went into spasms before it stopped moving.

"I assume you have a shuttle out of this district and a ship to get off of this planet?" Quia asked as she brought her vibro-staff vertical up against her body.

"Come on, this way," Quintano stated as he jumped over the table and started to lead the way back toward the shuttle that they had taken to get here.

"Aro, you pilot, the rest of us will stay on defense in case we are being followed."

A'Den landed from her high ground and took up the rear guard. She wasn't too happy that Quintano was already making command decisions for everyone and was already volunteering her to stay on point for defense and for volunteering her ship for travel. She was going to have to set him straight one of these days. However, he had a point and for now it was the best point that could be made. She would go along with it, at least for now.

Their firefight had started enough of the scribes, data collectors, and librarians and individuals started to duck and cover as soon as they rounded one corner after another. Even data droids disconnected from their servers and tried their best to get out of the way. The four of them found no resistance on their way back toward their shuttle.

Aro immediately made way for the pilot seat and started up the engine without waiting for everyone to get situated. The three others lurched backwards and nearly fell out as soon as Aro had put on the acceleration. The droid was hoping to get out of their before there was any more blaster fire, he was a navigator and an astromech, not a battle droid. However, despite his haste, the shuttles that they were hoping to not see came anyway.

Two shuttles seemed to come out of nowhere. They had hidden themselves just outside the view of anyone coming out of the area and could easily get the drop on them. As soon as they were spotted,

Quintano had to ask himself, were these were part of the Rodians that had come after them or were these after the Rodians once they picked up the data disk? How many individuals knew that they had this? Was this wild Nerf chase really worth all of this? At least these that were giving chase thought so and they were willing to kill for it. The next question was, were they willing to die for it?

Just as Quintano and A'Den drew their weapons to fire upon the two pursuing shuttles, the other jammed packed vehicles had their passengers open fire first. Blasts of blaster bolts shot across the air and struck nearby buildings, hit passing shuttles, and even struck the shuttle that they were on. Smoke started to come from their vehicle as a hydraulic feature was hit and the fluid had become superheated against the engine.

Aro gave another squeal as he tried to navigate the shuttle. With the damaged part the shuttle just wasn't responding the way that it should. The controls were too stiff and it was becoming more and more difficult to bank out of the way and turn the tight corners that were needed to avoid slamming into an oncoming building.

“Weet..weet...weet...wot..woot.”

“Not now,” Quintano stated as he tried to duck away from another barrage of fire. “I'm busy. You drive.”

“I got,” Quia stated as she made her way to the controls while trying to stay down. She knew that she wasn't the best pilot and she usually had someone else fly for her. She had taken passage aboard a cheap freighter to get to this planet and had relied on others to drive the shuttles. But they couldn't be that difficult to fly, were they? She soon found out.

The shuttle was more difficult to pilot that she thought, especially with the controls fighting against her. Everything she did seemed to jerk the whole ship and each time that happened, the others were knocked back and started shouting at her to keep the ship flying straight, only to be countermanded to not fly straight so they wouldn't get hit. Quia could only look back to see how the others were fairing.

Both Quintano and A'Den were trying to return fire while using the back of the shuttle for cover. The seats in the back were being shot away and it was only a matter of time before there was nothing left for cover, or to sit on for that matter. As for Aro, he couldn't initially be seen until

Quia realized what the droid was trying to do. All she could do was watch as the astromech slid around the side of the shuttle.

Aro ignored the blaster fire that was coming his way and focused on the job at hand. He engaged his electromagnetic holders and moved around the side of the ship. His body tilted sideways and then upside down as he moved along the bottom the craft. It didn't take long to find the problem and it would be an easy fix, all he needed was time. He also found the restraining bolt that had been put in place. The Hutt security on Nar Shaddaa didn't want the previous owner to go any faster than necessary. At this rate they would be easily over run and the only reason why they weren't already was the fact that A'Den and Quintano had been keeping the two shuttles at bay and that wasn't going to last long.

A'Den popped up out of her cover to try to take another shot at the incoming shuttles before they closed in on them. It was too late. Both shuttles had pulled alongside them and a couple of their occupants were trying to jump aboard. They were outnumbered and outgunned. She wouldn't have it any other way.

With the two that had jumped aboard from her side of the shuttle, she was too close to use her weapons. They were now fighting hand to hand and the first to lose was the first to die. A'Den wasn't going to lose. She had taught herself how to fight on the streets; she had to fight to stay alive.

A'Den slammed her head forward and caught her first opponent by surprise. Her helmet clashed against his skull and sent him reeling backwards. He tripped against the side of the shuttle and fell backwards. His body bounced off the first shuttle and then off of his own. His form was last seen falling into the seemingly bottomless pit of Nar Shaddaa.

Quintano came up with a groin shot to the one that had gotten into his face. He was never a man to fight fair, especially when the odds were stacked against him. His opponent was able to back off far enough for Quintano to pull up both of his blasters and plug two bolts into the man. Then, without waiting for his opponent's dead body to drop, Quintano turned his blasters upon the shuttle that had pulled alongside them. It was time to put an end to being boarded, at least from this side.

Quintano's blaster fire found the shuttle's engines and filled it full of holes. Thick black smoked came out of the vehicle, making the shuttle hard to drive. The shuttle, with all crew aboard, veered off to the side and

bounced off of nearby building, blowing up in the process. Dead bodies and debris rained down to parts unknown.

Aro had managed to correct the damage with a few tweaks and after that the shuttle became easier to fly. While still upside down and magnetically hanging on the underside of the shuttle, Aro moved his robotic armature to one side and pulled out the restraining bolt from the ship. He hoped that Quia would be able to find the throttle now. He was right.

Quia had a sudden surprise when the ship finally stabilized and then shot off before she could gain full control. The shuttle wobbled everywhere as she fought the controls one more time and as she did, she over compensated, making matters worse. She knew that she was at least putting some distance between them and the last shuttle; she only hoped that she didn't send them flying up against a building or into an oncoming shuttle.

The second shuttle fell back, not ready for the increased speed of those that they were chasing. But it wasn't for long. The pilot threw his highly specialty modified shuttle into overdrive. He had been proud of his accomplishments. With his improved speeder engines he could outrun any other speeder, or at least any that he had come across. There was no way that any Hutt backed lackey with their backwater pieces of junk built with secondary parts could catch them when he was smuggling parts, weapons, and drugs so the shuttle that they had targeted wouldn't stand a chance.

As soon as the crammed packed shuttle was thrown into overdrive, two of the rogues that had signed up for this mission were thrust backwards and fell off. Of course no one cared. It just meant that there were two less individuals to share a treasure with.

The Ugnought smiled as he continued to push his shuttle. It was only a matter of time before...

The shuttle rocked hard and whatever explosion had happened was strong enough to throw the shuttle off of its course. Thick black smoke rose from the engine as some kind of fuel started to burn off. Emergency lights started to flash as the shuttle started to go slower and slower. It was becoming more and more difficult to control the vehicle. There was no other option. Either he found a place to land immediately or one of two things would happen. The first would be that they lost full control and

they would crash. The second would be that the rest of the modified engine would explode. Either way they would all be nothing but debris. With as much strength as he could muster, the Ugnought pushed the controls to the nearest landing bay on the nearest building for an emergency landing. With any luck the building wouldn't belong to someone that he had crossed in the past.

Quia gave a sigh of relief. She pulled back on the controls and slowed the shuttle down to a more manageable speed. She had to admit that she was getting the hang of piloting, but this was still far too much for one day. The sooner they put the shuttle down the better.

“Where to now?” Quia asked.

A'Den was about to answer but it was Quintano who spoke first.

“To the spaceport. We need to get out of here before anyone else catches the news that we have this data disk. Whatever is on it is far too important. There are far too many who would kill for it and I'm not yet ready to die for something I know very little about.”

Quia nodded. She was sure that she could put this shuttle into a docking bay at the spaceport center. Their destination wasn't too far from here and if there were no further delays then they should be there soon.

Valas pulled back on the controls of his shuttle and let it fall back to a relatively safe distance. He didn't want to be seen by his prey. There was a chance that the Mandalorian would figure out that he had shot the engine of the chasing shuttle as he had shot hers not too long ago. If they figured out that he was still around then all would be lost.

He had gotten the word out that Quintano and A'Den had a much desired space map, like he had done on Hypori. The object was to keep Quintano and A'Den on their hunt by being pushed by others who thought that they had something worth having, rather or not it was some treasure map. However, he only needed them to be chased only to ensure the importance of the task at hand, he didn't need them to be caught; that would be counterproductive. There would be time to bring them in later, but right now they had a job to do and he would contact every scum in every sector if he had to ensure that the job was finished.

His prey would no doubt head to the spaceport to leave right away. He had to be there when they left if he wanted to follow them to their destination. Even though he had put a tracking device on their ship, there was still a chance that they could slip away and he gave nothing to chance. Fortunately he had taken out some insurance to slow down the Ebon Mortis.

Chapter: Commencement

“**E**bon Mortis, you are not cleared for takeoff. Repeat you are not...”

The words from the command center came over the commlink with as much authority as was possible. Although the command center had the authority and the responsibility to stop ships from coming and going, they really didn't have a whole lot of ability. They could scramble security members or even a hazmat team, but they wouldn't be able to respond in time. Even if they called in an air support, the leaving ship could still try to outrun anything that came their way. It would have been easier if the anonymous tip hadn't come so late. Had it come earlier then there could have been troops on the group and a supporting air team. Then again, if the communiqué was accurate, then what was aboard that ship didn't need to be shared with the Hutts or their troops. It was best to try to intimidate the crew of the Ebon Mortis and have a private group confiscate everyone and everything about the ship. However, the Ebon Mortis wasn't listening.

A'Den shut off the commlink almost as an afterthought. She was already going through the fewest take off procedures necessary to get the ship flying and she didn't want to listen to the empty threats from tower control. She was tired of being told what she could and could not do. This was her ship and no one told her what to do aboard her ship. On top of that, she was sure that news had traveled and the only reason why they didn't have clearance and the fact that they were never going to get clearance was the fact that the space traffic tower was going to board the Ebon Mortis and take the data chip. That wasn't going to happen either. Without going through the full take off sequence, A'Den just flipped on the engines and pushed the thruster controls forward.

The Ebon Mortis lifted from the ground and wobbled slightly. Without the secondary stabilizing engines online all flying would have to be done manually and not compensated by the computer. Also, since the external sensors weren't up and running yet, it was difficult to tell where there were air lifts or currents from incoming and outgoing flights as well as atmospheric air disturbances from wind tunnels. The thrust upward from the main engines off of the tarmac also played havoc on takeoff. All of these would have been countered and refined by onboard computers, computers that weren't yet on and running.

A'Den continued to push forward and pilot the Ebon Mortis onward. She increased her speed beyond that which was limited in the area and flew towards several ships on a crash course. Then, within a heartbeat of disaster, she spun the ship to one side and just skimmed across the two other ships. She piloted over the top of a personal carrier and then dipped down under a garbage scow before veering off to follow right behind a cargo ship. It was when she was sure that the ship's signature marker had been confused with so many other ships and that she had lost any possible tail or any possible radar tracking did she turn away and make toward space.

"Where are we going?" A'Den asked as she brought the other systems online. She had to get the hyper drive navigation systems up and running if they wanted to make the jump to light speed and as soon as that was going, she would punch in the coordinates. Hopefully she would be quick enough before anyone figured out where they had gone.

"The first set of coordinates leads us to Korriban," Quia stated as she did her best to try to calm herself. For a few moments there she was sure that they were either going to be shot down or were going to crash into one of the ships with A'Den's manic flying "skills". "The second set is a place in the middle of the desert called the Mortis Hollow. Here I can show you."

A'Den put the coordinates into the hyper drive navigation system while Quia started to operate another star chart. As soon as the coordinates were put in, A'Den pushed another throttle forward. The hyper drive engines sprang to life and their hum and vibrations could be felt all over the ship. Then, once they hit their peak, the forward window sprang to life with light as the Ebon Mortis went into hyper drive.

"As you can see here," Quia stated as she pulled up a star chart of Korriban. "The desert vale known as the Mortis Hollow is here..."

Quia stopped speaking the moment she saw the weapon drawn. Before she could react, A'Den had a blaster pointed right at her head. It would be a clean shot at point blank range. A quick look into the eyes of the Mandalorian and Quia was able to tell that A'Den was about to pull the trigger at any moment and even if the weapon were to discharge accidentally then there would still be no tears shed. She meant business. The weapon wasn't a threat; it was a promise and one that would be taken very seriously.

“Woo...woo...now just wait a second,” Quintano stated trying to calm the situation down before it escalated any further. “What are you doing? Put that thing away before someone gets hurt.”

“There’s more to this woman than meets the eye,” A’Den snapped. Her finger twitched on the trigger. It wasn’t going to take much to put a blaster bolt through this woman’s skull. “She’s full of surprises and I don’t like surprises. No librarian fights like that. Now, tell me who you are, really, or I’ll fill your body full of holes and dump you through the nearest air lock.”

“But we don’t just indiscriminately shoot...,” Quintano started. He wasn’t able to finish his sentence.

“In case you don’t remember, I trusted the wrong person at the wrong time and it almost got me killed. It won’t happen again.”

A’Den turned her attention back toward Quia. “Now talk.”

A’Den kept an eye on the weapon that Quia had shown great proficiency with. One move toward the double vibro-staff and she would start shooting.

Quia’s eyes darted toward her weapon and then back to the gun that was pointing at her. She had great training and she was good at what she did, but she wasn’t that good. The Mandalorian would have a drop on her the moment she even twitched. There wasn’t anything more that she could do, she had to give up her secret and hope that they could be trusted with it. She gave a sigh and nodded.

“My name is Quia Vaal. I am, in fact a historian, archeologist, and anthropologist. I specialize in the era known as the Old Republic. I’m an Agent of Ossus.”

“A what?” Quintano asked.

“See? She’s an agent,” A’Den stated flatly. “I told you that she’s trouble. We should dump her body before...”

“No, no, no, wait,” Quia begged. “I’m not a spy agent or political agent. I’m a historian agent. An Agent of Ossus is a records keeper and a seeker of truth.”

“With that kind of fighting skill?” A’Den asked sarcastically. “Highly unlikely. I don’t buy it. Try again.”

“Look,” Quia started. “There was once a great Jedi library on the planet Ossus. This was destroyed and many of the archives and data banks that were stored there were thought to be lost and many of the artifacts were destroyed. The Jedi library was rebuilt on Currosant and some of the lost information was recovered from other places around the galaxy. However, this library was also destroyed, just recently. It was a huge blow to those of us who used it to study and learn from our past.”

“A small group was formed to keep certain information alive and to keep searching for more. We call ourselves the Agents of Ossus out of respect for the largest known Jedi library. Someday we’ll rebuild a new library but with the Empire still at large and a threat to anything that we try to build, we keep our secrets and learned knowledge to ourselves, shared only among small cell groups.”

“As for my fighting skills, it’s a style that I’ve learned from some of the old texts. I’ve trained myself in some of the fighting styles that the old Jedi used to master. I must admit that I’m not as good as I would like to be, and I’m not even force sensitive, but I can still protect myself and the knowledge that I carry.”

“There are many that want to suppress the past. Those who can suppress our history can control the present. Those who destroy knowledge can suppress the masses. I won’t let either happen. There are some who safeguard diplomats, others safeguard planets, and others safeguard tech or valuables or even top secret information. I safeguard our past and where that might not be that important to everyone, I realize its importance and will put my life on the line to keep it safe or even to uncover something that has been hidden, suppressed, or something of value that could help society in the here and now.”

“Look, I’m really not after anything of monetarily valuable. I just want to learn the history surrounding this mystery. I’m looking for ancient texts and information I can someday pass on when the time is right. I have every reason to believe that there is more here than just a few credits that you think might be found; there’s untold knowledge. I want to uncover it. But whatever is out there to be found, you will need my help to find it so if you shoot me, you will never get what you are looking for.”

Quia hoped that her bluff would work. The vast majority of what she had said was true. However, she really didn't know what they may or may not find and she had no idea if her talents would be needed again. But they didn't know this either and if she could keep herself important than maybe, just maybe, they wouldn't shoot her.

A'Den gave a smirk and lowered her weapon. Either Quia had in fact told the truth or she was a really good liar. Either way, she had told a believable story. Either way, she would have had to call her own bluff since she had run out of ammunition during her last fire fight; she really couldn't shoot Quia if she wanted.

"Tell us about this 'Mortis Hollow'." A'Den half demanded as she put her blaster away. "If you know anything about this site, now would be a good time to tell us."

Quia shook her head. "I don't know a whole lot about specific history or even the current history in regards to Korriban. There's only the information that has been leaked out, bragged about by the Empire, or deliberately lied about. All I know are some basic facts and a lot of rumors, but I'll tell you what I know."

"Mortis Hollow is a valley in the red sand desert on Korriban, far away from known civilization. There were old stories of Sith purebloods and Sith Lords making pilgrimages there. Some stories suggest sacrifices being made. Other stories talk about horrible acts of violence and atrocities that were acted, all to further imbue the site with the dark side of the Force."

Both A'Den and Quintano rolled their eyes. They had both heard of stories of the "Force" and neither of them believed in such a thing. These were just old rumors, stories, and tales of an ancient religion. Nothing was to be believed. If any of it were true then there would be more Jedi and Sith Lords running about and would be under every rock and around every corner. However, no one knew of any these Jedi or Sith. There was talk that there may have been Jedi during the Clone Wars, but that was a generation ago and unless they were all killed off then there weren't any to begin with. However, believing in the "Force" or no wasn't what mattered. What mattered was that someone, somewhere, might believe it and that might be important to their undertaking.

"Anyway," Quia continued ignoring the looks that she received from the other two. "Let's just say that those who lived in the area held the valley of high regard, but what to expect is only speculation. There's no

doubt that there are some form of ruins and I wouldn't be surprised if there were still some automated security defenses. If there's an old password required then I might be able to help with that or with any warnings or instructions written in the old Sith language."

"Beyond speculation, the area is like most of Korriban, a hot dry desert of endless red sand. However, since this area is surrounded by hard red rock cliffs making it a ravine, the heat get trapped within the hollow. Add this to the fact that it's below sea level this is the hottest most desolate place on the planet. Don't expect anything to last there for long. If we are able to make it to the hollow without being spotted, we'll have to find what we are looking for within a short amount of time or the heat would bake us alive."

The information seemed to placate A'Den for now. However, she would keep a keen eye on the woman. She still didn't trust her.

Book: The Hunt

Chapter: Korriban

“**K**orriban docking station 412, this is the Imperial freighter Argo requesting landing sequence.”

The communications request was coming from the Gozanti class cruiser that was bringing in its latest haul to the planet of Korriban. It was a boring job to say the least. None of the crew wanted to be here. All the best pilots were being sent to the forest moon of Endor. It was unknown why since there was so much silence and lack of communication about the whole operation. But it spoke volumes to the crew of the Argo. The Empire didn't think that they were skilled enough. Now they were stuck shipping supplies to a planet that had all but long been forgotten about, or at least should be. There was nothing out here but sand and those that were crazy enough to live on it.

“Imperial freighter Argo, you have clearance to land. Follow landing procedure and proceed to docking bay 14.”

Quintano turned off the communication unit that they had been listening to. Aro had been able to use the commlink to tap into the freighter's transmissions. Now that the freighter had clearance, it was time to follow the ship a little further before making a break for it.

They had shut off their engines some time ago and let the Ebon Mortis drift. Since they were deep within Imperial territory, it was likely that they would be shot at or at least boarded, neither of which was desirable. It was when they were able to pick up a freighter coming in to drop off supplies to Korriban did they turn the engines back on.

A'Den had done an excellent job at shadowing the freighter's movement so that they would only look like a shadow upon the freighter's radar, not that the freighter would be looking for anything anyway this deep into their own territory. To help with their stealth, Aro was able to mask their ship's signature from their engines to match the freighter.

As the freighter turned to follow its new trajectory, A'Den switched on the stealth mode of the Ebon Mortis, a feature that drew a considerable amount of power. Since she had to retrofit the new stealth technology with the old ship, there were still some things to iron out. She was a good enough engineer to fix and adapt a few things, but some things were still out of her league. Perhaps someday she would hire a more expert engineer to bring the whole ship up to the standards that she wanted. Until then, she would have to use the stealth mode sparingly.

Once she was sure that the stealth mode was on, A'Den moved the controls to pilot the ship away from the Argo. She would keep the Ebon Mortis low on the horizon and follow the landscape to continue to fly under any radar, but she knew that she had to fly high enough to not disturb the sand and give their presence away. It would be a delicate balance, but one that she was confident that she could pull off.

Valas waited for a short while before releasing the electromagnetic clamps from the Wraith. His ship took a free fall from the Argo and the Imperial agent let it happen. He waited and counted his heart beats. He knew how fast an item could freefall and how much speed it could pick up on the way down. This was all important to ensure that he was only picked up as some falling debris and still have time to pull up before crashing into the planet.

When he was sure that no one had picked him up on their radar, Valas flipped on the engines and kept them running as low as possible. His ship stopped its freefall and came to a halt just a few meters off of the ground. He let his engines kick up enough of the Korriban's red desert sand to give a slight dust cloud. This would be dismissed as nothing but a slight dust devil or whirlwind or even the impact sight of the supposed meteor that he had imitated. The dust would also cover his ship and keep his heat signature the same as his surroundings. When combined with the fact that he was going to keep his altitude low on the horizon, he doubted that anyone would be able to find him.

This wasn't the first time that he had pulled this off on Korriban. He had come here many times and he doubted that this would be his last. Each time that he had been sent here he had been told that it was of the utmost importance that he remained unseen. He never asked why, he didn't get paid to ask why. However, he could assume that any visit to this god forsaken planet would have to be in full stealth. With this in mind,

Valas slowly pushed his throttle forward. He wouldn't move as quickly as he would like to have and the Ebon Mortis would get further and further away, but because he had them tracked, they weren't going to go far without his knowledge.

“Sir we have confirmation that there are two ships that have entered Korriban's atmosphere. Should we send warnings to the nearest city?”

The officer on the bridge of the Audacious had been told to keep an eye on any ship that was entering Korriban's air space, rather they had clearance of not. He had been told by Lieutenant Draks to watch for several tricks that different smugglers had been known to use, and even a few he had used himself. The officer hadn't thought that it was even possible for one, let alone two ships, to enter into Imperial space, travel this deep without being spotted, and then enter into Korriban's atmosphere without being caught and that only by the most careful of scrutiny would they even be found. Yet, here he was reporting on what he had thought to be impossible.

“No,” Lieutenant Draks stated. “We don't want Korriban's security to capture what we want. Remain hidden in the polar region for now and keep an eye on the two. I want to know where they're going and when they start to leave. As soon as we know that they have recovered what we want, we'll board the Ebon Mortis in space, away from prying eyes.”

The red desert sands of Korriban kicked up into the air as the Ebon Mortis came in for a landing. The thick cloud of red dust hid the ship as it settled in place and then, even when the ship had come to a full stop, the sands continued to fall upon the vessel, hiding it further from any approaching and prying eyes. The disturbance would have been seen from miles away, but the crew of the Ebon Mortis needn't worry. There was no one around and nothing out here.

From where they had landed, the crew could see two long rows of red sheer rock that stood up on both sides of their ship, about a mile apart from each other, creating a ravine. With the towering rock face that surrounded them, the crew felt as if they were in some exhibit on display entrapped in their own environment. It almost seemed so surreal having

the cliff faces so high above them, as if the stone walls themselves were passing judgment upon those that had trespassed.

The ravine itself had nothing else important that could be seen. Red desert sands, the same color as the red rock that surrounded them, seemed to stretch on for eternity. There were no plants, no animals, and no buildings. There was no sign that life had ever been here.

“Korriban,” Quintano stated. “Why does it always come back to Korriban?”

“You’ve been here before?” Quia asked as she gave the holo-projection of the map one more glance over. She wanted to ensure that she hadn’t missed anything before heading out into such a harsh environment that could be disastrous with one wrong move.

“Only once before,” Quintano answered as he helped with powering down the engines and all of the other controls of the ship. “I had to smuggle out an old seal from a tomb. And no, I don’t have it any more, I sold it.”

Quia bit her lip. Hearing that Quintano had raided a tomb and had stolen an ancient artifact only to turn around and sell it wasn’t something she wanted to hear. She was in the profession of artifact preservation, not theft or underground artifact smuggling and sales. These were the kinds of things that she was trying to protect the items from. Hopefully she would be able to find out who the dealer was and she could find a way to get the artifact back. Until then, she had another job to do.

“It’s their home world you know,” Quia said trying to change the subject away from smuggling artifacts and selling them on the black market.

“What?”

“This is where the Sith come from, or at least the purebred Sith. Sith Lords came later. But this is the place that they called home.”

“Why would anyone want to call a place like this home?”

Quia just shrugged. “Except for the fact that the purebred Sith were born here, I couldn’t tell you. It might have something to do with the fact this planet is very strong in the dark side, but beyond that, I couldn’t agree

with you more. This isn't my ideal environment for a home world and the sooner we get out of here the better."

A'Den continued to listen to the banter between the two of them. They seemed to be getting along quite well, perhaps too well. This was starting to eat her up inside. They were here to do a job, a job that could be very dangerous and if they didn't start focusing on the issue at hand, they could end up being dead. With that in mind, she had to agree with Quia. The sooner they found the treasure and got off of this planet, the better.

As the three of them started to head toward the landing ramp, Quintano was stopped by the chirping and beeping of Aro. It had seemed that the astromech was more than happy to come along with them and couldn't wait to be part of the adventure.

"No, no, Aro, you stay here with the ship."

"Wowie...zzpt...brrll...wewo...wewoo."

"There's a lot of sand out there and you and I know that sand gets into everything. The last thing I want to do is to give you a complete overhaul trying to get the sand out of places that neither of us want me to have access to. Besides, the heat outside is so oppressive that you would run the risk of overheating. On top of that we need someone to run constant radar checks to see if we've been followed, spotted, or if anyone accidentally stumbles upon us and give us an early warning. We might even need to have the ship ready to go if there is a need for an immediate liftoff. In other words, we need you here."

"Ohwee...ohwee, zart."

"Yes, I know. But you are an astromech and this is your job. We all have a job and yours is here with the ship. Now, don't let anyone in except us."

The heat of the desert hit them like a fist. The change of environment was so strong that it literally took their breath away and for a moment it left them gasping for air. It was a dry heat that burned their lungs the moment they breathed in. Their nostrils felt on fire and they immediately felt thirsty. Each one of them started to slightly cough due to the burning sensation that they felt in their systems. It was so hot that it felt as if the oxygen in the air had been burned away and had become too thin to

properly breathe. They started to feel light headed, dizzy, and nauseous and they knew that it would only get worse.

They made their way down the landing ramp and onto the desert sands themselves. This, in itself was difficult and each step felt as if they were pushing against the oppressive heat that had somehow physically manifested itself into a thick blanket. Their bodies felt like lead and fatigue was already starting to kick in. It would be so easy to just lay down in the only shade available, that shade that was given underneath the Ebon Mortis, and close their eyes. Of course they all instantly knew that this would be certain death.

To make matters worse, they could all feel the difference in the gravitational pull of the planet. Korriban had an extra fifty percent more gravity than what was considered normal, or at least what was considered normal in the core planets. Now they felt weighted down, pushed even further to the ground. Their bodies felt thick and unbalanced, heavy and lumbering. There would be no quick movements while they were here.

Quia checked her data pad. It showed that their destination wasn't too far away and if she was reading this right then it seemed to be inside the ravine wall, not too far into the mountains themselves. The only question was, was if she was reading this right or was the data pad malfunctioning due to the intense heat or even any magnetic influxes that the sheer walls might have. There was only one way to find out. Unfortunately, it might be the only shot that they had. If her readings were wrong then they had no way of doing any comprehensive scouting. If the heat and oppression of the environment didn't kill them then they were more than likely would be found. Their time here was limited and she hoped that she was right in her calculations.

"It's that way," Quia stated with heavy breathing. Her mind was too clouded to think clearly and she didn't want to explain the distance that might or might not be accurate. All she did was move forward toward the ravine wall of red stone and hoped that the others were following.

A'Den moved slower than the others in her full Mandalorian suit. Her armor had some protection against the heat with built in cooling systems and air vents, but it wasn't enough. Her systems were already on overload just trying to keep the heat from penetrating her armor too much and roasting her alive. Not only did the armor trap the building heat, but its weight was becoming too heavy and too bulky for her. She should have left it aboard the ship. She hadn't realized just how bad it was going to be

here on this part of the planet. The last time that she was here, she must have been in a cooler area. Now she was in the hottest place trapped in the one thing that was meant to save her life but now was doing just the opposite. She looked toward the other two to see how they were fairing.

Both Quintano and A'Den were doing only slightly better than she was. Although they weren't weighted down with armor like she was, they didn't have any cooling systems either. She could tell that each step for them was an arduous labor and every moment was a strain upon their systems. Even after only thirty yards, the looks upon their faces seemed strained and their bodies tense.

No one spoke. It would be too exhausting and too difficult to even try. This left an eerie silence that permeated the area. There were no birds, insects, engines, talking, no advertisement audio blasts, no droids, or anything that would make a sound. There wasn't even wind. This made their footsteps deafening upon the red loose sand and it was now that they realized just how noisy their lives had been to finally hear true silence for the first time. It wasn't pleasant, it was unnerving.

'This way.'

A'Den turned her head. There was a whisper on the wind. Someone had spoke and their words had slightly echoed off of the red rock walls that surrounded them. If it hadn't been so quiet then she doubted that she would have heard it. A quick look around told her that the other two hadn't perceived the whisper which meant that her suit had picked up what the others could not.

'Over here.'

A'Den stopped and turned again. This time she was certain that someone was speaking.

'No, this way.'

The Mandalorian spun again and again, each time trying to get a bearing on the whisper's location. Each time the words seemed to be everywhere all at once. They seemed to echo off of one wall and then against another.

"What's wrong?"

A'Den spun back. Her heart was racing; her mind was spinning while trying to find the voices that wouldn't leave her alone. Now it was closer. If only she could....

"A'Den? What's wrong?" Quintano asked with concern.

It was Quintano that had asked the question, but it wasn't his voice that was haunting her.

"Can't you hear it?" A'Den asked? "They're everywhere. We're surrounded. They've got the high ground. We'll be cut down. It's a trap. We've walked into a trap."

A'Den started to panic. She drew both of her blasters and crouched low. She automatically turned on her radar and did her best to pick up anything that might be moving. Nothing was going to get the drop on her.

Her radar went into overdrive. The hot spots all around them played havoc on her computer systems and images came and went. She was getting hits that would appear and disappear just as quickly. They were outnumbered and out gunned. Their enemies were everywhere and only she could see them.

'Kill them.'

'Kill them all.'

'They will try to kill you.'

'They'll take it from you.'

'You must kill them first.'

A'Den nodded. The voices were right. She wasn't surrounded by those that were trying to kill her; she had brought them with her. There weren't enemies all around her, there were only two and she could take care of them...

"A'Den! A'Den, listen to me." Quintano was trying to get her attention. "Put your blasters away. Stop pointing them at us. Listen to me."

"You are after it! You want it! It's mine! It's all mine! You can't have it. You have tried to take the Ebon Mortis, now you are going to try to take

this. He tried to take me. I killed him and took his armor and weapons. See, I can and will defend myself. Stay away from me or I'll kill you as well."

Before Quintano could reach out and try to shake some sense into the Mandalorian, A'Den took off and ran, as quickly as she could, toward the red cliffs that looked down upon this valley with oppression. She didn't look back, nor did she look forward. Instead, she ran in a straight line toward one single part of the rocky barrier in front of them.

Both Quintano and Quia ran after the Mandalorian. Their feet beat against the ground as hard as they could. There was no telling what was up ahead; who or what might be waiting for them and what was going through A'Den's head. Either way, they knew that it was best to grab her before she ran into or caused any trouble that she couldn't handle.

Yet, it was no use. The oppressive heat and the intense gravity was consuming them. Their bodies felt like lead. Every move was a labor of regret and this chase only made it worse. There was no way to catch A'Den before she reached the wall. All they could do was watch as A'Den disappeared as soon as she reached her destination.

"Well, well, look who's come back for more."

The man was about six feet tall and towered over her and, like always, A'Den felt small under his shadow. She usually looked forward to seeing him, so tall and brave, and even handsome. Now she loathed the man and wished nothing other than the absolute desire to kill him, again.

"I knew that you would come back to me, little one. You've enjoyed our times together, you always have."

"Go away!" A'Den screamed. "You're not here! You're not real! You're dead!"

"And you would know," said the Mandalorian. "You were the one who killed me. Tell me, can you still feel the warmth of my blood on your hands? Can you still hear the sound of my dying breath? Yes, of course you can. You will always remember, that is why I'll always be here, with you. So, no, I can't go away. You won't let me. I'll live on in your guilt and

your nightmares. I'll plague your sleep and your waking hours and you'll see my face each time you make another kill."

"What do you want?!" A'Den shouted. Her voice seemed to echo and yet she hadn't even noticed her surroundings.

"That's not the question. The question is, what do you want?"

A'Den looked confused at the apparition.

"Don't look at me like you don't know what I'm talking about," the Mandalorian continued. "I know how you looked at me. You wanted me. I was just giving you what you wanted."

"No! No! I didn't..."

"Not only do we both know that this isn't true," the apparition continued. "By attacking me, the way that you did, only proves that you were ungrateful for everything that I had done for you. Was it too much to ask for a little something in return?"

"No, I...I was grateful...but..."

"But nothing. Now we can finish what we started and I assure you that there is nothing you can do to stop me this time."

A'Den let out a scream of terror.

Quintano heard the scream up ahead. He needed to get to A'Den and fast. She was an individual that could take care of herself; she had made a point of that, so if there was anything that could make her scream like that then they were all in trouble. He found the cave where A'Den had entered and went in after her.

The Maidenhead Tavern was as he remembered it. One large 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. 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 smells of the food and drinks, the clanking of glass and bottles and conversation, and the soft melody from the live band that was playing were all part of the atmosphere that gave the tavern the feel of home that he had come to know and love. Of anywhere in the galaxy that he could go, this was the only place where he wanted to be. Everything that he ever would want was here. Everyone that he ever wanted to be with was here.

Except for her. Jessa wasn't here. She had died, hadn't she? That seemed to be a long time ago, a painful horrible memory that had broken his soul. He would do anything to...

"Jessa?"

The Twi'lek turned and looked to see who had called her name. Her deep purple eyes lit up and she smiled when she saw him. The nightmare that he had thought that he had was over, it had never happened.

Jessa crossed the distance between them. Her hand reached up and caressed his face.

"Why did you leave?" She asked with a slight bitterness in her heart.

Quintano couldn't help but be stung by that. He knew that he had been away for far too long.

"I had to get the package. I would have paid us a considerable amount of credits. We could have..."

Jessa just shook her head. "You were always after yet another get rich scheme. Nothing worked. Nothing was going to work. Even when you did get something out of it, you always gambled it away or drank it away or visited the girls at the brothel. You never changed."

"But I would have..."

Again Jessa shook her head. "No, you wouldn't have, and you know it. You would have gotten yourself killed. Or, worse yet, you would have actually have found something and would have run off with it. I know you better than you know yourself."

"No, I actually found something. It paid off. We could have..."

“The package? I tried to sell it. I finally had a means to escape my miserable life and I finally had something tangible that I could count on, and it wasn’t you. All I had to do was sell it. Whatever it was, it had to be worth something. I went down into the slums to find a buyer, to get a good quote. Of course I wasn’t going to go down with the package on me, not initially.”

Quintano gasped. He wasn’t back at the tavern. This wasn’t Jessa, or at least not a living Jessa. She had just referenced something that hadn’t happened yet. This wasn’t the Maidenhead Tavern; this was a nightmare coming true.

“I went to the lower levels of the slums, the only place where everything is up for trade. Do you know what they did to me before that brought out their butcher knives? They didn’t stop. I begged and screamed, but no one came. You didn’t come. You never come when I need you the most.”

Quintano started to back away from Jessa. He hadn’t realized just how brutal her death had been. He could have guessed, but he didn’t want to, he didn’t want to let his mind run down that dark road. Yet, here it was, coming after him. He didn’t need to hear this. He didn’t want to hear this. He had to run, but there was nowhere to go.

“Then, when they were done, they brought their hatchets. They hacked at me and cut at me. They didn’t even bother to kill me first. I felt every sensation of agony that they inflicted. I watched as they pulled body parts off of me, out of me. They filled me with drugs to keep me alive a little longer, to keep my organs a little fresher to survive the transporting.”

“When they were done, I bleed out. It was slow and painful. I wanted someone to come along and put me out of my misery, but no one came. Why didn’t you come and save me? Where were you?”

“I tried...I’m sorry...”

“It’s your fault. It’s always your fault...”

Jessa’s words started to trail off. At first Quintano didn’t understand. Then he saw why.

Jessa's body began to fall apart. Her fingers, her hands, and her arms were the first to go. Massive cuts came across her torso. Her legs were cut from under her. She fell to ground and screamed in agony.

Quintano couldn't help but scream with her.

The library stood as it used to, those many years ago back on Coruscant, right down to the smallest detail. The shelves stood high and to reach the top of them one needed a rolling ladder, the one that was always being used by someone else or at least was placed in the wrong place and was a bear to move to where it needed to be. Some of the shelves were full of old texts in books and scrolls; these were kept in the lower vaults. Most of the shelves were full with data disks, each that needed to be taken to the hologram room or run through a computer or at least an astromech. Few had ancient holocrons. These were in the lowest vaults.

The walls were pristine; Master Jedi Jocasta Nu would have it no other way. Everything was in its place and everything was kept in perfect order. She ran the library with perfection and she was often quoted saying that if the data wasn't here, then it never existed. This was how proud she was of her station and how she ran things.

But this wasn't Coruscant, was it? How did she get here? How could this be?

Quia looked into the eyes of Jocasta as if to ask these questions and more. But the librarian only looked back at her and smiled a warm smile that always melted her heart. She may have been a strict librarian, but she was always a lighthearted individual that was kind and wise in her age. This was why she had so much respect for her.

Quia shook her head. Jocasta couldn't be here. She had watched her...

Quia's glance turned toward the little girl in the corner, the one struggling to put a data disk away into the right spot. She knew that Jocasta would be terse with her if she didn't get it right and she didn't want to disappoint the Jedi Master librarian. Quia knew this because she was her. This was that time, the time before...

The sound of footsteps caught her attention and she spun in place. There, the figure that she had hoped to never see again, yet still haunted her nightmares, was the one called Anakin Skywalker. Beside him there stood several soldiers.

Quia screamed. She yelled at Jocasta to run. She begged her to leave through the secret door. Tears ran down her eyes knowing full well what was going to happen next. Jocasta knew it as well, yet she stood her ground and ignited her lightsaber.

Anakin's lightsaber impaled the librarian's body and killed her on the spot. Her lifeless form was dashed aside as if it was worthless, meaningless, and never held any value. It wasn't just Jocasta's death that was so hard, but the cold, callousness and disregard for her life that made the death so brutal.

Quia closed her eyes as if to try to blot out the scene that she had just witnessed. She wanted to close her ears to the screams that followed. Nothing helped. Everything echoed in her ears and her head and her mind. Her heart broke again, like it had every night thereafter.

She opened her eyes when the screaming stopped. She had expected to see the massacre that was left behind in Anakin's wake. She had expected to see the padawans that she had grown up with slaughtered on the floor. But this wasn't the case.

Jocasta was still standing, as she had before. The padawans were putting away the data disks like they were before. The scene had reset itself. It was playing out again, a never ending nightmare that wouldn't stop.

"Why did you run?" Jocasta asked.

Quia looked up. Tears of guilt washed down her face.

"I was afraid."

"What did I teach you about fear?" Asked the librarian.

"Don't give in to fear. Fear is the path..."

"You left us," a voice stated from one of the corners. One of the padawans had stepped forward to confront her.

“Didn’t you care?” Asked another.

“We all fought. Why didn’t you?” Asked a third.

They were all coming after her now, pressing toward her. Their eyes of condemnation bore into her soul.

Quia closed her eyes. Fear and panic was starting to overcome her. She wasn’t so much afraid of the harm that these padawans would do to her. She was more afraid of what the guilt would do to her. She had abandoned those that needed her. She was getting what she deserved. Yet, despite the fact that she had come to terms with this mentally, her heart was still struggling. She wanted to live. She needed to run, like she had before. She had to save herself.

“Do not give in to fear. Fear is the path to the dark side. Do not give in to fear. Fear is the path to the dark side.”

Quia continued to mutter the words over and over again and again. They were words that had been drilled into her ever since she was young. They were supposed to be helpful. Now, they were only just words. They had no meaning.

Then it dawned on her. They did have meaning; she just had to clear her mind, her heart, and her soul. She wasn’t here. It was all in her mind and she had to fight it with calmness, not panic. She started again, this time with determination, calmness, and stillness.

Do not give in to fear. Fear is the path to the dark side. Fear leads to anger. Anger leads to hate. Hate leads to suffering.

She said it again and again, each time letting the words reach her soul, each time listening to its meaning. Finally, she felt the tension leave her body. She felt the fear be swept away. When she was finally relaxed, she opened her eyes.

They had all come into the cavern and were all standing not too far from the entrance. This portion of the cavern was about twenty feet wide or so. It was only fairly worked stone, only enough to have some semblance of a room, but still had its rough texture. Like the desert outside, the walls, ceiling, and floor were all red, perhaps some oxidized

red iron. Further in the back of the cavern was another exit where the path led deeper into the mountain range that surrounded the valley.

The shade did give them protection from the direct heat, but it didn't make it any cooler. The cavern had trapped heat within its low ceiling. There also seemed to be some form of heat coming from deeper within as if there was a nearby lava flow. Then, to add to the discomfort, there something that was cold to the soul. There was something horrible and wrong nearby, something rotting and although Quia knew that she wasn't force sensitive, she understood that there was something very strong from the dark side just beyond this cavern, a place where their map had told them to go.

Both Quintano and A'Den had fallen to their knees sobbing, crying, and screaming in mental and spiritual anguish. Quia could only guess what they were going through. She might not know the specifics, but if it was anything like the ghosts of her past that she had to face, then they were in a lot of pain, a distress that could consume them if she didn't help. Quia moved to Quintano first and gave him a slight shake.

“Who..what..how...?”

Quintano came out of his hallucination with a start. A cold sweat had come over his forehead. His eyes were wide and his breathing was erratic. He had no idea where he was or how he got here at first, but eventually, he slowly came to his senses. When he did, he didn't say anything. There was only a look of guilt from whatever he had to deal with in his past.

Quia moved to A'Den to repeat the process upon the Mandalorian. With all hope A'Den's reaction to being brought back would be similar and they would be able to move deeper into the cavern. She was wrong.

A'Den came out of her nightmarish reverie with weapons drawn. Her blasters were moving from one target to another, from Quintano back to Quia. Her hands were shaking, trembling from whatever nightmare she had just encountered. Then, just when everyone thought that she was finally going to let loose a barrage of fire, A'Den ran toward the back of the cavern and vanished as she disappeared deeper into the set of caves.

Both Quintano and Quia followed out of panic. There was no telling what was in the next cavern and if it held anything like this, the A'Den would need all the help that she could get and that was in her best of

shape. Right now, she was too panicked to deal with anything. One they passed into the next cavern they only found what they hadn't expected.

The second cavern was about the same size as the first. All about the base of the walls were bones of various and unidentifiable creatures, scattered haphazardly, piled on top of each other. Some seemed to resemble humanoid features while others were huge and must have belonged to a very large beast. It was hard to determine just how old this pile was since it was too hot here with not enough moisture to allow growth of any bacteria that would help decompose these bones. None of them were anywhere near the middle of the cave.

In the middle, sitting directly upon the ground, sat a hand held size pyramid. This relic had many diagrams all upon its outer casing and it was no doubt in anyone's mind that this was in fact a holocron. The only questions were, was this the one known as Holocron Theta and what information, if any, did it contain.

"It's mine. It's all mine," A'Den shouted as she ran toward the holocron in the middle of the cave.

"A'Den! No! Don't!"

Quia's warning came too late.

Just as A'Den stepped into the center of the cavern to pick up the pyramid shaped holocron, her body started to sink, as if standing in quicksand. However, the "sand" wasn't red beneath the initial layer of desert red sand. Instead it was an inky thick black goo that seemed to be alive. It pulled and grabbed around the Mandalorian, trying to pull her in.

A'Den started to panic. In her already agitated state of mind it was easy enough to push the battle seasoned warrior over the edge. She pulled and kicked and twisted to get out of the grip of the living tar, but with each movement she made, she only made it worse. The stuff reached up from the ground and caught hold of her arms and shoulders and pulled her into the ground.

As A'Den started to sink deeper and deeper into the pit of goo, first her feet then her legs, she turned on her jet pack in full desperation. Yet, even as the pack's jets pushed against the horrible fate that awaited her, even as the fiery blasts scorched the black goo tar, she only made matters worse. The goo continued to pull even harder dropping her into the substance as

far as her waist. It was when her jetpack sputtered and shut off did she realize that she wasn't getting out of this and panic turned to terror. She was going to die.

"Toss me the holocron," Quia shouted, trying to get A'Den attention over her shock.

"So you two can run off with the treasure? Not a chance. If I can't have it, then no one will! I'm taking this thing with me to my grave."

"It's the only way you're going to live! Trust me! Toss me the holocron!"

"A'Den," Quintano stated in a soft voice, a voice that spoke compassion and concern, a voice that spoke more to her heart and soul than her ears. "Please...toss us the holocron."

"No! Never! You like her better than you like me. I can see it in your eyes; I can hear it in your tone. You're going to leave me. You were always going to leave me. If I give this to you, you'll have that chance. I've got the holocron now! I'm calling the shots. You're going to sit there and watch me die as I take this thing with me!"

"I'm not going anywhere without you. Trust me. I know trust is hard to give, but I'm not like those you have trusted before. Please."

A'Den hesitated. She was halfway up to her chest and still sinking fast. It was so hard to trust. She didn't want to especially after reliving her nightmare over and over again and again. Yet, perhaps because of it, she knew deep down that Quintano was right. She had to trust someone sometime. There was nothing anyone could do anyway. She might as well. With a sigh of resolution she tossed the pyramid holocron to Quintano.

Immediately, as soon as the holocron left A'Den's hand there was a gurgling sound. The black tar goo bulged before it spat A'Den out. Her body flew through the air and landed unceremoniously upon the ground near Quintano's feet.

Quintano bent down and helped her up. "Come on, let's head back."

The lone figure that stood upon the red iron ridge that overlooked the valley below was barely visible, even to the well trained eye. He knew how to stay still near the rocks to avoid being seen. It wasn't like this was his first time here and he doubted that it would be his last.

Valas also knew better than to try to move too quickly. He saved his strength and made sure that he drank plenty of water. Too many had come out here and had died by not being prepared or wise enough. That foolishness cost them their lives as it almost cost the lives of those below him.

From his view through his binoculars it was obvious that his prey had found something. He zoomed in on the three and was able to make out the shape of the object. He was sure that it was, by its shape and size, a holocron. The question was, was this the holocron that his employer was looking for?

He shook his head. It really didn't matter what they had. His job was to make sure that these individuals continued to pursue what this thing lead to. His employer wasn't after the map; he was after the treasure on the other side. They still had a long way to go.

“How did you know that would work?” A'Den asked Quia once they got back to the Ebon Mortis.

Their trek back to the Ebon Mortis was slow and arduous. There were several times that they just wanted to give up and rest for a little bit. Yet, they each knew that once they stopped, they would never be able to get back up again.

Once inside, they immediately turned on the environmental controls and cranked up the air conditioning. They found the water that they needed in the small med bay in the ship and it still took them awhile to recuperate from their ordeal.

“I didn't really,” Quia admitted. “It was just a hunch. I figured that since a force user had hidden this away here, it would be in such a way that only a force user would be able to get to it, that is to say that only someone who could manipulate an item could remove it. That being said, the area had to be trapped. Once I realized that the harder you were fighting against, whatever it was that had hold of, the more it fought back,

then the only answer would have to be to stop fighting. You would have to trust and be at peace. These are qualities that a Sith Lord wouldn't have. It just all made sense and I hoped that I was right. I'm glad I was."

A'Den nodded. "I'm glad you were too."

Changing the subject A'Den continued. "Is this what we're looking for?"

"I don't know yet," Quia answered. "I can tell that the only data that it has is a star chart, but I'm not much of an astrochart reader. I'm a historian, not a cartographer. I usually get help from a computer to extrapolate systems for me. I can find the known systems with a current map, but there aren't enough stars on this chart for me to even hazard a guess. On top of that, these symbols don't make any sense."

"Bleep...blorp...beep...bleep."

"What is he saying?" Quia asked.

"He says that since he's an astromech, it's his job to read astrocharts. Perhaps the two of you can work together and try to figure something out."

Quia nodded. "It's worth a shot."

A'Den left the historian with Aro as she made her way toward the back of the ship. There was something that she wanted to say to Quintano while she still had the nerve. Somehow she found this more difficult to do than to fight off a rancor. She even stopped a couple of times in a desperate attempt to prevent the conversation from happening. Yet, she knew that if she didn't say something now then she never would and it would continue to nag and fester for a long time. Even when she did find Quintano it was difficult to bring the words forward.

"Look, some of the things I said back there...", A'Den stated to say, but she was having a difficult time finding the right way to say it.

She had never apologized to anyone. She never need to. She was always sure of everything she did and every action was justified. She never had anything to apologize for. She also never cared about what anyone thought of her. Yet, now she found that she didn't want her words to be

remembered. She didn't want Quintano to know what was really going on inside of her.

"Don't worry about it," Quintano stated. "It was the heat. I'm surprised you didn't melt while wearing your suit. The thing is, heat will do crazy things to you, make you say crazy things. I wouldn't worry about..."

"It wasn't the heat."

Both Quintano and A'Den turned to see Quia's arrival. Both of them had to wonder how long the historian had been standing there and how much she had heard of their private conversation.

"If you think for one moment that I meant any bit of..." A'Den snapped at Quia.

Quia put her hands up and slightly forward trying to calm the Mandalorian down. "No, no, that's not what I meant. I didn't mean to know what you had or hadn't intended to say. I'm just saying that it wasn't the heat that was messing with your head."

"Korriban is heavy with the dark side of the force. It messes with your heart and your head. It can drive you insane. You will find that you will do and say things that you had no intention on doing. Worse yet, it could perverse the very thing that you wanted to say or even feel. Either way, you will leave all twisted and broken inside."

"The dark side is very strong and difficult to resist on the best of terms. This was at its worst. The oppressive heat and gravity was meant to physically wear you down while the dark side was trying to tear you apart from the insides. I would say that we did fairly well, all considering. I wouldn't beat yourself up about it. If we stayed there any longer I'm sure that we would have all drawn guns upon each other and none of us were going to get out of there alive."

A'Den let forth a deep sigh. The others thought that she was trying to ask for forgiveness about drawing a weapon on them. As long as they thought that, then she had nothing to worry about. What she really was concerned about was the jealousy that she felt when she saw Quintano and Quia together. The two of them seemed to hit it off right away. It didn't help that Quia seemed to be easy going, a trait that she simply couldn't bring out from herself and she doubted that she would ever have.

Of course this meant that she pushed everyone away. It wasn't the fact that she was looking for a relationship. She had to scoff at that idea. She didn't need anyone in her life to come and rescue her from herself. However, every once in a while she just wanted someone to talk to, perhaps someone to share an ale with.

"I thought you were helping Aro," A'Den stated trying to divert the conversation. Truly the historian had better things to do other than sneaking up on them and prying on their private conversation.

"I was, that is I did. That little droid is better than he realizes. He was able to find a match with the partial map. This is in an unknown sector of the outer rim."

"Then we know where the treasure it?" Quintano asked with excitement in his voice.

A'Den wasn't so thrilled to hear that the treasure might actually be in their grasp. As soon as they found it, they would all take their share and go their separate ways. There would no longer be a reason to be together.

Quia shook her head. "No. The map is incomplete. It could take us a long time just to scout the area and it doesn't mention what we are supposed to find there or where to find it."

"Then what good is it?"

"I've been formulating a theory and I think this proves it. I don't think we are looking for a treasure or information from one ancient Sith Lord who didn't want to share his power. If that were the case, he would have taken the secret with him to the grave. Since this is an incomplete map this means that others had other pieces. If my theory is correct, we only have one tenth of the full map that will eventually lead us to Holocron Theta."

"You mean we have to get nine more pieces just to find this Holocron Theta that may or may not reveal anything of importance?" A'Den asked with annoyance. She didn't mind having someone around to talk to, especially Quintano, but she wasn't willing to waste her time chasing down something that may or may not be of any value.

"Yes, and no," Quia stated. "Yes, we'll have to find the other nine pieces. But as far as not being of value, I don't think that is the case. In

other words, I think that this is very and highly important. This also means that it isn't a treasure per se, but in fact something far more important, perhaps some ancient technology. Whatever it is, these ten individuals took great lengths to keep it hidden."

"But who..."

Quia put up her hand to stop A'Den from asking any further questions. She hated it when individuals started to ask questions when she wasn't finished talking and the information she was about to give would have given the answer.

"I now believe that we are seeing an accumulation of cooperation among all ten Sith Lords in a Sith Council."

Both Quintano and A'Den looked at the historian as if to ask her what she meant. It was obvious that they weren't following her line of logic or even why it was important, not only important back when this happened, but important now.

"Look, a long time ago the Sith were ruled by one Emperor. This Emperor held a council of ten Sith Lords that would each control several sectors. By this the Emperor could maintain a full strong hold on all of the systems that were in his grasp."

"The only real way to become one of these ten Sith Lords was by death of a previous one and that usually meant by assassination. This meant that the Sith Lords didn't trust each other because each wanted one of their own apprentices to be on the council so that he or she could have even more power. Cooperation, especially at this level, was unheard of. If these ten Sith Lords wanted to share power then that meant that they were trying to do something that had never been done before, that was to overthrow the Emperor and rule as a collective."

"My next theory is this. The Sith that had the first map that you showed me wasn't part of the original ten. If he was then he wouldn't need an astromech's star chart, different from the other piece that we just recovered, to find the first map, he would have just taken it from the other council member. So we have an outsider trying to break into the Sith Council who was trying to hide power from the Emperor."

"I can just about pinpoint when this would have happened. There was a small time during the old republic where we have lost members of a full

council. There's a few year span between one set of council members and another. This tells me that the Emperor found out about the council's attempt to overthrow him, dealt with them, and erased them from history."

"The only question now is who would know? If an old Sith left the star chart to the first map in his lightsaber and the council didn't know or they would have taken it, and the Emperor didn't know or he would have taken it, then who knew that you might have this map aboard to get the word out? Why would a Sith leave such a precious map in his lightsaber but not have the lightsaber with him?"

"The thing is, all of this points to an ancient technology discovered or created during the old republic, hidden from the Emperor and Sith Council, or it would have been used by now, and has now only recently been discovered. But by whom? Has the Empire found a new weapon, more powerful than the Death Star that had plagued our systems not too long ago?"

"Of course all of this is conjecture. However, with the fact that there's a hidden partial map in the handle of an unknown Sith that was hidden aboard his ship but not with his body, the fact that the map already tells us that it's part one of ten, the fact that the star chart to find this partial map was aboard an old republic Sith ship, the fact that the Empire had just created a world destroying weapon, and the fact that word has gotten out that this map exists and that you have it, all adds up. There's something on the other side of these star charts that is going to change the galaxy and I doubt that it's just a simple treasure."

"I don't know what you have stumbled upon, but whatever it is, someone wanted it hidden and now someone wants it found."

"You got all of that with an incomplete piece of a map?" A'Den asked doubtfully.

"This is what I do, it's what I've been train to do and studied to do. As an archeologist, it is my job to work with what I can, usually with only pieces and fragments. From there I make a judgment call and build a thesis, a theory. I work with this theory while I try to find more pieces that either confirm or deny this notion and adjust my theory accordingly. So yes, I got all of this from a single fragment of a map and if my theory is correct, and this information was a well kept secret, kept hidden by ten different Sith Lords, then this is going to be a very dangerous endeavor."

Both Quintano and A'Den took a look toward each other. They couldn't help but wonder what they had gotten themselves into.

"So, where's the next piece?" Quintano asked.

"This first piece may be incomplete about where the final destination is or what to find when we get there, but it does show where to find the second piece. If we are going to continue this journey, then our next stop is Taris. I'm sure the second map will tell us where the third one is and will give us a second piece of our final destination in the process."

"Well, where to then?" Quintano asked.

A'Den didn't have to think long or hard on her decision. This adventure had already put her through hell and now it owed her.

"To Taris," A'Den stated. "Punch in the coordinates and let's see where this takes us."

Chapter: Taris

The thick humid atmosphere cleared away as the Ebon Mortis was expertly piloted toward ground level. Here, as the heavy clouds were penetrated, the true sight of the planet below could be seen. It wasn't a sight that any of the crew was used to.

Below the vast tropical jungle forest could be seen. Large trees and vines and large bushes the size of buildings were thrust up from the jungle floor. Some trees were as thick as the Ebon Mortis itself and spread out giving a canopy over the terrain below. Other trees were a hundred feet tall or taller. Vines that crept from one tree to the next, connecting the whole calliope of flora, were thick enough to walk on. There were only a few areas that weren't covered by the vast array of the flora and given time the jungle would finish its onslaught upon the land and cover the whole planet.

Where the jungle had yet to take over were various pools and lakes that had become stagnant and had turned into swamps. Even from the high altitude that the Ebon Mortis was cruising, it was visibly obvious that these bodies of water were not to be trifled with. They were green and brown and yellow. They were filled with mud and decomposing plants and even runoff of nearby ruins. These were polluted at best and very toxic at worst.

From time to time a set of ruins could be seen. These were cities from the old republic when this place was fought over by various factions. Crumbled buildings tried to cling to life as the jungle continued to invade upon them. Roads were broken and bridges were destroyed. Structures leaned at precarious angles, threatening to fall at any moment. It was difficult to imagine any functioning civilization that used to be here after seeing these.

Then there were the large ships that had crash landed or shot down. Their debris littered the jungle floor and pieces lay everywhere. Only the larger crafts could still be seen, some of which were sticking up through the trees, broken beyond repair and rusted beyond salvage.

With all of the fuel leakage, chemical plant drainage, sewer flows, radioactive material spillage, and weapon deterioration, there were large areas of runoff that continued to pollute the water and pour toxins into

the ground. Some of these areas were void of any life while others were teeming with genetically mutated plants. It left horrific images of what the animal life would be like.

The crew of the Ebon Mortis knew that the entire planet wasn't like this. There was a movement to rebuild a major city and an attempt to bring Taris back to a viable and sustainable planet. While the new government wasn't part of the Empire, it didn't mean that they welcomed visitors. As a matter of fact, with the galactic war still going on, they were very cautious at best to even consider letting just anyone show up on their planet. These new pioneers and city builders had a long and arduous journey ahead of them. They didn't want anyone to come and undermine their projects. This meant that the Ebon Mortis would likely be turned away or even shot at. Even if they were permitted to land, they wouldn't be permitted to go hiking through the jungles and definitely would not be permitted to keep any old data records, especially a holocron from the old republic, for themselves.

This meant that the Ebon Mortis had to be kept out of sight and off of everyone's radar. It also meant landing out in the middle of nowhere, an inability to get supplies, and an inability to get help if help was needed. They were on their own to face whatever dangers were out here.

A'Den found a spot that seemed wide enough to land the Ebon Mortis. There was still a considerable amount of distance to cover between this spot and the location that was noted on their map, but there was no other place to land and any better spot would be further away. This was going to have to do.

As the ship started to make its descent, the vessel crashed into many of the branches that were still in its way. The limbs snapped and broke sending a shower of leaves and smaller branches falling to the ground while wildlife flew and scattered in all directions. The echo of the breaking branches and the disruption of the animal life could be heard for miles and if the crew of the Ebon Mortis had any desire to approach this area with stealth, then that had become disillusioned and quickly dismissed.

A'Den went through the full landing process and dropped the landing gear. She turned off the vast majority of the systems since they didn't want to be noticed by any scouting party or by any creatures that may be attracted to electromagnetic impulses, like any Mynocks that might inhabit this area or anything else similar. It was just best to be safe than sorry.

“You’re sitting this one out Aro,” Quintano stated as he got up to leave.

“Woo...bzzt...twirlp...bzzt.”

“Yes, I know you want to go, but not this time. The terrain is swampy and you’ll probably rust by the time we get back.

“Woot...woot...woot...bleep...bzzt.”

“Now look, I know you that you had to stay behind last time, but it looks like you are staying behind again. I would feel better; all of us would feel better, knowing that you are here guarding the ship to ensure that we can get off of this planet as quickly as possible. We need you here. Ok?”

“Woo.”

The sound of Aro’s response was that of defeat. Quintano almost felt for the droid and wondered just how much of a personality it had and how close it really was to having full artificial intelligence.

The heat and humidity hit them lit a fist. It wasn’t nearly as hot as it was on Korriban, but at least there it was a dry heat. This was a sticky unpleasant heat that clung to their bodies and clothing. They were immediately wet from the thick moisture in the air and their clothes were soaked from the humidity and the sweat that they were producing. The moisture was so thick that it was difficult to breath.

“How far do we have to go?” A’Den asked. She had ditched her Mandalorian armor, learning from her mistake last time. But, although she wasn’t armored, she wasn’t without her two blasters. She wasn’t going anywhere unarmed.

“About two clicks, that way,” Quia stated after referring to her data pad and pointing off deeper into the jungle.

The three of them continued to walk in silence. There really wasn’t much to say and between the heat and the humidity it was too difficult to think of any conversation to have. They knew that they needed to preserve their energy and so they continued on with much conversation.

As they made their way through the jungle, they were able to see how the plant life was trying to reclaim this section of the planet. Large trees,

bushes and vines were swallowing up ancient buildings of stone, mortar, and metal. Sections of ruined buildings would be seen cutting through the flora, some beyond recognition of what they used to be.

A shadow came over them as something very large flew overhead. Its figure and shape was hidden by the tree cover and perhaps it was for the better. None of them really wanted to know what kind of beast would want to make them the next meal.

Creatures moved before them, always out of their vision. Sometimes they were rather small while others were much larger. Everything seemed to be startled and wanted nothing to do with them.

They continued, pushing aside brush when they could and moving around it when they couldn't. The plants were constantly in the way and their trek was difficult at best. Even the ground itself seemed to try to slow them down with its mud and, in areas, the beginnings of a swamp.

The jungle only just barely cleared and it was enough to show that at one time there had been a fairly large area devoid of trees or shrubs. As it was, there had been plenty of growth to almost take back the site.

A large fence had, at one time, surrounded the area. It seemed to be a large metal chain link fence with wire on top to further discourage entrance. Most of the fence had been knocked over, some parts were broken because large tree branches had fallen upon them while other places looked as if some large animal had broken in and even in a few areas it seemed that a large creature had broken out. Further down the fence was a gate that had been smashed open and ripped apart as if it were mere paper. Upon it was a sign, and although the words were from an old outdated language, one that Quia would be able to translate given time, the symbol, faded from exposure to the elements, was very clear. It was a warning that the facility that was guarded by this fence held radioactive materials.

The building in question made of concrete and reinforced with metal, still stood, albeit in poor shape. Many of the walls had holes in them and like the fence; it seemed that the elements and animals had done a considerable amount of damage to them. The double doors to the entrance of the building were broken outward and were laying haphazardly upon the ground, each with the same warning symbol that was found on the gate, that this area has radioactive materials.

A small pond, more of a swamp, was by the side of the building. Drainage from the structure had flowed here and collected until it became what it is now. The liquid didn't look anything like water. Instead it had chemicals floating on top that swirled with each other, but refused to mix. Some places had a fluorescent green that would move about just under the surface. Bubbles came up from somewhere underneath, beyond sight, giving rise to the notion that something might be living in that cesspool.

“Are you sure that the second piece is in there?” A'Den asked.

Quia only gave a slight smug look. The heat and humidity had been getting to her and was it putting her in a foul mood. This had coupled with the fact that these two kept questioning her ability to do her job, a job that she had been trained to do ever since she was a youngling. She had just about enough of them and if they didn't quit soon, she was going to solve this mystery without them.

Quintano led the way. His lit flashlight flickered across the dark walls of the structure's interior. It wasn't a pretty sight.

Pieces of the walls and ceiling could be seen where the integrity of the building had given way. Rubble filled one corner after another. There were signs of that something large had come through here, tearing apart sections of one wall after another. There were scorch marks of blaster fire and an area that looked like small explosives were used.

There was litter all over the place. Desks and chairs and cabinets had been broken and set up as barriers and sometimes shelters or perhaps even dens or lairs. Light fixtures were downed. Security doors were torn off and dashed aside.

Graffiti was painted all over one wall and down another. It seemed that several gangs or pirates or smugglers had come through here and marked this area as their territory, although what they could possibly be looking for was beyond Quintano's imagination. Everything that he saw had already been searched or destroyed. He only hoped that these previous pirates hadn't found the holocron that they were looking for. If they had then this adventure was going to end very quickly.

They passed by one room after another, each being shaken off by Quia who was keeping an eye on her data pad to see how close they were to the coordinates from the last map. Each room had been ransacked and torn apart. Control rooms, storage closets, monitoring stations, security

booths, mess halls, personnel bunkers, and minor electrical rooms were all ransacked. Nothing of value was still intact. Either items were taken or destroyed. There was nothing of use that was left behind.

Their fears became stronger and stronger the deeper they went into the complex. There were areas where it looked as if blood had been splattered upon the wall. Signs of violence were worse. There was more blaster fire the further they went and less and less graffiti. This meant that fewer individuals wanted to go down here and there was more battle signs and less signs of leisure.

Stairs lead them even deeper into the complex and here there were only battle scenes. Large areas showed where more and more blaster marks had marred the walls and sections of the floor and parts of the ceiling were blasted away. There were massive claw marks, as if some beast had been down here, and by the looks of things the creature had done a considerable amount of damage.

By the second layer down there were no signs of any loitering or pilfering. However, there was still plenty of destruction. There were more markings of beasts. Metal canisters were ripped apart, cabinets were torn off of the walls and smashed open, and control panels were punched inward. What could have been salvaged by pirates or smugglers was simply destroyed beyond repair.

By this time, Quintano had already pulled one blaster in his left hand while he continued to guide the others by his flashlight in his right. A'Den had pulled both of her blasters, one in each hand, and had taken up the second position. She was constantly monitoring their flanks and was the first to pull her weapons toward any area that showed any form of questionable regard.

Quia took up the rear, protected by the two in front of her, although that didn't give her any comfort. They passed by many shadows that were not entirely searched and she was sure that anything could and would circle around and attack from their rear meaning that she would be the first to fall. Although she knew how to use her weapons, she only studied how to fight against humanoids, not unknown creatures in the shadows. Even then her battle experience had been very limited. As a matter of fact, her only real battle that she had ever had was the one in Nar Shaddaa, and even that was out of pure instinct. The only comfort she had was the mantra that she spoke over and over in her mind again and again.

Do not give in to fear. Fear is the path to the dark side.

A shadow moved to their right and their hearts stopped beating for just a moment. Fingers tightened on the grip of their triggers. Sweat poured from their foreheads. Then, they realized it was just the shadows playing tricks on them.

A loud bang brought them dead in their tracks, each turning back to back to each other. Weapons were drawn and were pointed in all directions in a desperate attempt to take out their attacker before it got to them. The echo had made it difficult to tell where the noise had come from and for one moment it had seemed to have come from all around them.

Quintano's flashlight caught the culprit. A shelving unit had fallen from its rafters after time and wear and tear had taken its toll. Gravity had finished its integrity and its descent upon the ground had broken the silence leaving all to catch their breaths.

They moved with more caution, each sure that there was something else down here with them and each feeling foolish for thinking such a thing. There was nothing down here of interest. There was no food or water, only debris. Their footsteps echoed with each step and this was the only sound they heard.

“Over here.”

Quia's voice had made both Quintano and A'Den jump and for a moment they were going to turn their blasters to where they had heard the noise. They shook their heads. They had been far too jumpy.

Quia pointed toward a set of metal automatic double doors. Here the double doors had been ripped off their hinges as if they were merely made of flimsy material. Huge gash marks marred the portals where some beast had slashed and cut with its claws. There even seemed to be bloodstains where something had been mortally wounded and had either been dragged or had crawled inside the room beyond. Upon these two doors were the same symbols that had been seen as warnings, there was a danger of radioactivity and that this room in particular was to be taken into consideration where safety was involved.

The three of them pushed forward, stepping over the remains of the ruined portal and into the room beyond. They ignored the symbol and

dismissed the notion that any radiation was still around. However, they didn't ignore the fact that something massive and very strong had been here before and there was still a possibility that it could come back again.

The room was a good sized control room. A window took up a fair amount of the far wall giving a view to another room beyond. Beneath the window was a control panel with one seat. It was obvious that an individual could monitor and control the situation in the next room. The controls, like everything else that had seen along the way, had been smashed leaving nothing but broken wires and destroyed displays.

The other room had several mechanical arms that reached from its ceilings. From the ground rose quite a few of rods, in rows and columns letting them all know that this was where the radioactive materials would be unutilized for whatever purpose they were used for.

“What's that stench?” A'Den asked with disgust.

The others had smelled it as well. They couldn't help but notice the odor that had hit and had assaulted their senses. It had brought tears to their eyes and nausea to their guts. There was no mistaking the smell of decomposition.

“Something has recently died here,” Quia stated while trying to hold her dignity. It wasn't going to take much more before she lost what she had to eat last.

“I have a feeling that if we stay much longer then we may be next,” Quintano said. “Look.”

Both A'Den and Quia turned their attention to the area where Quintano had shined his flashlight. There, in the corner, was a large lair, a nest that had been built out of ripped and torn fabric, tangled wire, and large bones. A good sized area in the center had been cleared to show that whatever had built this nest had a habit of sleeping in it, and although it was currently unoccupied, it still gave the three of them the chills.

“We better find that holocron and fast,” Quintano said. “I don't want to know what had taken up residency and I don't want to find out what it eats.”

“Agreed,” A'Den said as she moved her blasters from one end of the room to another, looking at each shadow expecting the room to finally

reveal its secrets. “Let’s get this thing and get out of here. Quia, it’s all yours. Tell us what you think.”

Quia understood that she had to think quickly. Thinking quickly wasn’t her thing. She preferred to study and slowly put an idea together. Now she no longer had the luxury of time.

She had to think. If one of the Sith Lords had a holocron on this planet, then why would he keep it here? What was so special about this building, and for that matter, about this room? The only thing here was the fact that there was hazardous material, material that would make anyone sick, even to the point of death.

Perhaps that was the point. Many force sensitive individuals could manipulate energy, including force lightning. Could one manipulate radiation? Could a Sith Lord pull his power from the poisons of radioactive materials just as history had talked about individuals that could pull energy from life? It was a possibility.

If this were the case then the Sith Lord would keep the holocron close to his source of energy, a source that he could manipulate and watch over. That would be this spot. The only question was where would he hide it?

“Quintano, shine the light back this way.”

Quia let her eyes wander as the flashlight came back toward the control consol. Her eyes scanned every bit of it. Perhaps she was wrong. Then she saw it. Near the floor there was a section of the panel that had been ripped open, only it wasn’t knocked inward, it was pulled outward, toward them. Something had deliberately gotten into the small hidden niche.

Quia bent down and looked inside. The small niche was big enough to hold a holocron and not much bigger. This would be a perfect spot to hide such an important item, right at the feet of an individual that could use the very radiation from the other room to power him. The problem was, the niche was empty.

She had to think. If something knew that the holocron was here then it had to have either had a map, which it didn’t have, or it had put it there in the first place. If this was the case, then whatever ripped open the secret panel...

Quia immediately pushed Quintano's light back toward the lair. She ignored his protest and A'Den's questioning. If her line of reasoning was correct then she would find what they were looking for. Unfortunately they would also be in a lot of danger.

"There! See it?"

At first no one saw what Quia had pointed out. Then, in the shadows, between several large bones in the nest, the holocron could be seen.

"Quick, get it before..."

The blow to the back of her head came out of nowhere. Quia's body flew several feet before landing upon the ground.

A'Den and Quintano spun around with their weapons drawn, but it was too late. The beast was already upon them. A massive claw came down and slapped Quintano's arm hard, knocking his blaster out of his hand.

A'Den was able to get off a couple of blasts before she even realized what the thing was. From what she could tell, by the light of the blaster fire, the beast was humanoid in appearance. It was larger than they were, easily over two meters tall, and that was when it was slightly hunched over. It had no hair and its skin was a pale green blue. For clothing it only had rags.

The Mandalorian thought that she had the thing dead to rights, striking it at point blank range and hitting it dead center mass. She was wrong. The thing had moved so quickly that all she was able to hit was the wall behind the beast.

The thing had ducked and had moved to the right and waited for a split second while the blaster fire went off. Then it sprang back to its left as it moved forward. Its mass and momentum was too much for A'Den and she was slammed halfway across the room.

The beast went to make a move toward the downed Mandalorian when it heard a sound from the man that it had knocked down and a quick spin in that direction told it all that it needed to know. His prey had found his blaster and was coming around for a shot.

Quintano had the beast while its back was turned. All he had to do now was pull the trigger and...

The beast put out its hand and reflected the blaster bolts coming its way. Then, with hardly a thought, it gave a slight wave. As it did, Quintano was lifted from the ground and thrown through the air. His body struck the monitor station hard and his body fell limp to the ground.

The creature looked back toward his prey. The closest one to it was the first one that he had struck. She was coming around. It was best to take her out as quickly as possible so he could move on to the others. He took a massive lurch forward, caught the downed woman's body and pulled her upward. He could see that she had finally come around she was able to see her fate. Horror came across her face and the fear that she felt was like fuel to his fire. Her fear was almost as powerful as the radiation that he often fed off of. He opened his jaw and bit down hard upon her neck and shoulder area with its sharp teeth.

He felt her warm body begin to bleed. He felt her pain. He felt her fear. He felt...

Agony exploded through its back. Something sharp had pierced its body and came through its torso. He dropped the woman and staggered. A quick look told him that the Mandalorian had come up with a vibro blade weapon, the weapon that was dropped by his first prey. He had been so engulfed in his kill that he hadn't noticed the Mandalorian recovering faster than he had anticipated.

He was bleeding, but it didn't matter. He had been through worse. He had survived and he would survive this as well. He would show them, he would show them all. He would rip them apart one by one just as he had done with everyone that had come into his lair. He would...

"Quintano! Now!"

The creature turned toward the man that he thought was out of the fight. Instead, he had rolled and had come up with both of his blasters and was waiting for the right moment, the moment when the one that had stabbed him was out of the way.

He put his hand up to block the blaster fire once again, but it was no use. The pain was too great and it was messing with his concentration. The blasts struck him and darkness came for him one last time.

“Quia! Quia are you alright?” Quintano asked as he rushed to her side.

The historian looked awful, and not just because of the wound that the creature had given her. Blood was running freely from her shoulder and neck area and was already matting her clothing and her hair. This could easily be stopped and when they got back to the Ebon Mortis they would be able to help her further. However, she had turned pale and sweat was running down her forehead, more so than the heat and humidity had done prior. She was cold to the touch and trembling.

“Rakghoul...poison...infectious...too late...”

“No, no. Just hang on, we’ll get you ...”

“Where?” A’Den asked.

She hadn’t asked out of spite or anger, but simply out of curiosity. They weren’t supposed to be here. There were smugglers from every system after them. The Empire wasn’t too happy about them and they knew no one, no one with any medical skills. Even if they found one, what then? She knew that there would be questions and reports. Then there was the fact that Quia just said “infectious”.

“I don’t know!” Quintano snapped. “Get the holocron, I’ve got her. Aro! Aro, come in. Scan for the nearest settlement, I don’t care how small, we’re looking for the closest medic.”

Chapter: Rakghoul Plague

The hike through the jungle was tiring and arduous. They had to transverse around barriers of plants and large sections of ruins that stood in their way. The mud slowed them down and there were more than a few creatures that had been upset with their presence and had tried to attack them. There was even a carnivorous vine that had tried threatened to eat them alive, but A'Den had made short work of it with just a couple of blasts.

While A'Den continued to press on and make the trail for them while Quintano was helping Quia along. He had to basically carry her for the most part as she continued to grow weaker and weaker as they progressed. His only hope was that they made it to their destination in time.

The building in the small clearing was nothing more than a culmination of ruins from other buildings brought together to create a haphazard dwelling, more of a shack than any functional household. At first site they would have dismissed it as yet another set of ruins and would have, on any other day, passed it by. As it was, they knew exactly where they were going and what they were looking for.

A'Den hit the door with her shoulder, barging it open. Both of her blasters were drawn and she had them at the ready for anything that they encountered. As was always, she was going to shoot first and ask questions later if the situation warranted it and out here in the middle of nowhere, she was sure it would be warranted, especially after their encounter down in the power plant.

The initial room was set up like a small waiting room. There were a few chairs up against the walls with a small table between them. These offered little comfort to those who would be waiting for the man that they would find further inside, a man that they didn't have to wait long to find. He came through the opening from the far side of the room that led deeper into the dwelling.

“Who in the ...”.

The man stopped as soon as he saw the blasters being pointed at him. For one moment his eyes went wide. Then, he saw her. Quia's condition

had changed for the worse and now she was barely conscious. Ignoring the blasters pointing at him, he immediately shifted from being concerned over his own safety and shifted it to being concerned over hers.

“Get her over here,” he said leading the way back into the next room.

“Quickly, lay her on one of the tables.”

This adjacent room had a couple of patient tables for individuals to lie upon. As soon as Quia was lying down, he moved over to her and started to examine her. He went through various physical examinations, looking into her eyes and feeling her throat. It was obvious that he had seen the wound upon her neck and shoulders and had noticed how the make shift bandage was soaked through with blood. Yet, he didn't seem to make this his priority. Instead, he seemed to want to take in all of the details about this woman's well being before making any judgment calls. Even then, he pulled out a few hand held instruments to get further readings.

The man moved with precision and care. He showed his expertise in everything that he did and made no quick decisions. The man definitely had skill and experience and from the fact that he could ignore the blasters that had been pulled, it also seemed that this man was no stranger to blaster fire, either having it pulled on him far too many times or it was the fact that he had served in the alliance.

He was a little shorter than Quintano and quite a bit older. His gray silver hair was starting to take over the black that used to cover his head. It gave him a look of wisdom without revealing too much of an aged individual. He wore basic clothing, nothing too fancy, and he could have easily been dismissed as a local farmer or even a basic merchant. His skills told them otherwise.

“She's got a fever and is going into shock. Some of it is due to blood loss, but not all of it. Her wound is badly infected as if she's had it for a long time and it refuses to heal, yet it's fairly new and fresh. It must be the venom that was injected into her. Do you know what bit her?”

The doctor turned to the two of them, unimpressed by the two blasters that were still pulled on him and were pointing at him as if he was a raging Gamorrean.

“My name is Jado Pavan,” he said, “and I’m a doctor. Now you can either put those away before someone else gets hurt or you can shoot me and lose the only chance you have to save your friend.”

Both Quintano and A’Den looked at each other as if to silently ask the same question of rather or not they could trust the medic. With a shrug A’Den lowered her blasters and put them away.

“Now that we have that settled,” Jado continued, “let me get started and you can answer some questions.”

Jado moved to a cabinet and removed a couple of stimulant injectors. With expert knowledge he injected them into various spots around Quia’s body. As he did, he asked his questions.

“I’m not necessarily on the grid and I prefer it that way. I’m not an easy many to find, at least unless you know someone. How did you find me?”

Both Quintano and A’Den had come to the realization that the man that they had found was deliberately trying to stay hidden, it wasn’t just out of wanting to be a hermit. He didn’t want authoritative figure finding him. Now they began to question their choice of doctors.

“Our astromech was able to find some chatter on the comms. They spoke of you and your location. It didn’t take long for him to triangulate your location.” As Quintano spoke he realized just how proud he was of the little droid. He only recently had thought that he would never need one, yet time and time again Aro had pulled through.

Jado nodded. “It was only a matter of time before I was found by more conventional means. I guess I should have taken better care of my location. But there lays the dilemma. If the civilians can’t find me then how can I help them?”

“So, what were you three doing out here in the first place?”

“We were just...” Quintano started to respond but stopped short. The less Jado knew about their treasure hunt the best it was for everyone concerned.

“Let me guess. You were just looking around?” Jado asked with bitterness. “Do you know how many times I’ve heard that? Treasure seekers, adventurers, scientists, smugglers, pirates, botanists, archeologists,

and just about everyone else has stated the very same thing. Which ones are you? No, don't tell me, I would only have to tell the authorities. The less I know the better."

There was an awkward silence.

"Well at least tell me how she got this way," Jado prodded.

Again there was silence. Neither Quintano nor A'Den wanted to give up their mission. They needed to only reveal what was needed to save Quia's life and nothing more. The question was, how much could they reveal without tipping off what they were actually doing?

"Look, you can keep your secrets, I don't care. She's going to die if I don't get some answers. I've given her a few injections that will stabilize her situation for now. They will reduce the fever, fight the infection, and help stimulate her healing process, but it won't be enough until I know what bit her so I can deliver the proper antidote. Now, tell me or everything that I have done will be for nothing and you can just start digging her grave."

"We, we were out in an area," Quintano started, "in the deep jungles. There was this building. It...it had markings, you know, radioactive. We figured after all this time..."

"Wait, let me get this straight," Jado interrupted. "You ignored a radioactive warning sign? Great, just great. Well, at least we know what's going on with her system. I'll start by countering her radiation sickness and then I'll have to take a look at the two of you. If she's been contaminated then there's a great chance that you both have as well."

"No, wait," Quintano stated stopping the doctor from getting another set of stimulation injectors. "It wasn't radiation. There was something...a creature."

"Yes, obviously, I can see the bite mark."

"But this wasn't like any other creature. It was different."

Jado stopped midstride. He had finally listened to the clues that had been screamed at him. He knew that it couldn't be right, yet he had to find out. "Just what kind of creature?"

“It looked like a humanoid, devoid of hair, pale looking. It was vicious, more animal than anything, very strong and wicked fast. It...this may sound funny, but it just waved at me and sent me flying through the air. But don’t worry, we killed it.” Quintano was more proud of the fact that they had killed the beast than sharing any concern that the doctor may have over the creature’s existence.

Jado took another look at Quia’s wound and then the rest of her symptoms. She wasn’t getting any better despite the fact that he had given her enough stimulants to at least get her up and have her walk out on her own. It was only now that he realized what he really was up against. It was only now that he realized that it was too late, not only for Quia but for all of them. His complexion turned extremely pale. Without even a conscious thought about what he was doing, he slowly stated to back away from Quia as if she were the beast herself.

“No...no it can’t be. This is bad, this is very bad.” There was panic in Jado’s voice as he spoke.

“Why? What? It’s just a ...” Quintano started to say.

“It was a Rakghoul. She’s got the Rakghoul plague.”

“Plague?” A’Den asked with full tribulation. “Did you say ‘plague’? As in highly contagious, life threatening, plague?”

Jado nodded. “It’s the worst known plague in the galaxy. It’s spread by being bitten and once bitten the victim turns into one of those things that you fought to spread the plague further. There was a time that the Rakghoul plague nearly wiped out a large portion of this sector. The whole planet of Taris had to be quarantined. There was a war. Individuals tried to break quarantine. There was chaos everywhere. Everyone was either struck down by the plague or by those that were trying to get away from the plague. So many individuals died.”

“Taris had to be cleansed. There were biological teams that came and wiped out one site after another. They were relentless. It didn’t matter if the site was truly infected or not, nothing stood in the way. It was the worst cleansing that I can remember reading about. Some said it was even political. Needless to say, it was barbaric.”

“The teams were supposed to have gotten rid of everything. The plague was supposed to have been eradicated. The Rakghouls were supposed to

have been wiped out and extinct and the plague was supposed to have been destroyed, with the exception of a culture or two for medical reasons.”

“If what you say is true, then there was at least one Rakghoul still left, and where there’s one, there are others that have fallen victim to the spread of the disease.”

“What...what can we do?” Quintano asked. “I mean what can be done for Quia?”

Jado shook his head again, this time his look of aghast of the situation was mixed with remorse. “Nothing. There isn’t anything that we can do. The plague will sweep over her soon and consume her. She’ll transform into one of those things and then spread the disease to anyone she can get a hold of.”

“Then get somebody...” Quintano started to say.

“No! You don’t get it! None of us can leave and none can arrive until she is dead and her body is burned in the incinerator. Then we’ll do a blood draw to see if any of us are infected. Only then can we leave. We’re on full quarantine for the next two days at least.”

“You are not killing her,” Quintano snarled pulling both of his blasters. This in turn made A’Den pull hers again. Now they both had the doctor in crossfire, a crossfire that they doubted that the doctor would be able to live through once the blasters started firing.

“Look! The plague will make her feel like she’s on fire, like an acid has spread to her system. It’s agonizing. If you have any compassion for your friend you would shoot her now before the process destroys what you know of her, she turns into one of the Rakghouls herself, and she spreads the disease to all of us. From there it would be an outbreak and the whole planet, even the whole system would be at risk. It’s the only way.”

Quintano walked closer to Jado until he had his blasters up against the doctor’s chest. “Cure her or die with her.”

“I...I can’t...I don’t have the equipment, the skill, the...”

Quintano cut him off. There would be no more excuses. They were all going to make it or they were all going to die here, together and he would take the doctor with them.

“You’ve told us that we might all be infected already, so shooting you would only stop your agony, so I don’t see why this isn’t an option for us. Now stop telling me what you can’t do and start telling me what you can do; if not for her life and if not for yours then at least to prevent its spread.”

Jado nodded, the smuggler, or whatever he was, had a point. Jado had to admit that he was scared, not because of the blasters that had been shoved into his face, this hadn’t been the first time nor he was sure would it be the last. He was afraid of the plague. He was afraid of catching it, if he hadn’t already contracted it through a mutated version that had become airborne. He was also afraid of the plague getting out. His guests were right. The only real way to ensure that this was contained was to cure his patient and with that cure ensure that none of them had the plague as well.

“Alright, alright I’ll give it a shot. But just to let you know, we are limited to what we have here at my clinic and we are short on time. There’s only so much that I can do. I can’t make any promises, but I’ll do my best. It’s all we’ve got.”

Both Quintano and A’Den gave a sigh of relief as they put their blasters away. They really didn’t want to shot the doctor, they weren’t murderers, they were just desperate and if anyone could save Quia, then this person was their only hope.

Jado quickly went to work. He first took a blood sample right from Quia’s wound, trying to draw as much as the toxins as he could to work with. The more of the plague in its raw form that he had the better chance he had to work with it. He even took several samples from Quia from other places so he could see how her body was fighting it. This would give him an idea of what might or might not be working.

After this, Jado took his samples and started to put them through analyzers that were around the room. These were only meant to determine a type of flu that might be going around or even the type of venom that could have been delivered by any number of venomous animals or poisonous plants on this planet. They weren’t meant to analyze something that didn’t exist anymore. He had to make various adjustments

to ensure that he could get proper readings before moving on to his next series of actions.

From there Jado injected various compounds into different samples only to shake his head. He exposed samples to other stimuli and got nothing that met his satisfaction. Yet, he continued to work, despite each set back.

Time passed and both Quintano and A'Den paced back and forth. Patience wasn't a virtue for either of them, and it wasn't just waiting to see if the doctor would be able to save Quia or not or even if the plague had spread. They understood that every moment that they weren't moving was another moment that they could be found. Being found would not only destroy their chances of finding the treasure, but it would put an end to any effort that the doctor was doing. They were sure that any common smuggler or pirate or even Imperial trooper would just shoot Quia on the spot and then the two of them as an afterthought.

Silence hung thick in the air and clung to everything, like the heat and humidity. It was almost deafening on its own. It was enough to drive both Quintano and A'Den insane if they had to endure it any longer and A'Den was glad when Quintano broke the silence.

“Tell me doc, what’s your story?”

“What?” Jado was able to answer without being disturbed in his work. He didn't even bother looking up from his experiments and analysis.

“You obviously know what you are doing and know how to work under pressure. Something tells me that you aren't just a local doctor, especially since you don't want to be found by the local authorities. Why are you here in this miserable place? Surely if you have this kind of talent you can have your pick of where you practice.”

He shook his head. He had wanted to forget, but the nightmare came back to him in a flash and for one moment he was back at the scene.

The emergency room of the hospital had been busier than normal for the past several days, ever since the power-shift on Coruscant. A new Empire had been established, the Jedi order had been abolished and now the Senate had been dissolved. Chaos was everywhere on the planet and

this was one of the last places that didn't care what side of the political spectrum one was on. Anyone coming in here would be given the best treatment possible. Today was no exception.

Several more stretchers with wounded came and went from one hallway to another. There had been fighting in the streets again. Many had been hit by blaster fire. Some of them were actually in the fight while others were just casualties of war. None looked good at all. The vast majority of them were being sent to other doctors throughout the hospital. A few, the more seriously wounded, were taken to Doctor Jado Pavan.

"What do we have here?" Jado asked as two more were wheeled into his operating room. He had just finished with yet another difficult case and was now being presented with two more.

"They were in a firefight, just like the others that have been brought in." The alliance intelligence officer that was standing next to the two new patients had spoken.

Somehow Jado hadn't thought that this was like the "others" that were being brought in. If that was the case then they wouldn't have been followed by an officer and he wouldn't have specifically stated "like everyone else." This was now the officer's official response and it had to be taken at full value which means that it wasn't what was really going on.

Jado moved from one patient to the next. Both had been hit several times with blasters and were in bad shape. The each had massive blood lose. Neither of them had a good chance of living.

Jado shook his head. "I'm making a call here," he stated as he pulled the sheets over the both of them. "Take them to morgue."

The officer pulled a blaster and lowered it toward Jado. "I didn't ask for an opinion, I'm telling you to operate on the both of them. I need them alive."

"You don't understand," Jado said raising his voice. "First of all, in this hospital I'm in command, you don't get to give me orders. Second, it would take too much time and resources to patch either one of them together. My time and resources can be spent with patients that have a chance to live. Taking that away from them will not only condemn their live, but these two will probably die in the process. The answer is no."

“Doctor Jado Pavan, they say that you are one of the best here at this hospital. However, you aren’t the only doctor that can save them. Now, it’s very important that they live and if you aren’t willing to help then you will no longer be among the living to be of any use. My report will say that one of these two, in their delirium, killed you. Now at least bring them both to consciousness and I’ll take it from there or I will no longer need you and I’ll find someone else.”

Jado gave a sigh. If this was what the officer wanted then it was what he would get. Jado wasn’t afraid of his life, but he was afraid that the intelligence office might start shooting his staff. With any luck his two patients would die before he spent too much time and resources so he could give his energy to individuals that actually stood a chance of living.

With expert precision, the doctor moved from one patient to the next while administrating a series of stimulants. These were meant to stabilize the patient. He did have a few bacta tanks which would help their bodies heal faster but if they weren’t stabilized first then they would probably die before they were even put into the tanks.

Jado found the wounds that needed the most attention on both men. The worst were the shots to the head and from what he could tell these were close range, probably an assassination attempt, not part of one of the many skirmishes that have been happening lately. There were other minor wounds, tales that these men were in the fight for their lives and had lost only to have whoever they were fighting come up and shoot their fallen bodies in the head. Someone wanted both of these men dead and wanted to make sure that there was no doubt about it.

The doctor took another of his devices and started to give his attention to the first man. If he could just relieve some of the pressure on his patient’s brain then there would be a greater chance to live through the whole process, from there it would be easy enough to repair the damage done, but he had to be careful. One bad move and he could damage neural connections and if it didn’t kill the man then at least leave him in a comatose state of being brain dead. Yet he had to move quickly enough if he wanted to help his second patient. Too much of a delay and the second one would surely die.

“Stop! What is going on in here?”

The sudden interruption from the door stopped Jado from starting his procedure. Normally he could work under pressure and ignore explosions and guns pointed at him. However, this procedure was very delicate and one interruption could mean the difference between life and death. He looked up from his operation.

There, in the doorway, stood a military officer. He was in bad shape and was barely able to hold himself up using the doorframe to keep his balance. If Jado were to guess, then this man was part of the wounded that had come in and should be being treated and taking it easy. With this in mind, it was obvious that he needed to ensure that his presence was known and that what he had to say was more important than his own well being.

“I am in the middle of two very complicated operations and I don’t have time for this,” Jado snapped. “Now if you will...”

“I am Major Oswakar Doswshap,” the officer stated as if his rank meant anything in this room. “That man is an alliance officer Lieutenant Neo Dorvin,” he said pointing to the man that Jado was about to operate on.

“And that one is an Imperial officer,” he said pointing to the other. You will not waste your time with that Imperial scum. His name is Dev Mallik. He’s wanted for war crimes and it would be in everyone’s best interest if he dies here and now, and if you don’t have the will to do it, then I’ll do it for you. He’s been in charge of the vast majority of this carnage that you’ve seen lately and some of the worst battle that we have experienced. We have full knowledge of him torturing his prisoners and targeting civilians.”

“I don’t care who you are major,” the intelligence officer stated. “I believe my office outranks you anytime. You have no business here and no authority. It’s best for you to turn around and walk away.”

“I’m not walking away from a man that has created this carnage,” Major Doswshap snapped.

“This “carnage”, as it were, was merely a cover and a diversion to have Dev Mallik defect to our side. When the Imperials found out they hit us hard and even tried to kill off both these men. Our agent risked his life for this.”

The intelligence officer turned back to Jado. “If you can’t save them both then I’ll understand and Agent Dorvin will receive a hero’s medal for his sacrifice. But we need this defector alive.”

“Defector?” Major Doswshap blurted. “You mean that he’s actually going to join the alliance? After all that he’s done?”

“He has vital information to the republic that can take down the Empire. Think of all of the lives that we can save. Isn’t that more important? We need his information.”

“And we are just going to throw away everything that he had done and ignore his past, ignore his crimes and welcome him in? What do we tell the victims’ families? How do we explain that it’s alright for him to live but that their family members had to die in such a horrible fashion?”

“We promised him full asylum and complete immunity and we intend to keep our side of the bargain. Doctor, please proceed.”

Jado looked at the two men that had been arguing. They each had valid points. Then he looked at the two wounded. During the time that he had to stop and listen to the argument the two had gotten worse. There was no time left to save them both, he had to choose one.

“So, what did you do, doc?” Quintano asked.

“I went to work on the first one that I had started, the alliance agent officer. When it came down to it, I couldn’t be persuaded by politics or by judgment of past deeds. I’m a doctor. I heal people. That’s what I do. I merely operated on the one that was closest to me and let fate decide the rest.”

“I can’t let my inability to save everyone all the time get in my way of my profession. If I let that happen then guilt would freeze me up every time and I won’t be good to anyone. All I can do is do my best with the patient in front of me and then move on.”

“The Imperial defector died that day, and perhaps it was a good thing. There was talk that he had orchestrated and faked the whole defection to get to our agent. Of course his mission had to be secret, even to his own regiment. They were supposed to hit our troops hard, but his second in

command had gotten suspicious and messed up the whole meeting and tried to kill both our agent and his.”

“Of course we didn’t find this out until much later. Until then I was pulled into one hearing after another. The intelligence commission was furious with me. I had to admit that I didn’t mind the pressure and acquisitions that they were implying, that I was actually working for the Empire. They had no proof. However, they also managed to pressure the hospital where I was working. This was where I was hit the hardest.”

“According to the hospital board members, I wasn’t able to save the right person and nobody wanted me after that. I was transferred here and even here I wasn’t welcomed. Eventually the whole fiasco was such an embarrassment that my license was yanked and I was written out of existence. That’s why my practice is way out here, in the outskirts. If I’m found out that I’m still practicing then I would face terrible consequences, especially if I talk about the incident.”

“I usually only get smugglers or some pirate that had taken a bad fall or even one of the locals that can’t afford to go see someone in the city. I usually have to deal with a run-in with one of the wild life, or someone that had gotten into a blaster fight with a set of smugglers.”

Jado stopped talking and looked up from his instruments. The results weren’t good at all. He hadn’t been able to find anything to even slow down the plague. Nothing was working and time was running out. She was going to die soon and it was his job to help the others face reality.

“You may still have to shoot her,” Jado stated.

“Over my dead body,” Quintano snapped back. He may now have had a better understanding of where the doctor was coming from and a greater respect for him, but the doctor was wrong. He just had to be wrong.

Jado continued, not fazed by Quintano’s inability to listen to reason. “I’m still going to do everything that I can, but you still need to face reality. She’s suffering and the plague is sweeping through her. If I can’t find a cure and soon then you’ll be forced to kill her before she kills you. It would be a mercy killing, and if you don’t do it, then I will. We still have some time, but not much. I’ll continue to work but things aren’t looking good and we are running out of time. Once that happens the only

thing that can ensure the plague's destruction is her death. It would die with her."

Jado stopped with that thought. It was a long shot but it was all they had. If it worked then he would not only be able to save her life, but it would stop the spread of the plague any further. If he failed then she was going to die by the plague anyway. He didn't have time to explain his theory and they probably wouldn't allow him to try it, so, without a word, Jado immediately took to work.

The doctor moved from one cabinet to another, then to one drawer to another in a desperate search for some item. He fanatically moved across the room, ignoring the displacement of any other item that he picked up, looked at, and discarded haphazardly. Then, when he had almost completed the search of the whole room, he seemed to remember where he had placed the one particular injector stimulator. Without delay he returned and injected the material inside into Quia.

Immediately Quia gave a cry out in pain. Her body arched up in protest. Her eyes went wide as she then went into convulsions. Just as her body was about to fall off of the patient table, she went silent and still. Her lifeless form lay on the table.

"What have you done?!" A'Den shouted.

"I'm going to ...," Quintano began to speak but was cut off by the doctor who held up his hand palm outward to stop.

"She's not breathing!" Quintano shouted.

"A moment longer," Jado responded.

"Longer?! Longer?! You've killed her! I'm going to..."

"Do nothing!" Jado shouted back. "You will do nothing. Now trust me. I'm counting."

"Counting? What...?"

Again Jado put his hand up to stop Quintano from talking. He didn't have to stop A'Den since she had been in too much of shock to say anything and there was no wonder. He had, in fact, just killed their friend.

What they didn't know is that an individual could stay dead for a short amount of time and he had to push that time to its limit.

Jado took out another stimulant injector and readied it. His hand moved to Quia forehead and felt her temperature. It was dropping. This was a good sign. Her fever was going down. The plague was dying with her. He waited a little longer.

Suddenly Jado struck the stimulant injector directly into Quia's chest and injected the full amount of its contents. It was a very strong stimulant from the adrenal gland of a beast in this area. In low doses it was known to give increased strength, speed, and stamina for a while. This was enough to kick start a shuttle. Too little and she would simply slip away. Too much and her heart would burst.

Quia gave a gasp as her eyes went wide. She arched her body again as the stimulant took effect. Her breathing became rapid. She looked about the room in panic and dismay.

"Quia!" Both Quintano and A'Den stated together with joy. They attempted to approach her but Jado put out his hand and stopped them.

"Easy. Easy. You've had a rough time. What do you last remember?"

Quia looked at him with wide eyes. Her heart was rushing. She wanted to run and run hard to keep up with her body. She closed her eyes and tried to relax as she focused on the last thing that she remembered.

"A Rakghoul. A force sensitive Rakghoul. I think it was one of the old republic Sith Lords. He must have..."

Jado gave her a curious glance. "Perhaps the procedure had a major effect upon her. I should keep her over night just to..."

"No." All three, Quia, A'Den, and Quintano had all answered the doctor together.

"We need to get going," A'Den suggested. "We're grateful, very grateful for what you've done..."

"But you have little to no credits on you at the moment," Jado responded. "I know, I know, I've heard it all before: quick to have my service, slow to take my advice, and nothing to show for it."

“Look,” Quintano stated, “it’s complicated and the less you know...”

“...the better,” Jado stated completing his sentence. “Like I said, I’ve heard it all before. You are about to make it big and when and if that happens then you will return and pay me.”

“Yeah...well, something like that.”

Jado nodded. “Go on; get out of here before I change my mind and call for the authorities.”

The trip back to the Ebon Mortis wasn’t easy. It was obvious that Quia still needed to rest, yet she would have nothing of it. She knew and understood that they were on a deadline and the sooner that they left the better. Besides, she didn’t want to wait around to see if any other Rakghouls might show up.

The holocron that they had procured was given to Aro, and just like the first, it revealed part of a map that joined with the first. On top of that it showed where to get the third piece.

“Where to next?” A’Den asked as she started up the Ebon Mortis.

“Hutta. We’re going to Hutta.”

Chapter: Revelations

Quia continued to lie in the bed of the room that she had chosen to be hers for the duration of the mission. She would have been fine with just about anywhere on the ship and she had even said that all she needed was a place to meditate and that a room wasn't necessary. She had never had a room of her own since she had to share one at the academy since for as long as she could remember and her training had taught her to find comfort and rest wherever she could. Even when she was on Nar Shaddaa the room that she had was small and cramped. The bed that she had wasn't very comfortable and she had ended up just sitting in a meditative position instead of sleeping on it.

With all of this in mind, it wasn't easy to accept a full room all for herself. Since the ship already had a spare room that no one was using, she had taken it, albeit reluctantly. However, she had to admit that the comfort of the bed and the privacy that the room gave was a luxury that she would miss the moment that she gave it back up when this was all over.

A'Den continued to fly the Ebon Mortis by herself. Since Quia was resting from her wounds, and it was going to be a while before she was back to full health, and Quintano was resting after helping Quia all the way through the forest and back to the ship, there was no one else to keep her company at the cockpit. It was just the way she liked it, all by herself.

But that wasn't the case. Perhaps she had liked her time being alone for a while. It wasn't that way anymore. Despite the fact that her company had annoyed her beyond her tolerance levels, she still found that she missed them when they weren't around. Now, the cockpit was too quiet. At least she had the most annoying part of her company, the ever sarcastic astromech named Aro.

It was this thought that brought her to the astromech. He had been quiet for quite some time and she had to wonder what the little droid was thinking. She was hoping that the astromech wasn't trying to think up some more snarky remarks to make at any given time. Come to think of it, if the droid had any smarts at all then it should be working on extrapolating the map parts that they already had and trying to figure out

the rest of the map as a whole without them trying to go through all of this trouble. As a matter of fact, if the astromech hadn't already thought of it first, it was best to remind the droid and make sure that it was actually being helpful and not just shutting down whenever it felt like.

"Aro, have you been able to figure out where the treasure is yet?"

"Bleep...tweet...mert...xert."

"But I thought you said you were the best?"

"Mert...beep...boop."

"Are you good for anything?"

"Wert...tweet...zip...bing."

"Wait a second...you did what?"

"Wert...tweet..."

"Yes, yes, I heard you the first time..."

"Whirl...beep...bleep...bloop."

"Because once again, I can't believe that you would just simply keep that kind of information from us. Then again, I can't believe that I'm surprised at all. Fine, let me know what you've got."

Aro let out a few more tweets and beeps before he activated his holocam and sent a hologram a few feet from him.

The hologram that was projected was that of a man. His features looked withered despite the fact that he still looked young. From what A'Den could tell, the individual was wearing a black and red hooded robe. As he spoke, there was a confidence of authority that surrounded him combined with an air of arrogance.

"This is the personal journal of Lord Darth Tentigo. We, the Sith Lords of the current council, have made a pact to create a council of our own, sans the Emperor. The Emperor has become too lax and thoughtless in his passion of destruction. He has lost the vision of the Sith and it is time

for his removal. As such, we shall rule the galaxy not under one Emperor but as a congregation of our vision.”

“This new council will consist of Darth Voracitus, Darth Milunia, Darth Otius, Darth Ira, Darth Liveo, Darth Jacto, Darth Odeo, Darth Egens Dolor, Darth Metus, and I, Darth Tentigo.”

“Let it be known that we have discovered a new power source, a power source that we are unwilling to share with the Emperor as if he were to receive it, then it is our belief that he will wipe out the galaxy in a great purge. This must not come to pass. Let it be known that we and we alone, will the stop the Emperor from this madness and instead of coming to a power struggle that would destroy us all, we shall rule together.”

“The new power source that we have found is too unstable at this point. Let it be known that we, the new council, will establish a new technology to harness this power and share it together.”

“Until this new power source becomes a viable weapon, its location will remain secret and known only to us. We understand that this technology may take some time and we may forget why we have done such a thing hence this recording. It is up to each of us to find a way to cheat death long enough to see our plan come to fruition.”

“We have divided the location into separate maps, each of us with one piece to hold until the time they are needed. Only by our full cooperation can we bring the whole map together. This will ensure that if one of us falls then any successor would still need to rely on the whole council. This is why it is imperative that each of us secure each piece so that only we or a true successor can get a hold of them.”

“The plan is in motion. The technology is in development. The Emperor does not know. Yet one thing stands in our way, Darth Ablaof.”

“It has come to our attention that Darth Ablaof has found out about our plans. He has yet to tell the Emperor and we doubt he ever will. He conveys the source as we do. If he takes it then all is lost. If he gets sloppy and is found out by the Emperor then all is lost. He is too powerful. He is too unpredictable. His future cannot be seen. He must be put down if we are to succeed.”

“Darth Ablaof is an abomination and beneath us, the new council. He can never be trusted and by this alone he must be destroyed. This we shall do.”

“This here is the plan of the new council, recorded least we forget.”

“The galaxy is ours.”

A'Den had to think about this. There was no treasure at the end of this quest. There was only something that they couldn't use and had no bearing on them whatsoever. They were risking their lives and being chased by the whole galaxy for something that they couldn't use and probably couldn't even sell. There was too great a risk for no return, except for the fact that this was history, something that only a historian would appreciate.

Then it struck her. When she was talking to Quintano and she had left Quia with Aro while they were figuring out the first map, it was at this time that Aro had played the message. Quia had heard it. She had known. She knew that there was no treasure. Yet, despite this, she mentioned nothing and still led them into danger. She knew that if there wasn't anything monetary at the end of this quest, then there wouldn't be a quest and she would be sent back to Nar Shaddaa.

On top of that, Quia's explanation that she was good at her job which was why she had figured out the Sith Lord connection was totally bogus. She hadn't figured anything out; she had heard it from the recording. Quia had done nothing but lie to them and put them in danger for her own personal reasons. It was time to confront Quia.

A'Den dropped the Ebon Mortis out of hyper drive and put the ship into stealth mode. Despite the fact that the stealth mode drained a lot of power, she wasn't going anywhere without confronting Quia, and she wasn't going to be spotted while sitting in the middle of deep space. When she was done, she turned to Aro.

“Keep an eye out and report anything out of the ordinary. I have things to deal with.”

The door to Quia's room suddenly and unexpectedly opened and it was in such a dramatic and display that Quia was startled from her near sleep

state of being. She jolted up in fright and attempted to reach for her doubled bladed vibro sonic staff. It was when she saw that it was A'Den did she relax.

She had gone from fear to relaxing all within a heartbeat. Then she saw the scowl upon A'Den face and knew that something had angered the Mandalorian. Now she was concerned.

“Get up and get out!” A'Den shouted. Her voice was loud enough to echo across the halls of the Ebon Mortis and could be heard all the way back to the cockpit.

“A'Den, what's going on?”

“You tell me. What game are you playing? Did you think that it was funny?”

Quintano couldn't help but hear the heated conversation from Quia's room. It seemed that the both of them were at it and if they didn't stop then they would either tear each other apart or at least take the ship down with them. He rushed from his room.

“What is going on?”

“She's a fraud!” A'Den snapped back.

“What do you mean?”

“Ask her yourself!”

Quintano turned to Quia but only received silence. It was A'Den that broke the silence not waiting for Quia to give any response to her side of the story.

“All that talk about how you took an educated guess, a professional theory. Well that wasn't true, was it? You listened to the hologram that was initially stored on the first data disk. When Quintano and I left you alone with Aro, you listened to the hologram. You told us that you had a theory but you heard it yourself. There was no theory; there was only information that we would have discovered ourselves.”

“So she just...” Quintano had started to comment but was immediately shut off.

“So, she just made up the fact that we needed her. It was all a game to her. It always has been.”

“We didn’t need her to help translate the old Sith language; Aro just needed time to it and he’s actually better company.”

“On top of all of this she knew that there isn’t any real treasure at the end of our quest. It won’t benefit either of us, except for her. She’s the only one that will get credit for discovering some old Sith energy source. She’ll be able to back to her group, or agents, or other librarian, or historians, or whoever they are, and become their hero. This adventure is all for her. We’re risking our lives just for her popularity.”

“Well, this is over. It’s all over. I don’t care what this is all about rather some hidden treasure or some power source, it’s over. I’m dropping you off on the nearest planet and ditching you once and for all.”

There was silence for a moment as all of the accusations sank in. Tension filled the room and for one moment no one dared to speak. Quia’s eyes glared deep into A’Den’s and the response was mutual. Then Quia nodded and spoke. It was time to tell them everything.

“Look, yes, I didn’t mention the message that was on the data chip. I’m sorry. I didn’t tell you because I wanted in on the adventure. I wanted to be useful, to be important.”

“All my life I’ve been stuck in one library or another. All I’ve ever done is shelve, categorize, and catalog data. Everyone else has been able to go out and search for lost artifacts or find some long lost relic. All I get is to be locked away and never sent out.”

“I guess it was all because I ran during the raid on the great library on Coruscant. It’s been my punishment for not staying and fighting, although if I had then I would have died as well. There was nothing that I could have done to save Master Jocasta Nu.”

“All I wanted to do was come along and prove myself, to you, to my fellow agents, and mostly to myself. I wanted to prove that I could be useful. Please, let me go with you. I didn’t mean to...”

A'Den's anger started to boil. She hated it when anyone had hidden agendas. Her mentor had a hidden agenda, now he is dead. She wasn't going to be lied to and manipulated for someone else's goal. She might have felt sorry for Quia and might have even taken her aboard had she just been straight forward. Now it was too late. Quia had lied to them, perhaps it was a small lie and perhaps it might even be justified, but it was a lie never the less. Now it was difficult to believe the timing of those that had jumped them at the library. Now it was difficult to believe anything. There was only one thing left to do. She shook her head.

"No. No, I've had enough. This adventure is over. As of now, I'm landing at the nearest planet and dropping everyone off."

"...and dropping everyone off."

Valas sat back as he listened to the conversation that had boiled over. This wasn't good. This wasn't good at all.

He had been paid to ensure that the crew of the Ebon Mortis no matter how many there were, continued their journey to find all of the missing pieces to the map. Now everything had imploded and the entire mission was not only in jeopardy, but it was in question as well.

First, the validity of the mission hadn't been made clear enough. He had only been hinted that Holocron Theta might be real. Now, he had come to find out that it was not only very real, but it was very important. He wasn't going to believe in some long lost buried treasure. However, a power source that could change the way the galaxy was run would be a different story all together.

He had to admit that he understood why Draks hadn't told him about the full validity of Holocron Theta and how important it really was. In truth, he would have done the same and for the same reason. He trusted Draks about as much as Draks trusted him. And Draks had every reason to not trust him. He knew that if he could get his hands on this power source then people would be working for him, not the other way around.

He also understood that a power source this powerful, this sought after, would change the political power shift all over the galaxy. While Valas was sure that Draks was a fine officer for the Audacious, he doubted that Draks was a competent galactic leader, and since he knew

that Draks wasn't in favor of the Emperor. Since this was the case, Valas had to wonder who was really behind the scene of the request for the map. Was it a descendant of one of the old council members? It was a mystery and Valas didn't like mysteries. He would find out who was really pulling the strings.

However, Valas always prided himself as a professional and he would act accordingly. He wouldn't allow his feelings to get in the way. He still had a job to do and he would do it. That was his contract; that was his code. He would deal with the mystery later. Right now he had to get back on track and finish what he had started.

Second, he did have to get back on track and finish what he had started. The mission had taken a turn for the worse. Those that he was trying to manipulate through greed no longer were driven to retrieve something that they didn't understand and couldn't control. There was no further need for them to continue and without them, there was no map. Without the map, there were no spoils at the end. Without the spoils there was no payment and the mission would be a failure. He had to now force the crew of the Ebon Mortis to get back on their mission.

The question now was, how could he do that? It was easy enough to manipulate individuals through greed, but how could he change this all around? He had to think of something.

Then it dawned on him. His answer was in the message itself. He no longer needed rogues and thieves and treasure hunters. What he needed were heroes and he was sure that all three of those aboard the Ebon Mortis would heed the call, once the call was made.

“Bleep...beep...tweet...xxert.”

“Not now Aro, I'm not in the mood,” A'Den said flatly. She had felt defeated. All she wanted to do was put in the coordinates to some populated planet, toss out her company, and just be left alone.

“Boop...beep...tweet...tweet.”

“Fine, let's hear it.”

“...the need for the map is no longer relevant. The Ebon Mortis and its crew are no longer relevant. A copy of the full map has been found, we no longer need the various pieces. Location of the power source has been found and can now be processed for immediate use. Reports have shown that we have enough fire power to destroy whole planets with fewer resources needed than the Emperor’s Death Star. Our first test target is Coruscant. The rest of the alliance and the Empire shall fall. Do not respond. Meet us at the rendezvous for further instruction.”

“Repeat, this is the Audacious to the rest of the Havoc Squad. The need for the map is no longer...”

“That’s enough Aro, I’ve heard enough.”

A’Den gave a deep sigh. The timing of the message couldn’t have been any better, or worse depending on how she looked at it. There was just simply too much wrapped around this map, or at least these sections of a map and she just couldn’t wrap her mind around just how deep they really were in all of this.

The first thing that she had to consider was just how long has this “Havoc Squad” been following them? She had piloted the Ebon Mortis away from known trade routes and they had kept their heads as low as possible. She had made every attempt to keep the ship hidden by staying around the poles of any planet before entering its atmosphere; she had used weather patterns to scramble radar attempts, and she had flown as low to the ground as she could. Even if a tracking device had been put on the ship, the tracker would have to stay fairly close or they would lose the signal.

The next thing to consider was the Havoc Squad themselves. Who were these guys? They had just stated that they weren’t either part of the alliance or from the Empire. With the first two factions already tearing apart the galaxy, a third faction would ensure that the destruction would be complete.

Lastly there was the threat of the power source itself. Could it really destroy planets? The old Siths from ancient hologram message had thought so, now the Havoc Squad believed it as well. If this was the case, and the Havoc Squad had the ability to harness it and use it against anyone and everyone then there was nowhere safe.

A'Den shook her head. Even though there wasn't anything personal to gain by going after the maps now, there was everything to lose if she didn't. Although she liked to work alone, it didn't mean that she wanted to always be alone, and it definitely didn't mean that she wanted whole planets destroyed. If they didn't do something, anything, then millions would die and she knew that it would be on her hands. She had to at least try. With a deep sigh she headed back into the belly of the Ebon Mortis to undo what she had done.

The knock on Quintano's door startled him. He had come here to gather his thoughts about the argument that had only recently come about. Quia just wanted to be alone and it seemed that she had been too embarrassed by her actions to want to be seen. She was willing to be let go and take the consequences of her actions. The problem was, he wasn't.

He wasn't willing to be expelled from this ship, or its company, just because Quia hadn't been straight forward with everyone. And, even though there wasn't a real treasure at the end of the journey, it didn't mean that they couldn't sell it or mine it or do whatever it was needed to turn a profit. There really wasn't any need to end this adventure.

He shook his head. He had to admit that it really wasn't for the treasure, or whatever it was. He had to admit that it was the company that he was here for. He missed A'Den. He liked her from the start and now that they could spend time together, even in the face of danger, hunting down something that they couldn't spend, well that was alright by him.

Problem was she was too pissed off at the whole adventure of being misled that she was no longer on speaking terms with him either. There was nothing that he could do to fix things when A'Den didn't want them fixed. That probably hurt more than the realization that they weren't going on this treasure hunt any more.

Then there was Quia. She was sweet and all. It was easy to talk and laugh with her and easy enough to flirt with her. However, she never did flirt back. She may have laughed, but not flirted and never really responded in anyway outside of just a coworker, a fellow adventurer. That was alright with him. He had known many women that were just coworkers or fellow adventurers. He didn't need to take this relationship any further than it already was. Besides, she just didn't have the same bite

or sharpness that A'Den had, something a bit feistier that was more to his liking.

Now Quia was defeated and she didn't want to speak to anybody. She was probably going to go back to some library with her tale between her legs and try her best to be happy about cataloging every else's data, that was if she was allowed to have a job back after abandoning her station on Nar Shaddaa.

Considering how everything had played out, a knock on his door was the last thing that he had expected to hear. He had expected to stay in his room until they landed and from there he would head out to parts unknown with Aro. With a surprised voice, he answered.

“Come in.”

The door opened and it was A'Den who was standing behind the portal. She had a frown upon her face and a look that seemed to say that she didn't know what to say. However, instead of talking, she merely beckoned him to follow her.

“What's this all about?” Quintano asked.

A'Den gave a deep sigh. “Just follow me and don't ask questions for once, okay?”

Quintano gave a shrug and followed the Mandalorian where they crossed the hall and went down a bit. Here they found Quia's room and A'Den gave a knock upon it.

“I'm not in the mood to talk to anyone right now,” was the answer that came from the other side.

A'Den didn't explain herself. She merely opened the door and barged in.

“Hey, a little privacy...” Quia had started to say but was cut off by a look from A'Den. It was one of those looks that could cut a person to the core without saying a word. Quia didn't finish her sentence.

“We have a problem,” A'Den said flatly.

“And what would that be?” Quintano asked. “No, wait, let me guess. You’ve decided not to toss Quia and me out on the first planet we find but instead are going to jettison us out through an airlock into deep space instead.

A'Den turned and gave Quintano a snarky scowl. Now was not the time for his lip.

“No,” A'Den said dryly. “We’ve just received a message stating that the quest of the Holocron Theta has been resolved.”

“What? What do you mean?” Quia asked.

“Aro picked up a transmission from one ship to another stating that they have found another way to get to the energy source without the maps. Another map was made, one with all of the pieces.”

“It seems that the Sith Lords didn’t trust each other after all,” Quintano stated. “I say we just let them have it, it’s not worth anything anyway.”

A'Den shook her head. “That wasn’t the whole transmission. It seems that these parties plan to weaponize the power source. They are planning on destroying whole planets and Coruscant is their first target.”

Quia gave a gasp upon hearing this. “Do they realize how many people live there?” Her fear of being sent away to another planet, or even her fear of confronting A'Den was now pushed aside. Her fear and concern was now only for those individuals that lived on her home planet.

“We can’t let that happen,” Quintano stated without letting anyone else give any further opinion.

“I know”, A'Den said as she put her palms up and out to placate the room before anyone else stated the obvious. “That’s why I’m here. I’m putting all differences aside, and I’m asking you to do the same. We need to stop this from happening. So, I’m asking if either of you might know someone that can help out.”

There was silence

“Fine,” A'Den stated with a bit of a bite in her tone. “I get it; you are all upset with me. Fine. But let's put that aside for now and find some way to stop this destruction.”

“I might know someone,” Quintano stated. “Her name is Lieutenant Coronel Jewel Abram. She's a member of the rebellion. She might be able to help.”

“You mean the rebellion that you were part of and had left?” A'Den asked with a bit of surprise. She was sure that this had to be difficult for him knowing the story of him leaving and under what circumstances.

Quintano nodded.

“You were in the rebellion? Quia asked

“It's a long story, not one that I'm proud of.”

A'Den gave a sigh. She had to get the conversation back on track. “How well do you know her?”

Quintano gave A'Den one of those stares that stated *'you don't want to know.'*

“Let's just say that we didn't part on speaking terms.”

A'Den put her hips and her shoulders and let her brows furrow. Her stare bore into Quintano. She wanted answers. She needed answers before going any further.

“Alright, alright,” Quintano stated as he relented. “She was my commanding officer and was in charge of the unit that I left. She has already sworn that if she finds out where I am then I would be tossed into a brig on some inhospitable planet and forgotten about.

“Great, just great,” A'Den spouted off. To say that she was annoyed with Quintano's answer would have been an understatement. The idea of actually tossing him out of the airlock actually crossed her mind.

“Is there anyone in this galaxy that you haven't pissed off? No, don't answer that, I don't want to know. What I do want to know is, can you convince her to help us?”

Quintano shook his head. “No, I doubt she will help me...however, she has a good heart and if anyone is willing to stop the destruction of a planet and is willing to save population of all of those people then that would be her. I’m sure that I can get her to pull a few strings and with any luck we can get some of the rebel forces and stop this before it happens. Does Aro still have a copy of the transmission?”

“Yes, I had him to record it.”

“Good, I’ll use that to convince Jewels.”

“Hey Jewels, this is Quintano.”

Quintano had opened a channel to the alliance fleet on a known scrambled frequency. He may not have liked working with the alliance nor was he found of all of the procedures, but he understood them and also understood that if he hadn’t used this frequency while scrambled then he would have never had gotten through.

He was put right through to the lieutenant coronel. Reaching her was easier than he had expected, considering their past. Then again, it might have been because of that past which allowed the call to go through as quickly as it had.

“It’s Lieutenant Coronel Abram to you and when I get my hands on you, you will be sent to brig for a long time. You have some nerve calling me.” The lieutenant coronel’s response was less than welcoming, but not a surprise.

“Listen, I need your help...”

“Wow, that’s rich,” Jewels responded. “I never thought I would see the date when you would be calling me for help. It seems to me that you never needed anyone’s help before. You must be really desperate. I’ll tell you what, tell me where you are and I’ll come and pick you up. It’ll be like old times.” There was sarcasm in her voice this time, mixed with anger.

Quintano knew what she meant and had heard as much in her sarcastic tone. There were no fun old times and if there were ever a moment when they meet he was sure that Jewels would detain him and toss him in a cell somewhere.

“I mean it, it’s serious Jewels. We’ve got this message...”

“We? You mean that you haven’t ticked off a few individuals long enough for you to actually have a ‘we?’”

“Would you knock it off for just one moment?” The tone of his voice stopped the chatter on the commlink.

“This really must be serious,” Lieutenant Coronel Abram stated with a bit of seriousness to her own voice. She had never heard Quintano in such a manner. He had always taken everything light heartedly. Everything seemed to be a game to him, or at least when they had last met. Now, there was something different about him, something had changed. There was an air of urgency and responsibility about his voice and it was difficult to believe that this was the same person that she had known.

“It is. Look, we’ve got this message that...”

“I need to stop you right here,” Lieutenant Coronel Abram stated while cutting him off. “First of all, there are a lot of messages that are being transmitted, and you aren’t privy to any of them. Since you still have the ability to transmit on this frequency with a scrambler tells me that you may have caught one of our transmissions that I cannot confirm nor deny. You’ve caught yourself up in something that you can’t be part of. Now, whatever it is that you think that you have heard...”

“It wasn’t from one of your squads. I know better than to try to interfere with one of your missions, this isn’t anything like that. It’s from a new group called the Havoc Squad and...”

“I can’t help you with whatever it is that you think that you may have uncovered. We’re caught up in something big and we just don’t have the time or man power to investigate any message that may or may not be true.”

“Look, Quintano, if you think that this is really so important that you would risk being arrested on charges of desertion, then maybe it is that serious. I promise that I’ll personally look into this when we are done with this mission, and I’ll even promise not to lock you up, provided that this isn’t some kind of womprat chase.”

“I have to go. I’ve already spent too much time on this channel and I’ve probably already said more than I’m supposed to have. I’ll call you again on this channel with this scrambler when I’m done.”

The commlink went silent right after Lieutenant Coronel Abram’s message. There wasn’t even a formal ending, just an abrupt silence leaving everyone to believe that the transmission had been cut off from another source.

“So, that’s it then,” A’Den stated breaking the silence. “It’s over. We have no one to turn to.”

“What do we do?” Quia asked with a bit of fear and concern in her voice. She wasn’t willing to just sit back while the whole planet of Currosant was in danger of being destroyed, yet she felt too powerless to think of anything.

“Then we’ll have to do it on our own.”

Both Quia and A’Den turned to Quintano. Neither of them had thought that the rogue smuggler would throw himself into such an endeavor.

“What? Now wait, that’s suicide.” It was Quia’s voice that challenged Quintano’s suggestion, yet it also echoed A’Den reasoning as well.

“Look, all we have to do is get the map and get to this power source as quickly as possible. Maybe, once we get the map, I can give Jewels another call. She should be done with her big mission by then. Besides, we’ll need the map to lead her to the power source anyway, so we’ll still need to do that. And, come to think about it, we don’t even have to attack this ‘Havoc Squad’. All we have to do is slow them down.”

Before A’Den could even consider the thought, Quia jumped in immediately.

“I still want to come along. You know that I’m handy with my vibro blades and you still might need my help. I’ve got to do this, now more than ever. It’s no longer about making a big discovery; I’ve got to save my home planet... Please?”

A'Den gave a deep sigh. "Fine. We'll go after the rest of the map and we'll keep this 'Havoc Squad' occupied until the alliance can show up and take it from there. However, there's one condition, you are straight forward with us from here on in. Deal?"

Quia nodded. "Deal."

Quia waited until A'Den had headed back to the cockpit and was out of earshot before talking to Quintano.

"So," Quia said with a slight coy sound to her voice. "What's up with A'Den?"

"Nothing. What do you mean?"

"I don't think she likes me."

"Well, with what you pulled back there..."

Quia shook her head and answered before Quintano could finish. "No, I mean before all of this. She has kept away from me whenever she could and barely even speaks to me well before this incident. Even when we first met, you know, at the library, she didn't like me."

"Oh, that", Quintano stated as he rolled his eyes. "Don't worry; it's just her lovely charm and personality. She doesn't like anyone, especially at first. Did you know that she almost killed me? She even almost sold me over to the Empire and the only reason why she didn't was because she wasn't going to get paid. However, once she gets to know you and you get to know her, she isn't too bad and can almost be tolerated. However, I would still watch what you say and do around her; she's known to be trigger happy. Give her time; she'll be fine, you'll see."

"I don't know. She seems to like you."

"Me?" Quintano asked with a hint of surprise. "No, I don't think so. She barely tolerates me. When this treasure hunt is over, we're both going our separate ways, probably never seeing each other again."

"You don't see it do you?" Quia asked. "You really don't."

“See what?”

“What’s going on between the two of you?”

Quintano had to shake his head. “Look, there’s nothing going on between A’Den and me. She’s really not my type. I don’t like so much competition.”

Quintano had to rethink what he just said. He knew that it wasn’t true, he just wanted to deflect Quia away from the feelings that he was trying to fight. Without even realizing what he was doing he continued to deflect Quia’s probing question.

“Now, maybe you and I...”

Quia put her hands up and forward, stopping him right there. “Like the Jedi that I study, I’ve taken up a vow...”

“You mean that you’ve never...”

Quia gave a blush and then shook her head as if to have that be the only answer that she was going to give. Instead of indulging her answer, she quickly changed the subject.

“We need to continue our search.”

“So, off to Hutta?”

“Yes, off to Hutta.”

Chapter: Avidd

“**A**vidd Sha, this is A'Den Verda Fett. Avidd Sha, do you read?”

A'Den had taken to the commlink and was calling ahead to the Hutta docking station. They had avoided every docking station that they had come across and this one should have been no different, and probably more so to be avoided than any other. This was the docking station to the planet Hutta, the home planet of the Hutts. If the Hutts found out that they were here, invading their territory and coming to their planet, then the punishment would be severe.

She had used a scrambled frequency and one that was on a short band wave. She also made sure that the signal was broadcasted with very little power to ensure that it was too weak to be picked up on the planet below. Only if someone was tuned into the right frequency, at the right time, within the right distance, and had a scrambler, would the message be picked up. Otherwise, the message was only static at best.

Quintano picked up the fact that whoever was on the other end of the call would have to have met A'Den in the past and they would have had to have gotten along, at least well enough to put up a scrambling device right under the noses of the Hutts. That would take a lot of trust. He wondered just how much trust they had and how far back they went. He also wondered how he felt about it.

“A'Den. It's good to hear from you.” The voice on the other side was enthusiastic to hear from the Mandalorian, perhaps too enthusiastic for Quintano's taste. “How did your bounty turn out? Make a good profit?”

“Not quite,” A'Den responded. “I was able to catch my hunt, but I wasn't paid so I had to let him go.”

“That's no way to do business with someone with your talent. Did you at least renegotiate with your employer?”

“The same way I negotiated with the sergeant.”

There was laughter from the other side, obviously from something funny that was an inside joke between the two of them.

“Tell me, Avidd, anything new on the comms?”

Quintano had to wonder if that was really part of the necessary banter between the two of them or if A'Den was looking for something in particular.

“You know for certain that there's always chatter on the comms,” Avidd answered. “Even more so than usual.”

“Oh?” A'Den asked coyly as if she already knew what to expect.

“They're talking about you, or at least someone that sounds a whole lot like you.”

“Let me guess, they say that I have a map to some long lost hidden treasure.”

“Well, yes. I guess that means that you've heard it then.”

“Let's just say that I've had a run in with a few individuals who believe that story.”

“Well, is it true?” Avidd asked inquisitively. “You're not holding out on me now, are you? After all that we've been through? You wouldn't do that to me, would you?”

“Avidd, you know that I wouldn't lie to you, I never have and I never will. Yes, we do have a map.”

“We? Since when have you ever partnered up?”

“I partnered up with you,” A'Den said with a bit of sarcasm to her voice.

“And we all know how that ended up,” Avidd retorted.

“Look, it's kind of complicated.”

“...And this map of yours leads you to a treasure?”

“No, not yet at least. So far it's just been leading us to one clue after another. We don't think that there's a treasure on Hutta, just another clue.”

“And before you even think about turning me in,” A’Den continued. “If anyone else gets their greedy little hands on this map then you know as well as I that whatever is at the end of this journey will never see our pockets. Even if a common smuggler or pirate could get there first, the Hutts and the Empire would fight over it.”

“But if you can get to it first...?” Avidd asked with a bit of anticipation in his voice, anticipation for his own pockets.

“Ok, ok, I’ll give you cut of our findings,” A’Den said giving into Avidd’s cue.

“Well then, I guess I’ll have to go through the regular procedures to ensure that you are accepted in the Hutta airways.”

“Thanks, Avidd, I owe you one.”

“Yes, yes you do, and don’t forget it. Believe me, I won’t and I’ll come calling.”

“I know you will, Avidd, and I’ll look forward to it.”

With that A’Den closed down the commlink and started to punch in a set of coordinates into the navigation system. With these in place she would be able to follow a known trade route that wouldn’t be questioned. From there they would be able to break from the route and make their way to the coordinates that Quia had given.

“Now just wait a minute,” Quintano stated interrupting her. “What do you mean that you’ll give him a cut? And what is this with you bringing him in on the mission?”

“We need him to complete the next step of the journey. We won’t be able to land on Hutta without him and if I didn’t offer him something then he would be less likely to turn the other way and more inclined to accidentally turn on the radar in our general direction. It was in our best interest. We need him.”

“Yes,” Quintano argued back, “but we needed Quia to get us started and she’s been helpful the whole trip.”

“...and that is why her cut of whatever financial gain we have coming out of this, if any, is coming out of your half.”

“So this Avidd will have his cut coming of your half?” Quintano asked.

“Fine. I see nothing wrong with giving a cut to someone who has actually been helpful. The only things Quia has done are things that we could have done without her.”

“You’re just jealous because...”

“That’s not what I’m jealous about.”

There was an odd silence that filled the air and the tension could almost be cut through with a knife.

The conversation left the both of them feeling a bit awkward. There seemed to have been some words unsaid and an underlying tone that neither of them wanted to venture into, and yet it was definitely something that needed to be figured out before too long. It also seemed that they both felt the same way, whatever that “way” was, and yet neither one of them was willing to admit it.

A’Den pushed softly on the controls. Although she trusted Avidd and believed that he would never turn her in, no matter the price or the cost, she still had to be careful. There were others that were watching the skies and the slightest error could tip their presence and that would be bad, not only for them, but for Avidd as well. She didn’t mind putting herself at risk, she would never put his life at risk because of her carelessness.

“So, how do you know this guy?” Quintano asked, breaking the silence.

“We go way back. It’s a long story.” A’Den didn’t even turn to Quintano when she spoke. Her answer had even been curt and she had hoped that between her tone and her body language that she really didn’t want to talk about it.

“It seems that we have a little time,” Quintano prodded. He had to admit that he was a little more than just curious.

A’Den gave a sigh. She really didn’t want to go through this. Yet, she knew that Quintano would continue to pester her until he had the information that he was looking for. It was best to do this under her

terms before this got any more awkward than it already was between them.

“When things got rough, right after...right after I got my armor, I had decided to higher myself out as a mercenary. I heard that there was good pay from Queen Trios on Shu-Torun. There was something about a civil war and she needed to hire out an army to stop a coupe. It was there where I met up with Avidd. We hit it right off and agreed to watch each other’s sixes. Someone had to have our backs and it difficult to trust just anyone during that time, especially since most everyone there would have turned on each other if the credits were good enough.”

“We were pinned down one day and things were looking bad. We had our orders to hold the line, but we were being overrun. It was only going to be a matter of time before we lost the skirmish. And it was over a minor area that wouldn’t have given anyone an advantage if they held it. A simple strategic retreat would have given everyone the rest they needed and the ability to fortify more strategic locations. But we had our orders.”

“I can still hear the screams. Many were dying all around us. I hadn’t realized how horrific battle was. I have to admit that it was getting to me. Yet, we held.”

“The explosion was deafening. I can still hear it you know, especially when I close my eyes at night. It threw me for a loop and I’m sure if I hadn’t been wearing my armor than I would have died. Avidd wasn’t so fortunate. When I looked over to see how he was doing, he was covered in blood. A couple of his limbs were missing. He was in bad shape.”

“There was no use in fighting anymore. We were all going to die. It was either retreat or fall. I couldn’t just leave him. I picked him up and carried him to the nearest medical center.”

“Avidd was in a lot of shock and pain. He was losing blood too quickly. He was slowing us both down and he knew it. He asked me to finish it. He asked me to put him out of his misery. I couldn’t. I just couldn’t.”

“The doc there said that he didn’t have a chance. I promised Avidd that I would look over him; I couldn’t just let him die. I wouldn’t let him die. I begged the doctor if there was anything that could be done. I was willing to do anything, pay anything, to save Avid if it was possible. He said that he could do some cybernetic implants, but it would be expensive. It cost me everything that both Avidd and I had earned up to that point.”

“The process wasn’t easy and I guess it hurt like hell. Avidd did a lot of screaming during the operation, despite the pain killers that the doc gave him. Again, he begged me to end his life. He cried for it. He begged me not to go along with the procedure. I kept telling myself that it was just the pain that was talking, but I’m not so sure.”

“I can still see the look on his face when it was all over. It was filled with hatred and I couldn’t tell if he hated me for saving his life or he hated himself for not dying when he was first hit. He eventually got over it, or I always kid myself that he had, but I still wonder sometimes if he has any regrets towards me. If he does, he doesn’t show it anymore, but still...”

“Anyway, Avidd lived and we wound up on charges of desertion. Of course we didn’t stick around to face those charges. We left as soon as we could.”

“Avidd wanted nothing to do with combat anymore and wanted to settle down, to have a less exciting career. I wanted to try my hand at going solo for a while, being my own boss. We decided to go our separate ways. I guess it was for the best. However I wanted to ensure that Avidd at least had a good shot at life. No one wanted a cyborg with shell shock and P.T.S.D. at first, but I helped him land this position with the Hutts.”

“He’s a great guy. I think he’s made peace with the whole event, with me, with himself. But I can’t imagine what it would be like to lose half of myself and have it replaced with cold machinery.”

“He’s picked up quite a bit of skill being a splicer and comms expert. This is how I get around the galaxy so easily. I just make sure that I toss a few credits his way.”

Quintano had listened to every word A’Den had said. At first he thought that this conversation was going to go a different direction and he was more than willing to give a quip here and there. But as the story continued, Quintano began to understand.

There was a myriad amount of emotions here. One of them was the friendship that could only be made during war time. He had a few individuals in his time during his commission with the alliance that he was sure would fit this circumstance and it was at this time that he felt guilty

not knowing how they were. Now he understood that he hadn't been much of a friend to them after all

Another thing she was probably feeling was survivor's guilt. Avidd had his life completely turned upside down. He had to start life all over with cybernetic implants. He had barely survived and the part that had would never be the same. On the other hand, she ended up without having even a scratch. Quintano was sure that she felt guilt and would go out of her way to ensure that Avidd was well taken care of. With this in mind he told himself not to give her a bad time any more about letting Avidd in on their treasure hunt or even offering him a cut of whatever credits might come out of this, if any.

Chapter: Hutta

The trip into Hutta airspace was slow as A'Den did her best to keep to locations that would keep them off of the radar and it was only made worse by the thick atmospheric clouds that surrounded the planet. A'Den continued to navigate with her instruments and instinct the best that she could. Yet, despite her ability to pilot the ship, she found the process to be very stressful.

A'Den understood what would happen to them if they were spotted. If they were fortunate then they would only be shot down. If they did, by some miracle of expert flying, managed to get away then not only would they lose the ability to look for this missing piece of the map, but the Hutts would ban together and put a bounty on their heads. There would be nowhere in the entire galaxy to run to. They would be hunted until the end of time with no expense withheld.

The atmospheric clouds not only played havoc on the navigation hardware but it was so thick that it was difficult to see through. Fortunately they weren't angry storm clouds, but they were dark enough to be almost depressing, and when they finally burst through them A'Den almost gave an outburst of joy, almost.

The view beneath the cloud cover only returned the feeling of oppressiveness and dread. The sight was like a blow to their spirits and each one of them had to ask if themselves if they really wanted to chase this adventure through the environment of the planet.

The gloomy clouds overhead had blocked out the sun and left a feeling of despair. To make matters worse, there was only a slight mist that hung in the air that failed to fully rain and bring upon a catharsis. Instead it felt as if depression had fallen and would never let the land go.

The ground yielded a sight that could only be considered a blight upon the land. There were several processing plants that were scattered about, all in various arrays of decay and destruction. Weather, time, and neglect had left these metallic monstrosities covered with rust and decay. Large swaths of corroded metal had fallen inward and had left massive holes in the roofs of the buildings which allowed even more of the depressing weather to affect them.

Almost all of the processing plants were still spewing out great amounts of smoke and smog into the air that only added to the thick cloud cover. A'Den had been ready to find another route or even attempt to make evasive actions to disappear before they were seen. However, her fears were alleviated once Aro had pointed out, through a series of tweets and beeps that these processing plants were fully automated and no life forms were detected inside.

To add to the thick smoke, the metallic beasts were also spewing out a vast amount of sewerage and chemicals into the ground around them. Drainage pipes continued to dump revolting and disgusting looking spillage onto the ground and into the swamp around the area.

Massive pipes ran from one processing plant to another. Like the building from where they had originated, these were also metallic and were also covered in rust. Where their parts connected the rust had eaten through their integrity leaving gaps where their spillage of raw sewage and chemical waste continued to drain upon the ground.

The swamp that had formed around the various buildings and pipes was a commutation of stagnant water, sewage run off, and chemical drainage. There were places where chemicals had floated to the top of the slag and had discolored it with bright phosphorescent colors that swirled and refused to mix with each other. There were other places where steam would suddenly burst forth from the swamp and spew its contents into the air when one chemical would combine with another and mix with a gas pocket.

The planet's flora clung to life in ways that were unimaginable and unfathomable. How such plant life continued to live and thrive under the toxic and horrific circumstance was beyond concept to those aboard the Ebon Mortis. And yet, not only did the plant life live, it thrived.

What little sunlight came through the omnipresent cloud cover was further cut off by canopy of trees that had grown all about. But these trees were not like any type of tree that the crew had ever seen before. These were wrapped and twisted. They grew at odd angles and were discolored in hues that that the crew had never thought possible.

Vines, thick enough to hold the weight of an average person, clung from one tree and dangled and wove their way through the swamp, entangling everything they touched. These made their way to the various

chemical spewing buildings and even made their assault upon these processing plants as if trying to swallow them whole.

It was hard to imagine anything that anything with any form of sentience would want to stay in this place, with the exception of some massively enlarged slug type creature. And yet, that was what had stayed. The Hutts had transformed this planet to their liking and this was the result.

A'Den moved the Ebon Mortis closer to the tree line and followed it to their coordinates. From what she could tell, somewhere beneath them, under the cover of trees, and somewhere one the swap itself, sat the area where they were supposed to find their next piece. Yet, despite how hard the crew of the Ebon Mortis looked, they couldn't see what they were looking for and they knew that their expedition was only made that much more difficult.

Giving up on trying to find their landmark, A'Den continued to pilot the craft over the swamp. Her eyes darted left and right in a desperate attempt to find someplace to land their craft. Nothing looked promising. Either there was too much tree cover or there was just too much swamp and not enough solid ground. The solid ground that could be found was usually taken up by one of the processing plants. With each passing moment the hopelessness of finding something close to their goal started to set in and the reality of having to hike through this bog was becoming all too real.

The small island of mud and sludge was the best that A'Den could find, short of flying all the way into the nearest spaceport and turning themselves in. As it was, the small patch of "land", if that's what it could be called, was merely a rise of gathered muck. It was already occupied by several small saplings of trees that were trying to get a foothold on life. These were completely annihilated as soon as the Ebon Mortis landed upon them. To add to the awkwardness of the landing, the landing "pad" was too small for the Ebon Mortis. The ship had to land with several of its landing gear in the direct water portions of the swamp itself. The belly of the ship rested upon the downed trees making this the best or the worst impromptu landing space, depending on one's point of view.

"It's best if Aro were to stay behind," Quia stated as she started to gather her gear.

Quintano was going to agree with her for the obvious reasons. The swamp could easily swallow up the little droid. There would be mud and swamp flora that could get into parts that would ruin the astromech. And finally, while Aro was here, he could use the ship's radar to keep an eye on any unwelcomed guests. The droid had already been very useful and despite his protests of tweets and bleeps, Quintano was going to agree with the librarian.

“Not this time,” Quia answered Aro before Quintano was able to do so. “There are creatures named the Xuvva. They are similar to the Mynocks, and might even be a related species. They could strip a droid bare before you know it. There are even some so large that they could carry you off and you would disappear into the swamps and never be seen again.”

This left a mournful “woo” from the astromech, one that was combined with fear. Aro then gave a few tweets that followed suggesting that he was better off if he stayed in the ship and kept an eye on things for the crew.

The landing ramp struck the swamp with a splash and tossed swamp water everywhere, soaking all three of the crew members. The three of them gave a deep sign. It was going to be a long day.

The stench of the bog struck hard. It smelled of rotting plants and animals. It smelled of methane gas and other gasses that were just simply unpleasant at best. It smelled of raw sewage. The odors were so bad that it immediately brought tears to crew's eyes and even A'Den, in her Mandalorian suit, had troubles.

The going was difficult at best. They had to slowly pick their way from one slimy mud mound to another. Each step had to be carefully tested to ensure that they didn't sink into some deep mire or mud hole. Large swaths of trees and thick vegetation had to be circumnavigated as well as area of open water.

The depressing mist continued to cling to the air. It stuck on everything around them and left it all in a perpetual state of dampness. Precipitation dripped off of the trees and the vines. There wasn't a dry spot to be found.

Any plant that had fallen, for whatever reason, was in an immediate state of rot. Nothing was allowed to sit for any length of time, but instead was put through its process to be broken down so that life could feed of it.

They continued on in silence, each feeling miserable and finding nothing to say, except announce just how horrible they felt, which would have only made them feel worse. Their clothing stuck to them. They were covered in mud. They were sure that they would stink for some time to come even after leaving this planet.

Quia attempted to break the monotony by tell both A'Den and Quintano that they were fortunate. She went on to explain that this was the dry season and that during the monsoon season there could be torrential rains lasting for weeks. The waters would rise even higher and...

She had only received a grimacing look from Quintano that told her that he wasn't interested on how fortunate that they were. Things were bad enough and the thought of how things could become worse wasn't something that anyone wanted to hear.

However, they did wish for rain. They wished for a heavy deluge that would wash away the grim that was clinging to them. They wished for a downpour that would clean the air and bring them out of the mist that offered nothing but disparity.

In their dread, they had almost missed what they were looking for. With each of them lost deep in their own thoughts of discomfort, they weren't paying attention to where they were going and it would have been out of blind slogging through the swamp that they would have turned and missed the site. As it was, it would have been easily enough to miss it, if Quia hadn't looked upon her data pad and had realized that they were right on top of their location.

The building was a two story orb shaped structure. There was various other orb-like "additions" to the building and it looked more like a large insect rather than any dwelling. It sat up a set of four metal stands that brought the majority of structure out of the muck. A metal spiral staircase ran from the swamp, starting somewhere under the water, and continued around most of the first layer where it met with a door some ten feet or so above the waterline.

There were windows around the building. These were made of some crystalline material, almost as transparent as glass, but a lot stronger. It would have been difficult to see inside the building through these crystal windows and it seemed that their only function was to allow some light, what little there was, into the building rather than to give a view of the desolate swamp.

The rest of the building was made out of metal. This made sense since there wasn't any stone around and any wood products would only quickly rot under the influence of the weather. However, even the metal that the building was made out of hadn't held up over the onslaught of time. Like all of the other metal buildings, structures, pipes, and other pieces of equipment that was laying about, this building was also full of rust.

The plant life and vines were attempting to take over the complex. Vines climbed up and down along the sides and clung on as if they were feeding upon the rust that the building had collected. It would only be a matter of time before the swamp claimed it and swallowed it whole.

The three of them gave a sigh of relief. Although the trek here hadn't been too difficult, it had drain them emotionally and they were glad that they had found what they were looking for. All they had to do now was get what they had come for and repeat the process. With any luck they would be back at the Ebon Mortis where they could find clean clothes and possibly burn these.

The metallic stairs were in worse shape than initially thought. The rust had eaten through so much of the integrity of the structure that it threatened to fall apart the moment they started to put their weight upon it. As it was, Quia and Quintano had to ascend one at a time while A'Den used the jets on her jetpack to fly to the entrance door; she knew that the added weight of her Mandalorian armor would be the last thing that would be needed to finish off the stairs and plunge it into the watery depths of the swamp.

The door was electronically sealed and this would have been the deterrent to keep out anything unwanted that desired entrance. However, since the portal had been withered away by time and the elements, the electronic seal was no longer functioning and the integrity of the door was likewise no longer an issue. The only thing keeping the door standing was the fact that it had rusted to its frame. Even if the electronic lock could become operational again, it was doubtful that the door would even open.

Quintano had tried to give the portal a shoulder bash in hopes to knock the door open and when that didn't work, Quia pulled out her vibro staff. However, even she could tell that she didn't have a good enough leverage from the small landing to get in a good blow that would have done enough damage to help their situation. It was A'Den who had enough of things getting in her way. She activated her jet pack, flew ten feet away from the portal, turned, and ignited her jet pack to its fullest potential. Her form shot off like a missile. Her body struck the rusted portal and it shattered. Its rusty shards burst into the next room like fragmented glass.

A'Den landed with a roll and came up with both blasters up and out. She was ready for anything or anyone that was going to prevent them any further from their goal. What she got instead was nothing.

The round open room was a combination of various rooms. There was a kitchen and dining area in section while there were comforts of home with couches and chairs in another. There was a set of stairs to the right that led to a section above this one as well as a continuation of the stairs leading down to some basement area.

The room gave a 360 degree view of the swamp that surrounded the building with all of the windows all around. The crystalline glass that was used as windows gave a better view looking through them from this side then they did from the other side and it was easier to see out than to see in. However, that view was now soiled by mud, slime, moss, and vines. This had reduced the light coming into the room even more than the canopy of trees forcing Quia and Quintano to turn on their flashlights.

To one side there was a four foot wide hole in the middle of the floor. A corresponding hole was in the ceiling and it looked as if something had burned its way through at least two levels of this building. Although there was no hole through the very top ceiling on the top level, that would have exposed the inside to the environment from the outside; there was no telling how deep the series of holes went down.

To further add to the destruction of the integrity of these levels, the stairs, both going up and going down, were destroyed. It was difficult to tell what had destroyed them, but it wasn't weather. There was no rust or evidence that they had collapsed from decomposition.

Finally the room showed further acts of violence as the furniture in this room was torn, ripped, shredded, sliced, and burned. Couches were melted. Chairs were trashed. Shelves were destroyed. Tables were

demolished. There was nothing that still had any form of integrity to them and it had seemed as if some form of a fight had come through here and had devastated the room and its contents.

A'Den quickly assessed the room and found no immediate threat. She gave a sigh of relief, not that she couldn't handle a threat, but that she was in no mood to have to deal with yet another delay. It was time to find what they had come looking for and leave as quickly as they could. Since she knew that the others couldn't make their way upstairs and that her jet pack made her the best qualified for flight she let Quia and Quintano know her intentions.

"Let's split up. We'll find this holocron faster and get out of the forsaken swamp sooner. I'll take the upstairs."

"Sounds good," Quintano stated. "I'll take the lower area."

A'Den initiated her jet pack once again and took to flight. She maneuvered herself up, through the hole in the ceiling and into the room beyond. It took a little bit of skill to steady her trajectory through the four foot wide burned out hole and she had to ensure that the building material didn't scrap across her jet pack while in flight, but she was able to manage.

The upstairs was the bedroom, meditation room, and observatory area all rolled into one. The bed was too large for just one individual and A'Den couldn't help but shake her head at the thought of this Sith Lord having any company way out here. The trip alone should have discouraged anyone from completing the expedition and the view would have destroyed any doubt that the trip would have been worth it. Like the furniture downstairs, the bed was torn apart and shredded. There were burn marks and slash marks. There were even bite marks from something very large, something that would look to be big enough to push its way through the hole in the floor.

The widows here gave a full view of the swamp outside, although there was nothing to see. These windows were also covered with vines, moss, mud, scum, and fallen debris from the vegetation above that there was no view to be had, not that the swamp would have offered a view anyway.

The meditation area had a rug moved up to a shrine. Here there were candle holders, incense holders, and even a brazier. There was an odd ebony black obelisk with some sort of runes upon it that A'Den didn't

understand, but she was sure that Quia would be able to interpret it and if needed she would call the historian upstairs if needed. This area was also torn apart, shredded, smashed, ripped, and destroyed leaving nothing intact except for the obelisk and A'Den had to wonder if the ebony material was Beskar, the only substance strong enough to hold up against the violence that had occurred here.

After her initial search and finding nothing out of the ordinary, or the holocron simply lying out in the open, A'Den began doing a more thorough search. She started to feel every crack and crevice. She felt for switches, buttons, and levers. She ever thought about the layout of the room compared to layout outside to see if she could recall any discrepancy. She couldn't think of any and she wondered if either of the other two had any luck.

Quintano grabbed a hold of the rim of the hole in the floor and lowered himself into the basement beyond. As he fell he noticed that the hole that he had dropped himself into had come from an area deeper still. He had to twist in mid-air and redirect his landing so that he missed the second hole. His landing was less than ideal and he had to roll upon impact.

Quintano's flashlight was needed in this room. There was no light from above and whatever light had been coming into this room from any energy source was no longer operating. There were no lights and darkness had consumed this area.

Quintano could tell, by the height of room and dimensions from outside; that at least half of this room was beneath the swamp level. It was much cooler here than above and smelled slightly of swamp water. There was a dampness that hung in the air as if the outside sewer swamp had permeated into this room through the very walls that were trying to keep them out. Of course the stench that was coming from the hole in the floor didn't help either.

The walls were slightly damp and Quintano had to question rather it was the dampness in the air that was clinging to them or the fact that they were slowly losing their integrity. If the later was the case then there was a possibility that these very walls would collapse at any time and flood this room. With this in mind, Quintano hurried his search.

This seemed to be the cellar. There were boxes and barrels and sacks of food supplies. Racks and shelves lined the walls. Anything that would be

needed to keep this building operational, at least for some given time, would be stored here; that was if things weren't as they were now.

The cellar was a disaster. The boxes and barrels and sacks were all ripped open and torn apart. Whatever the contents had been could only be guessed at since these were now empty. There was no hint of food that would have been kept here. If Quintano were to have guessed then he would have theorized that whatever had tunneled into this room had eaten all of the supplies.

That thought gave him the shudders. If there was a creature somewhere out there, wide enough to make a hole four feet wide and was powerful enough to burst through several layers of building material and metal, then it was time to wrap up his search even faster. He didn't want to meet up with whatever had done this and with the threat of becoming the beast's next meal Quintano immediately went to work while constantly looking over his shoulder and keeping an ear out for anything that sounded suspicious.

With the best of his ability, and while trying to work across the rubble and debris of the decimated shelves and racks, and broken barrels and boxes, Quintano moved from one section to another. He felt for hidden switches or panels. He looked for niches and compartments.

Quia started in on the middle section of the building. However, she wasn't so sure that she was going to find anything here. She was sure that A'Den would have been the best bet to find anything since the holocron would have been personally guarded in the Sith Lord's personal room. Here, in this room, it would have been out in an area where anyone who entered could easily search. No, she was sure that it was probably upstairs. However, she wasn't going to take her gut feeling as a proven fact, she was still going to search just in case she was wrong.

Her investigation led her all around the room. She looked for anything out of the ordinary and found nothing. The longer she searched the more she was satisfied with her initial thoughts.

"Nothing up here," A'Den shouted from above. "Any luck down there?"

"I haven't found anything," Quintano shouted back from below. "Is there any chance of helping me out of this hole? It stinks down here."

Quia didn't respond. Her mind was already moving through the various possibilities. Under the assumption that A'Den had made an exhaustive search and the holocron wasn't upstairs, then there was the possibility that it wasn't here at all. All they had was a location on an old map on where to find the location if it were still here. However, if the holocron had been moved since then, then they were in the wrong spot.

She watched as A'Den came down through the hole through her floor and went to help Quintano out of his. It was at this point that Quia's mind went to the events that had transpired here. If she could put together the past then she could figure out the present. From there, she could figure out the future.

Quia smiled. This was what she did for a living. This is what she did best. All she had to do now was examine the clue, come up with a theory, and see where it took her.

The historian bent down and examined the hole in the floor. She ignored the conversation between A'Den and Quintano about the state of the dwelling and condition of its contents. She ignored how bad it smelled from the basement. She even ignored it when A'Den and Quintano started to question what she was doing. She would have answers for them after her investigation.

From what Quia could tell, the hole had been created by an acid. There were areas in the material and metal that had been melted and burned away. Also, she had been able to tell that the acid had burned upwards. If she were to have guessed then whatever had come up through here had secreted an acid attack. Considering the size, the creature would have to be fairly large. Only one thing came to mind.

"It was a chemilizard."

"A what? Quintano asked.

"A chemilizard. This is an evolved species from the original that used to live here before the Hutts came. They used to be a species called the Orpali Dragons. These were fairly large lizards that would eat, well, about anything that they could find."

"When the Hutts came, they changed the environment to suit them. Over time the species that lived here either died off or adapted and the Orpali Dragons adapted. They started to eat the chemical and sewage run

off spillage that would otherwise be toxic to everything else. Eventually the species mutated so much that they aren't the same species that they were to begin with. Some species have known to spit acid."

"Oh, great," A'Den stated with sarcasm. "Just what we need, an acid spitting giant lizard."

Quia ignored A'Den response and continued. "It's my guess that the chemilizard may have tunneled into the basement to get to the food, or shelter, or just by accident. Either way, it got to the food and then felt the power source from the holocron."

"You think that the holocron may have attracted this lizard?" Quintano asked.

Quia shrugged. "It's just a working theory. If a Xuvva could be attracted by power sources then why can't a mutated chemilizard? Who knows what is all out here. No one comes out here and investigates mutated creatures or their diets. The only reason why I know about it is because it's required reading in regards to what happens when a planet is reformed or when a planet is heavily polluted. We only have documented reports since ambassadors had watched Hutts eat the Orpali Dragons as delicacies and at a point in history they were no longer being served. A few questions lead to the only history that we know of these creatures."

"Suffice it to say that these creatures can be far more dangerous than we thought or anyone had thought. If a mutated chemilizard had come up through the basement and through these layers then the Sith Lord that lived here would have to put up a fight. That would explain the fight that had gone on through here. Again, I'm just theorizing."

"If I'm right, then I believe that the Sith Lord lost the battle and the chemilizard went after the holocron."

There was silence in the room. Both Quintano and A'Den felt as if they had been hit in the stomach. The hard blow of the news had taken the wind out of every hope that they had. And there was no reason to not believe Quia, everything that she said seemed to be validated by the evidence and condition of the rooms. There was no reason to believe that the holocron was still here.

"Then that's it? We're done?" A'Den stated with a bit of bite, anger and frustration to her tone. "We've come all this way, to walk through this

forsaken swamp of disgusting filth and we turn up nothing? The very item that we are looking for has been carried off by some creature, out there. The holocron could be anywhere on this planet, and that is if it's still functioning. For all that we know, the chemical components of this swamp has eaten away the cube and it's gone, long lost, and with it, its secrets gone as well. For all that we know, this chemilizard has eaten it for lunch. For all that we know, a swarm of Xuvva has eaten it. For all that we know, some Hutt cartel leader has already found it. Rather your theory is right or not, it's obvious that the holocron is no longer here and we have nothing to go on."

A'Den's voice echoed across the room reveling her rage and anger over the whole encounter, and no one could blame her. They all felt the same way. The swamp had taken so much out of them that the only thing that was keeping them going was the holocron that they would find and now that it wasn't here; they just didn't know what to do. Their spirits were crushed. Their hopes were destroyed.

Quia had to shake her head. She simply couldn't give up hope, she just couldn't. There were too many individuals who were counting on her, rather they knew it or not, rather they were part of the alliance or the Empire, they all were worth saving. She couldn't give up. There had to be a way. She simply had to try something.

'Do. Or do not. There is no try.'

The words came back to her as if they were said only a few moments ago, even though it felt as if it were almost a life time. She could almost hear the voice of the little green being as he spoke. He continued to make her laugh every time he did speak. Now his lesson was important. She only wished that she would have taken him more seriously back then. Unfortunately she couldn't change who she was when she was younger, but she could change who she was now. Now, what she had to do...was do.

She had to think. There must be some way to find the holocrons. They had to have something about them that made them unique enough to be able to locate their presence. Then it hit her. There was something unique about them.

"I've got it," Quia stated with renewed hope. "Each holocron has to have an internal power source that would allow the cube to not only hold old data; but they also had to be able to transmit the recording. Since

these power sources were from the Old Republic era, and the technology has been advanced beyond what had been used, then all she had to do is scan the area for the unique signature power source.”

There was a moment of silence that permeated the room as the other two thought about it. It was A'Den who shook her head in protest.

“You are talking about scanning the whole world for such a small source of power, and that is if it's still active.”

“Actually, we don't have to scan the whole world, just a few square kilometers of this area. The chemilizard wouldn't have gone far, they're not migratory animals. It would have a lair fairly close by and if we can find it then we stand a good chance of finding the holocron.”

“But all of this could have happened a long time ago,” A'Den stated. “This chemilizard is probably long dead by now and who knows what could have happened since then.”

“I've taken that into account. Since chemilizards aren't hunted like the Orpali Dragons and are known to be toxic to those that do try to eat them, there's no reason why they can't grow and live to their fullest potential. Add this to their chemical makeup and it's possible if not highly probable that these creatures could live for a very long time.”

“But it's all speculation,” A'Den argued back. “We have so little to go on.”

“It's all we've got, and it will be enough.”

“Why are you so sure?”

“Because I have to be,” Quia responded. “There are too many individuals' lives at stake. I just can't quit. I would never forgive myself if Currosant is destroyed and I didn't do everything that I could to stop it.”

“Fine,” A'Den conceded. “But we need to be careful. Our scanners could catch the attention of the Hutts and we're not supposed to be here. The last thing that I want to do is upset the Hutts and have them hunting us across the galaxy.”

Quia nodded in agreement. They had to be careful and do this quickly. Any involvement with any outside group, especially the Hutts, would delay them at best. She turned to Quintano.

“Can you have Aro scan the power properties of the holocrons and then use the scanning features of the Ebon Mortis to do a search in our area?”

“I’m already on it.”

Quia quietly nodded. They had bought her explanations and believed her story, a story that she would find highly unbelievable, that was at its face value. What she was holding back was something that neither of them believed in and she was certain it was the driving force of the chemilizard. She didn’t believe that the power source of the holocron had attracted the beast; she believed that the beast felt it through some other means. Quia was sure that the chemilizard was force sensitive and was able to feel the presence of the Sith Lord and holocron through its connection with the force.

This was a double edged piece of information; it could end up being both a blessing and a curse. For starters if the chemilizard were force sensitive then this would help the creature to live longer and might even ensure its current survival. The bad part was, it could have mastery over the force and it would be more difficult to take down if it were still alive.

Chapter: Chemilizard

Aro continued to give a few tweets and beeps as it worked from one project to the next. It was easy enough to isolate the particular wavelength of the energy output of the holocrons. His built in scanners were perfect for the job and it would have been similar to analyzing any energy weapon being shot at a ship that he was working with or even finding the energy wavelengths of a warp signature left behind by anyone that they might want to chase and hunt down.

From there Aro turned on the communications array of the Ebon Mortis. He knew that the ship's scanners could pick up the wave length he was looking for. However, the scan would only emanate outwards from the ship and since the scan would more than likely have to cover the distance to the others, the amount of energy needed and the scanning wavelength would be a beacon to any other scanners. What he needed was something that could generate that kind of energy without being noticed and something that could scan in a more specific area without sending out such a wide search. There were only place where he could find those scanners.

Once the communications array was online, Aro sent a scrambling code towards the space station that they had communicated to before arriving here. As soon as the communications were established he sent his programming code through and into the computer station. His protocols found the program that he was looking for. A series of command codes was all it took to tap into the space station's scanners.

Aro uploaded the wavelength he was looking for into the computer's analyzing while turning on the scanner to the appropriate location on the planet's surface. He monitored the results as the space station did his job for him. It was only a matter of time before he got his hit.

Jermax scanned his computer screen one more time. He was sure that what he had picked up on his monitor was only a minor glitch, perhaps a reflection of some electrical storm in the area. However, there it was again and it was a steady beacon telling him that an energy source, that of a

scanner, had triggered his instruments that were planted in the restricted zone.

Jermax had been in charge of making sure that the restricted zone stayed that way, restricted. No one was supposed to enter, and if they did, then they weren't supposed to leave. He wasn't told why and it wasn't his job to ask, and if he valued his life, then he never would ask.

The pay was good and threat of not doing it was horrible. There had been no choice really and he couldn't complain. At least he was alive and down here in the computer monitoring room instead of...well, he really didn't want to think about it.

The room was small and full of different monitors, screens, and counsels. These were the only light source he had since the artificial lighting had burned out a long time ago and he hadn't the courage to ask for them to be replaced. There were different mainframes all over the room and these gave a constant buzz that drove him close to madness by the end of his long and arduous shift.

Jermax went through a series of commands from one station to another to make sure that his initial findings were correct. He would hate to give a false positive; it would be as bad as not giving a true positive. When he was sure about his findings, he bolted from his room.

The way toward the throne room would have resulted in a tangled knot his stomach but he knew the consequences if he didn't inform his master. Even the two massive Gamorrean guards that stood watch at the front of the throne room didn't intimate him enough to withhold the information that he had and he quickly walked passed them despite the fact that they tried to stop him.

The throne room was as he remembered. It was large, probably larger than it had to be, but then it was designed to overawe any who would dare to come in here. There were massive columns placed periodically that held up the vaulted ceiling. Valuable rugs were tossed upon the floor and expensive tapestries hung on the walls.

Near the end of the room was a ten foot long table full of food and drink, enough to satisfy the appetite of a small army. However, all of it was to be dedicated to the one who dominated this very room.

Behind the table lay the large slug named Bocha Hutt. Like all of the other Hutts, this creature was gluttonous and over indulgent and he didn't care. His overweight form was bigger than life and his command was larger than that.

Beside the sloth was his protocol droid, I.G.-4 by name. Jermax new that the droid was supposed to communicate for the Bocha so the Hutt didn't have to indulge himself to the trivial task of actually speaking. However, Jermax wondered if the droid had alternative plans and was speaking for himself and Bocha was so focused on his own gluttony that he never bothered to correct the droid and as long as his business continued to run the way it was, then the droid could do whatever it wanted.

“Oh great Bocha, we have a serious...” Jermax had started to speak but was cut off by the protocol droid.

“The great and mighty Bocha the Hutt does not want to be disturbed at this time.” I.G.-4 had spoken without an utterance from Bocha himself.

“But it's of imperative importance.”

“The great and mighty Bocha the Hutt says that he will have you tossed into the rancor pit for mere sport if you do not leave immediately. Your presence disturbs him.”

Jermax wanted to toss the droid into a smelter and watch as the droid's parts melted into slag while listening to the thing scream.

“There's an unauthorized power source in the restricted area.”

“Wha...? Muwengee. Na chooga.” The mention of the unauthorized anything in the restricted area brought an immediate response from the gluttonous slug.

“The great and mighty Bocha the Hutt says...”

“Yes, I heard him you tin plated bucket of bolts. I'll track it down.”

“He's done it!” Quintano exclaimed. “The little droid actually did it.”

This had brought joy to all three of them and even A'Den couldn't help be have a smile come across her face. Despite the fact that they still had to trek back through the sewage chemical swamp lands and possibly battle and ancient acid spitting chemically infused overgrown lizard, A'Den was actually looking forward to this part of their adventure. The sooner that they were able to get the holocron, the sooner they could leave. On top of that, if there was still a lizard out there, somewhere, the she could take her frustration out on it. This thought alone brought a deeper smile upon her face.

The three of them left through the way they had come, through the now broken door of the building. Although they had agreed that the tunnel through the basement would have probably dropped them off closer to holocron, they also all agree that it stank way too much to endure for only the sake of a few hundred yards.

The sun had set low enough on the horizon by the time they had started their trek again. What little sunlight had come through was now gone and this left them in almost complete darkness. They each had to resort to pulling flashlights to find their way.

Their progress was slower than when they had started to come here in the first place. The lack of light meant that they couldn't see the pitfalls or sudden drop offs until they were almost right on top of them. They had to move slower in order to avoid any potential disasters.

Their lights continued to cast strange and eerie shadows across the swamp. Everything seemed to move under their illumination. Plants became elongated. Vines crept along the pathways of the trees and twisted with every shadow that was cast.

The three of them kept their eyes out. Although they had some idea of where they were going and about how far away it was, they still had no idea what they were looking for. They didn't know if the holocron was up in a tree, buried in the mud, submerged in the water, or hidden in some warren. They didn't so much see it as they did smell it.

At first, their flashlights caught only a sight of a mound that they would have mistaken as any other part of the swamp. There was moss, vines, and mud all piled together and there was no need to think of this as anything other than what they had already seen along their way. They would have even passed it by, if it weren't for the smell.

The overwhelming sense of decomposition and feces was more prevalent here than anywhere else that they had encountered before. The odiferous stench was so bad that it overpowered the horrible scent of the swamp itself, a situation that was thought to be impossible until now, and brought tears to their eyes. The three of them had to hold back their desire to lose their dignity. They gagged for fresh air. It was when their flashlight went back to the area that was producing the stench did they realize what they had found.

The mud pile wasn't just full of swamp plants, moss, leaves, and vines; it was worse. The warren was made out of bones and decomposing bodies of animals and creatures that lived in these parts. Arms, legs, and tails were all interwoven with the rest of the building material.

From what the three of them could tell, this was definitely a lair of some kind and from what they could see, that creature was quite large, even if it were to lay straight across from side to side. There was no need to stick around to find out where the creature was and if and or when it would be coming back

"I think we've found the nest of the chemilizard," Quia said as she stated the obvious.

"Quick," A'Den said, "let's find what we've come for before..."

A'Den's voice was suddenly cut off as her form was pulled down and backwards by some unseen force. She let out a sudden gasp before he body disappeared under dark water that was surrounding them. Then, before anyone knew what was happening, A'Den was gone.

"A'Den? A'Den?"

Both Quia and Quintano started to call out the Mandalorian's name in a desperate attempt to reach her. Their voices held concern and even a bit of fear. Their cries echoed off of the trees in the distance and returned to them like haunting ghosts.

They hoped that she had only taken a nasty fall from an unexpected step backwards or perhaps a section of mud gave way sending her flying backwards. But when no answer had been returned and no sign of her existence came about, their concerns lead to fear and full desperation. They knew that A'Den couldn't hold her breath underwater for much longer and her suit was too heavy to swim in. Her Mandalorian armor

could very well be taking her to the bottom of some pitfall and A'Den might very well be drowning at the bottom of the swamp.

“Where is she?” Quia asked with a concerned voice. She had already seen far too many people who were close to her die. She didn't want to see another.

“I don't know. I just don't know. I don't see any sign of her.” Quintano's voice held the same fear as Quia's and he was near a point of panic and crossing the threshold of hopelessness.

“She's got to be around here somewhere. A'Den? A'Den?”

Suddenly the very water right next to them exploded in a fury. Mud and sewage and chemical run off were splashed in all directions. Both Quintano and Quia were immediately soaked.

From the unexpected torrent of water and muck came the very individual that they were looking for, but not in any fashion that they were hoping. A'Den was flung out from under the water and tossed through the air. Her form hit one of the nearby trees and struck hard before her body fell unceremoniously back into the water.

Both Quia and Quintano rushed over to the Mandalorian to help her up. They could tell that she had been stunned, but didn't seem to be seriously harmed.

“It... it tried to eat me,” A'Den stated as she started to stand. Her words were stuttered while she tried to catch her breath. Not only had her stay under water leave her without much needed oxygen, the slam against the tree had taken away what little breath she had. It was going to be a while before she would be able to fully recover. “My armor stopped it but...”

A'Den wasn't able to finish her sentence. It was Quia who let out a scream of surprise this time as something hard hit the back of her legs. Her knees buckled and her body fell backwards. The only clue as to what had hit her was the movement of a snake like thing in the water. It only took a moment to realize that it wasn't a snake but rather the tail of something very large. It was a moment too late.

Before anyone could react, the water around them yet again erupted in a shower of disgusting filth, this time revealing the beast that had tried to

eat A'Den, the beast that had just knocked over Quia. The creature was easily three meters in length and perhaps four feet wide. Its green scales with brown markings match the color of the swamp, its moss, and the water making it difficult to see during the best of conditions. It widened its mouth, wide enough to bite any of them in half.

Quintano rolled to one side and was already in action by the time he came out of his roll. He came up with both of his blasters in hand. Within a heartbeat he laid down a barrage of blaster fire.

As her adrenaline kicked in, A'Den was able to find her breath. Without hesitation, and not wanting to face the lizard again, she activated her jet pack and let it carry her high above the beast. With having the high ground she was able to put down a suppressing fire from her blasters.

With both Quintano and A'Den shooting off one blaster fire after another, the dark swamp lit up with light. They were now able to see just how immense the creature was. They could also see just how ineffective their attacks were.

One by one the blaster fire bounced off of the tough hide of the beast. Energy was displaced in all directions and struck down nearby trees or were ricocheted into the swamp itself. Nothing was affecting the creature. Even as both Quintano and A'Den had come to the realization that there wasn't anything that they could do to harm the beast, they continued to blast at it with the hope of hitting a soft or vulnerable spot

Quia had rolled back up after the initial blow and did her best to try to stay out of the beast's way. Yet, for every move that she made, the lizard was one step behind her. She moved to her right and the creature snapped at her, just missing her. She dodged back to her left only to find that the beast was still in pursuit.

It seemed to Quia that the creature had singled her out from the other two. She didn't know if it thought that she would be an easier target or that it was, in fact, force sensitive and might have felt her connection to the Jedi that she once had served. Either way if Quintano and A'Den didn't do something, anything to at least slow the beast down enough for her to catch her breath, and quickly, then it would only be a matter of time before she tripped up in the mud or catch her foot on some root.

A'Den was able to see the predicament that Quia was in. The historian couldn't get a break. Knowing that her blasters were doing anything to

even get the beast's attention, it was time to turn to something that might. She spun her blasters and slammed them back into her holsters. From there she pulled the EE 3 Carbine rifle that was slung over her shoulder, leveled it, aimed, and fired.

The blast struck the chemilizard with accuracy and with a hard enough punch to catch its attention, but not the attention that A'Den had hoped for. She had thought that she would at least be able to blast a hole right through the beast. Instead she only managed to anger it.

The chemilizard turned its attention away from Quia and snapped its head up and around. Within a heartbeat, the beast let loose a large spittle of acid that flew through the air towards its flying foe.

A'Den's eyes went wide the moment that her sensors picked up the extra heat signature that was coming at her. She remembered what the acid had done to the Sith Lord's home and she wasn't going to stay around to see if her Mandalorian armor would fare any better. She moved to one side.

The acid missed A'Den and she was glad that it did. However, it quickly came to her attention that the intended target wasn't her. Instead it struck a large branch overhead. By the time A'Den realized that she had been wrong, it was too late.

The acid attack hit the thick branch and burned right through the limb. With its integrity lost the large limb fell and slammed into A'Den, knocking her out of the air and plunging her back into the disgusting swamp that she was trying to avoid.

The sudden attack upon A'Den was all the time that Quia needed. She pulled out her vibro-staff and activated it. She planted her right foot and kicked off. Her body spun in place, she picked up momentum and she let her weapon take the lead. With her full force, she struck the chemilizard.

The weapon simply bounced off of the tough hide of the beast. The sudden stop of the unsuccessful attack brought Quia out of her spin. She nearly fell over once her momentum had been ceased. She should have been able to cut through the creature. Now she was off balance.

The chemilizard ignored the lack of threat that was given to it by both Quia and Quintano, who kept shooting at the creature in hopes of at least getting its attention. Instead, the lizard turned its fullest attention toward

the downed Mandalorian. Although it knew that its teeth had a problem breaking into the Mandalorian armor, it also knew that the individual had a weapon that had harmed it. It needed to take care of the strongest threat first before making a meal of the other two. It lurched forward and snapped at A'Den.

Quintano rolled to one side, straddled over the downed Mandalorian, and opened fire upon the chemilizard's face. He was hoping to hit the lizard's eyes. He was hoping to catch its attention. He was hoping to at least give A'Den a chance to regroup. All he got was the blunt end of the lizard's attack that sent him flying backwards.

A'Den came to the realization that they didn't have anything that could harm this creature, at least not fast enough to put it down before it took out of them. They had to find a better way, a smarter way, to take out the creature. Then it struck her. Maybe they did have a weapon that would work. It was worth a try and it was probably the only thing they had left. Out of full desperation, A'Den reached into backpack and pulled out the artifact that she had kept from the Sith Lord's bedroom.

“Quia! Catch!” A'Den made sure that her voice was loud enough for the historian to hear and she hoped that her aim toward Quia was good enough for her to catch the item in question.

With the other gun slinger dashed aside, the chemilizard now had its clear shot at the Mandalorian. It reached forward again and snapped its jaws down upon its prey.

A'Den could feel the pressure upon her armor as the chemilizard continued to bite into her. She was sure that it was only a matter of time before the best was able to bite through and it was also only a matter of time before the lizard was able to shot out its acidic spittle again. A'Den knew that there were some animals that needed to rest a little before it was able to use their poison and she hoped that this creature was similar. She didn't want to think about the consequences if she were wrong.

As Quia watched the chemilizard catch hold of A'Den and started to thrash her about, her eyes caught the item that had been tossed to her. She was sure what the item was and if she was right then this was the only way to kill off this beast and save A'Den in the process.

With one fell swoop Quia snapped her vibro-staff back into its holder and reached out to snatch the cylinder out of the air. As soon as she

caught it, her eyes went wide. She knew what it was immediately and knew how to operate it. Although it wasn't her choice of weapon, she could easily adapt.

Without delay, Quia activated both sides of the twin bladed double sided lightsaber staff. Twin energy streams came forth, one from each end of the middle handle. The beams of power lit up the area and gave this part of the swamp a glow that could be seen for quite the distance. As the blades of pure energy came forth, a flock of birds took flight and flew for their lives fearing the fate that was to come.

Quia wasted no time in acting. She didn't let her thoughts get in her way or her lack of actual fighting experience stop her. The sight of A'Den being shook by this creature was enough for her to focus upon and enough to spur her forward.

The historian took two quick steps that brought her into the right position. From there she kicked off and sent her body sailing through the air. She soared up and over the top of the chemilizard and as her form descended Quia flipped the lightsaber in her hands, raised it above her head, arched her back, and slammed the energy blade deep into the skull of the chemilizard.

The chemilizard went to give a scream of pain as its skull exploded in pain but the lightsaber struck too quickly. The energy blade dug into its brain. The creature went into involuntary convulsions before dropping A'Den and falling to the ground dead.

Quintano helped A'Den pull herself up out of the swamp of muck and sewage once again. It had been a close call and he was sure that if Quia hadn't acted as quickly as she had, then A'Den would have suffered far worse than just the embarrassment that she had suffered.

It didn't take long to find the holocron in the chemilizard's lair. It had been buried deep into the creature's nest and several decomposing parts had to be removed in order to retrieve it. The only positive aspect was the fact that they could now make the trek back to the Ebon Mortis and quickly put all of this behind them.

"We've been able to track the scan for the short time that is was being generated," Jermax stated as he hurried back into the Hutt throne room.

He was excited to share his findings and further excited by the fact that he wasn't going to lose his life, at least not today.

“The scans have come from our own space station.”

“Woobee Waga?”

“The great Bocha the Hutt...”

“I am quite away of what Bocha stated, you bucket of bolts. I am quite fluent in Huttese.”

“Why...I never...,” I.G.-4 said in an arrogant tone.

“Well, maybe you should, now shut up so I can let Bocha know of the situation. Anyway, yes, the scans have come from our own space station. We were also able to utilize our own scanners and were able to pick up a spaceship leaving the area.”

“The great Bocha the Hutt demands that you find out who was on duty during that time. The great Bocha the Hutt would deal with individual personally. The great Bocha the Hutt wants to know if the ship had been identified.”

I.G.-4 hadn't waited for Bocha to even speak and had ignored the frustrations that Jermax had voiced. Instead the droid continued to speak on its own while Bocha ate as if this was no longer an issue.

“It's not a ship that has appeared on our records before, but we'll run it through any of the old recordings to see if it has ever been in our area before and we'll put the word out to have it tracked down.”

“The great Bocha the Hutt will deal with those trespassers as well. As you know, no one is supposed to know about the restricted zone and if information were to get out ...”

“I know, I know,” Jermax stated as he patted the air in hopes to stop the droid from talking. “Don't worry. We'll catch them.”

A'Den stepped out from her personal room aboard the Ebon Mortis. She had left the holocron with Quia in order for her to find the next

target area while she had gone to take a long hot shower. Even after the long soak, she was sure that she would have to have several more before she was able to feel like herself once again.

Her armor was going to have to be sonically cleaned. She would have to ensure that she got every spot carefully detailed to make sure that she removed every bit of the swamp from every crack and crevasse. Not only did she want to ensure that she got the stench out, she wanted to ensure that the corrosive nature of the swamp didn't eat away some of the delicate electronics that were housed in her suite.

During her time cleaning up, she had time to reflect. She had to admit that she was grateful for the fact that Quia did know how to use the lightsaber properly. Both the historian and the artifact were well timed and without either of them the situation would have taken a turn for the worse.

A'Den gave a sigh. Although Quia had returned the lightsaber artifact, there was no real use in keeping it. She really didn't have a need for it and it was obvious that Quia knew how to handle it. Rather she liked her or not, rather she was jealous of her or not, it was probably for the best to let Quia have the weapon in case they were in need of it or the historian's skill at using it later. It was time to find Quia.

Quia had already cleaned up and had come back to the bridge. From what A'Den could tell, the Ebon Mortis had already been set on course. It seemed that Quia was more than eager to help in any way that she could by taking the initiative.

"Oh, there you are," Quia stated the moment that she saw "A'Den come into the cockpit area. "I helped Aro find out next planet and he's already set a course to our next destination. I hope you didn't mind. I mean, it's your ship and all, but I thought that the sooner that we got underway the better. I had waiting a while to see if we could go ahead, but when ..."

A'Den put her hand up to stop the librarian from talking. She knew what she was trying to say and any further words would only be more awkward for the both of them than either of them wanted to feel.

"Look," A'Den started. "This isn't easy. I've always done things on my own so thanking someone for saving my life isn't easy..."

There was a moment of silence where the feeling of awkwardness that was trying to avoid was now creeping into the room.

“Anyway, I wanted to give you this,” A’Den said as she handed over the lightsaber hilt. “It’s just a little thanks for helping out. You can put it to better use than to have it continue to collect dust.”

Quia took the lightsaber hilt and gave a blush. She was almost overwhelmed by the gift. She had always hoped of retrieving an item from the past, but now that it was handed to her as a gift, she didn’t know what to do with it.

Quia shook her head and tried to hand it back to A’Den. “I can’t keep it, it belongs in a museum.”

“Then keep it and put it in a museum then,” A’Den stated as she shoved the item back.

Quia smiled. Perhaps when this was all over she would do just that. Until then, she would keep a hold of it and make sure it was safe. She put it in her backpack before turning back to A’Den to thank her once again.

A’Den saw the reaction from Quia but only shook her head and changed the subject. “Where to next?”

“The fourth piece is on Dromund Kaas.”

Chapter: Blackning

A'Den, Quintano, and Quia all held their breath as another lightning bolt struck and crossed over the bow of their ship. Although the Ebon Mortis had a tough hull and a single lightning bolt wouldn't have done a whole lot of damage, they still were concerned about getting hit. This lightning wasn't like anything they had seen at all. This was black lightning and its presence didn't bode well.

"Dromund Kaas became the Sith Capital world," Quia had mentioned before they had even arrived. "They moved here, abandoning Korriban. Like Korriban, this is very strong in the dark side of the force."

Again, both A'Den and Quintano had rolled their eyes as Quia mentioned the force. They still didn't believe in the entire "light side" or "dark side" religious "force" thing that Quia continued to talk about. They did believe in the good and bad in individuals, but not as some strange ever binding aspect that can have its own will and power over an area like an entity of its own let alone some cosmic magic that could control as much as the stories tried to talk about.

However, with this in mind, they still had to admit, if only to themselves, that they had seen and witnessed several things that they couldn't explain. It had been easy enough to chalk these things up to just simply the unknown of the galaxy. Now, it seemed, that it was getting more and more difficult to just dismiss these things and they had to admit that the idea of a "force" had taken hold in the back of their minds and simply wouldn't let go.

"I don't know what all we will find there," Quia continued. "But there have been old reports of horrible beasts, carnivorous plants, and strange spirits. There have even been reports of blackning."

"Blackning?" Quintano asked.

Now he understood what Quia had meant. She had told them that according to the tales, this energy would not only cause havoc across the electrical systems like regular lightning, but it would cause horrible audible and visual hallucinations. After their time on Korriban, Quintano wanted nothing to do with any more hallucinations.

“The readings don’t make sense,” A’Den stated as she did her best to hold the ship on course.

The storm wasn’t like any other storm that they had known. There was no wind and no rain, only shots of black lightning coming from the clouds that threatened to knock them out of the sky. They were ominous bolts that seemed to give warning to stay clear of the planet, a warning that had been ignored but was now being taken into consideration.

A’Den knew that the Ebon Mortis, like other ships, could handle a little bit of lightning, that wasn’t the problem. The problem was that these bolts still had a mass amount of heat that could damage their heat shields and that these things had enough power to punch a hole through their ship. This wasn’t good at all.

A’Den was used to things that she could fight. This wasn’t one of them. She was no longer in control of the situation. All she could do was hope to fly the Ebon Mortis to the coordinates the best that she could.

There was the second problem. The navigation units kept telling her that there was something very large in front of them, like a mountain but then it would disappear. Her readings told her that she was going in the opposite direction before correcting themselves. She had initially chalked this up to the electrical disturbances of the blackning but not all of her readings and navigation systems acted up at the same time.

“...help...”

The distress call that came seemed to come over the static of the commlink.

“Aro, can you get a lock on the call?” Quintano asked.

“We’re not going to threaten our mission by rescuing...,” A’Den started to say but was cut off.

“We can’t just ignore this,” Quintano stated.

“We have to help her,” Quia chimed in.

A’Den gave a sigh of defeat. She was certain that she wouldn’t hear the end of this if she just turned away.

“Fine. Let’s see what’s needed, but we do what we can and limit our time. I’m not staying around long enough for someone to figure out what we are really doing out here. We’re not supposed to be here, remember? There’s already too many who know about our little treasure hunt.”

Quia realized that the last jab was aimed toward her. A’Den wasn’t holding back her disdain from being imposed upon in her ship and in her hunt for this treasure.

“Bleep...boop...boop...tweet.”

“What do you mean ‘what message?’” Quintano asked. “The one that came over...”

“...help...”

“That message. You heard that one, right?”

“Twizz...meep...blorp...blorp.”

“The one that’s clearly coming over the...”

The piercing loud scream of pain and agony shot through the ship. It pierced their ears and hurt their brains. It ripped at their hearts as if someone one was dying a most horrific death imaginable. Worse yet, it wasn’t coming from the commlink; it was coming from inside their ship, right next to them.

Out of sheer panic, A’Den shifted her controls and put the Ebon Mortis into a hard bank. Both Quintano and Quia, who had been unprepared for the sudden move, were thrown to the side and were tossed about. Their bodies banged into the seats and consoles.

There was another dark flash that came across their bow and slammed into the ship’s nose. The ship rocked hard with the force that struck it and the Ebon Mortis was pushed into a power dive. The ship shook and rattled as if it were a mere toy being tossed about.

A’Den and Quia rolled again and again slammed into equipment, gaining bumps and bruises along the way. The gravitation force that was being pulled by the power dive was too much for them and neither of them could find the strength needed to pull themselves from the floor

and onto a chair, not that this would do them any good since they were going to crash into the planet's surface at any moment.

Aro activated his electromagnetic hold upon his "feet" and made sure that he was attached to floor. He would be no use to anyone else if he was also being flung about by the hazardous dive that they were in. As soon as he was sure that he was secure he went into action.

While A'Den continued to fight with the controls, Aro sped deeper into the ship. As soon as he made it to the controls to the airlock, he extended his armature and punched in the commands, opening the door.

Warning lights went off all inside the Ebon Mortis. Everything was flashing angrily at the crew and was eager to tell them that whatever they attempted to do, they were doing it wrong. It was as if the Ebon Mortis herself was letting the crew know that she was not happy over the situation that the crew had put her in and that her last and final messages were going to show her disdain.

A'Den pulled back hard in a desperate attempt to right the ship back upwards, but the ship just wouldn't respond. She tried to redirect power to the stabilizing engines. She tried to reboot the power converters. She even tried to override the navigation system to try to force the computer into an emergency landing. Nothing worked.

Quia rolled out of her ball that she had been thrown into and untangled herself from around one of the chairs. She remembered the voice that had been on the comms, or at least what she thought had been on the comms. If someone was really out there, maybe she could get a message out.

"If there is anyone out there that can hear us we are crash landing and in need of help. Repeat, we are crash landing and in need of help."

There was no reply, only static.

It was at this time that Quia had realized that what they really had heard wasn't on the commlink system after all. The comms weren't picking up any signals. There was nothing but static. It was also then that she realized that the voice that they had heard, although garbled and distorted, was her own. She hadn't just sent out her own distress signal, her own cry for help, she had screamed because they had crashed. A look up toward their plummeting trajectory confirmed her suspicions.

The Ebon Mortis had broken through the cloud cover of Drummond Kaas and the view before them was straight out of their nightmares. The ship was plummeting nose first toward the swamp of the planet below. The trees were coming into view. The sides of mountains on their starboard side were coming too close. The details of the bog on their port side became clearer. They were either going to smash into the side of the mountains or slam into the thick trees and plunge into the unknown depths of the murky waters below. Either way the Ebon Mortis wouldn't be able to handle the impact.

Quia had finally realized fear beyond anything that she had felt before, even greater than when the Jedi library had been attacked. For some reason, this beyond any other, terrified her. Horror had gripped her soul. Despite her training of not giving into fear, Quia let out a blood curling scream that pierced the hearts and souls of those around her, the very scream that they had heard only moments ago.

Aro moved across the external surface of the Ebon Mortis. His electromagnetic hold upon the ship allowed him to glide easily from one location to another just as easily as everyone could walk on normal ground. He moved across the side and over to the bow of the ship where the blackning had struck.

The smoke that was coming out from where they had been hit gave evidence of the damage that had been done. The astromech was able to ascertain that the blow had been too precise to be some random environmental anomaly. Even a ship piloted by an expert pilot and the best astromech navigator and targeting droid wouldn't be able to hit this target.

Aro immediately went to work. He extended his armature through the damaged plating and found the engine relay conduit. This part relayed messages to the engine and navigation controls. With this damaged, there was nothing that A'Den could do on her end. She could pull back on the controls and push as many buttons as she would like, but unless this was fixed, those messages weren't getting to the right part of the ship.

A'Den continued to watch as Aro moved with expert precision. Sweat was pouring from her forehead out of pure frustration and panic. Her heart was racing through her chest. The terrain below was coming closer and closer. If only the astromech would hurry.

All of the lights stopped blinking and the controls came to life as Aro gave one final adjustment. A'Den pulled back on the controls and maneuvered toward the port side. Her arms strained against the controls as they were fighting against her with the gravitational force that they were pulling.

The Ebon Mortis was slow to respond. The base of the ship started to turn and when it did, its belly scrapped against the mountain side and bounced the ship and its occupants about. A load ripping could be heard and everyone was sure that they just had a hull breach, something that would have to be fixed if they survived the landing.

As the bow of the ship came up, the Ebon Mortis slammed into the trees that had taken over the swamp beneath them. Branches snapped and smaller trees broke in half. Broken pieces of wood, limbs, branches, and tree trunks along with leaves, bushes, and vines were displaced everywhere.

The sound of their unceremonious approach could be heard for miles away. The snapping of the branches, the crashing of tree trunks into the bog, and the whining of the ships engines cut through the air and disturbed all life that heard it. The sounds echoed off of the mountain wall that they bounced off of and the reverberation only added to the sonic chaos.

A'Den continued to fight with the controls as her eyes scanned for some place to land. She was hoping to find a place close to the next set of coordinates after they broke through the plant's cloud cover. Now, she was looking for anything at all. The spot up ahead caught her attention. There was just enough exposure between the plants to see a stable area to land upon.

The Mandalorian pulled up just enough to clear the trees before going through the landing procedure. The landing gear dropped and the maneuvering thrusters decreased in power. With what ability the ship had left, A'Den brought the ship down onto the surface that she was aiming for.

Chapter: Dromund Kaas

“**T**his place is disgusting.”

Quia’s exclamation of the swamp around them echoed the thoughts of everyone else. There was nothing of interest here for as far as they could see. All that there was, was the swamp.

They had landed upon the only visible form of stability that was around. From what they could tell, this had been a foundation of some building many years in the past, the rest of which had been destroyed from the advancement of bog and its purpose was lost over the advancement of time. From here the swamp went on in all directions with no evidence of letting up.

There were tall moss covered trees with thick vines that clung to them. There were trees that looked dead with only their trunks still visible and having no foliage upon them. These looked as if they were rotting and dying, yet seemed to have features of a living embodiment as if they would get up and walk only to shove its prey into its trunk to fest upon.

There were ferns up to three meters high and three meters across. There were flowered plants that at first seemed to have the only real beauty here, that was until their gapping trap like jaws could be seen. There were other flowering plants that grew over two meters that stank like rotting meat. Reeds grew everywhere.

There were large swaths of water divided only by small areas of mud. It seemed that where ever they were going to go, they would either have to walk through the mud or tread through the unknown depths of the watery swamp. Neither held any appeal.

Insects could be heard buzzing about. They immediately started to land upon the crew of the Ebon Mortis as if they had never feasted before and continued to pester all three of them, even A’Den with her Mandalorian armor wasn’t immune to being annoyed by the pests. Only by constantly waving their hands and swatting the insects off of their bodies was there any reprieve, but even then it didn’t last long. The insects continued their assault.

Larger animals could be heard off in the distance. It had seemed that their unceremonious landing hadn't scared off some of the local wild life, and this hadn't boded well. If these creatures weren't going to run away from an incoming ship, they weren't very likely going to run away from blaster fire either. If this was the case then getting to this holocron was going to be tougher than they had anticipated.

There were large creatures up in the trees, perhaps some kind of primate, which moved about and kept just enough distance so as to not be identified. Flocks of birds came and went and one very large one seemed to circle high above. Small mammals and reptiles scurried about. Snakes continued to slither from here to there and periodically there was movement in the water hinting at something very large but would disappear before surfacing.

All three of them now had second thoughts about continuing forward. For all they knew, they could just disappear into this jungle swamp and never be seen again. Then again, no matter where they went after this, everyone else would want to continue their search which meant that they would still be hunted.

"It looks like we are several clicks away," Quia stated while looking at her data pad. "We need to go in that direction." Quia pointed back towards the way that they had come from, towards the very mountain that they threatened to splatter against as opposed to just bouncing off of.

"Alright, we need to get moving then," A'Den stated as she started to lead the way.

"Beep...zzt...bloop...bloop."

"I know, I know, you want to come along," Quintano stated. "However, we need you here to patch things up while we're out. Besides, you've come and gotten us out of trouble several times, we might need that to happen again. Keep your comms on and stay sharp. If we need you, we'll give you a call."

"Boop...bleep...murp."

"I know. But concenter this, you would have to travel through all of that muck. The mud and water would jam up your gears and short circuit your wiring. You would have moss and slime in place that you would never be able to get out. I also happen to know that Mynocks love to live

in places like this and they could strip you clean in a short amount of time. It's probably best that you stay here."

"Woo."

The going wasn't easy. It was slow and aurous. The mud only brought their trek to an almost crawl while trying to maneuver through the thick underbrush that only slowed them down even further. To make matters worse, the humidity brought on fatigue and forced them to rest more often than they wanted.

They slogged through the muck. They moved on through the slime. They brushed away swarms of bugs and dangling vines that got in their way.

The movements brought them from one piece of dry land to another while they attempted to avoid the unknown depths of the watery bog. However, even this wasn't pleasant. The "dry" land wasn't so dry. There were mud bogs. There was quicksand and finally most of the land spots were so full of vegetation that it was difficult to move around on top of them.

"Which way now?" A'Den asked.

She was sweating in her Mandalorian battle suit. The heat and humidity was getting to her and she was beginning to question her sanity of bringing it in the first place. She had thought that perhaps she could fly above the trees, but then she would lose the other two. She had also thought that the suit would protect her from various beasts, but it wasn't protecting her against the smaller insects. It seemed to her that she regretted not putting the suite on and then, when she didn't, she regretted not having it on. Now it was only too heavy and too cumbersome to be effective.

Quia stopped and took a breather before looking at her data pad. She was getting strange ghost reading off of it. Everything was giving her a double image. She was sure that it was the humidity that had gotten into the instrument to make it malfunction like this and she gave it a slap. This seemed to help and for the moment she was able to get a good reading.

"If this is accurate, and we haven't been traveling around in circles, then it's over that way," Quia said pointing towards a direction. "It's just beyond those ..." She wasn't able to finish her sentence.

The water around them came to life. It burst with motion and activity. Bubbles and waves shoot up in all directions. Water splattered all around then burst upward as the beast emerged from its watery home.

Several large black tentacles sprang forward and started to reach for everyone. One slapped forward and caught Quintano by surprise, knocking him backwards and sending him flying into the mud. Another caught Quia around her waist and began to toss her about. Two more caught A'Den, one around her ankle and another around her wrist.

Quia screamed in surprise. She hadn't thought of herself as a woman who would scream in any given situation, yet here she was. It was only after the initial shock of being picked up and thrown about did she come to her senses. Her hands started to reach for her dual weapons, yet every time that she tried, she was thrashed about even more. She found it impossible to grab hold of her blades and even more so just to comprehend which way was up.

In full desperation Quia started to slam her hands down upon the thick black tentacle that had embraced her. She struck over and over, again and again. Yet, it seemed to only annoy the beast that was behind these appendages. The ebony appendage only squeezed harder, making it difficult to breathe.

Quintano rolled with his blow and tried to come up with his weapons. Unfortunately he had slammed into some of the ferns and had become tangled up with them. This had made him lose his blasters in the process. He gave a hurried look to try to find them and as soon as he had, his back exploded in pain.

The ebony black tentacle came down hard upon Quintano one more time and sent him sprawling through the mud. The beast tried another attack, yet Quintano had rolled away and the appendage only found the mud and ferns. A side swipe almost caught the rogue and another bash from a fourth appendage just missed as Quintano ducked.

Quintano rolled yet again. His back and ribs were in pain. If only he could get to his blasters then he would at least be able to have a fighting chance. As it was, each time that he found them again, he was confronted by yet another series of blows that came upon him. He knew that it was only a matter of time before he was either tripped up by the foliage,

slipped in the mud, or just plain fell from exhaustion. When this happened he knew that he would be done for.

A'Den turned on her jetpack. The engines burned hard and pushed her body upward, but only to the extent of the appendages. Here the engines strained against the pull of the beast that had grabbed her. They whined out of protest. They roared louder with each passing moment.

A'Den winced in pain. The ebony black tentacles were pulling her leg and arm and it wasn't showing signs of letting go any time soon. No matter how much she put into her thrusters, it just wasn't enough to break the hold of whatever creature was still in the water. She knew something had to give and she hoped that it wasn't her.

Suddenly the tentacles let go. They had been strained far enough that the beast had decided to release its victim before it hurt itself in the attempt to keep her. As the appendages let go, the creature also let go of Quia, releasing her and sending her crashing to the ground.

The beast, having had enough of having to fight for its food, decided to bring itself to its fullest extent. The water exploded once again as the beast came out. There was a brief moment when all were in shock by its mere presence.

The main core of the creature, like its tentacles, was ebony black. It had a large round body, similar to that of an octopus only it was over two meters in diameter. In the center of its mass was a single large eye.

This sight froze Quia, A'Den, and Quintano in their place. No matter their experience, no matter their training, and no matter their knowledge, neither of them was prepared or ready for the presence of this creature. They had seen nothing like it before and wished to never see it again. Their first instinct was to run, to run as quickly as they could and put as much distance between them and this beast as they could. But they knew that they couldn't escape the distance of these appendages fast enough. At least one of them would be caught. There was only one thing they could do. Their moment of inaction came and went in a fraction of a moment and when it passed, they acted as one.

Quia was able to pull twin blades. Within an instant she had slapped the two ends together and gave a slight twist. The two blades became one weapon, a weapon that she was competent with and comfortable with.

She had honed her fighting ability to the best that she could and she was eager to fully let loose upon this creature.

Quia gave the weapon a slight spin in her hand to build momentum as she made a slight step backwards. This put her weight upon her strong leg. She gave another slight shift, pushed off, and jumped.

While in mid-air her blades caught the first appendage to come at her and the deadly sonic weapon cut through the tentacle with ease. She landed gracefully, planted her right foot, and spun to her left. Her full spin brought her back around with force and momentum, enough to slice through another. Then, she stopped and pivoted back the other way, impaling her weapon deep into a third appendage. By the time she had completed her full attack, there was green ooze-like blood flowing freely upon the ground while two pieces of the creature continued to wiggle, unknowing or unwilling to know that they had been severed.

Quintano rolled back into the bushes where he had lost his blasters. He had kept an eye open for his opportunity to get back to them just as he had kept an eye open to their location. Now that the opportunity had arisen, it was simple enough to find and grab them both. He came up blasting.

Quintano's blaster fire struck with accuracy. It wasn't difficult to hit the beast, but it was hard to do any real damage. It seemed that the vast majority of the firepower that struck the beast's core didn't harm the creature at all, or at least had very little effect. Where Quia's sonic weapon sliced through the creature's skin and muscle with ease, the beast seemed to be invulnerable or at least highly resistant to energy discharge.

A'Den watched as the other two of her companions fought the creature below her. She could see how Quintano's weapons weren't having much of an effect so she was sure that hers would only have the same results. She could also see how Quia was doing well enough, but she couldn't get to the main creature without getting into the water with it and since the bog would have to be deep enough to hold the beast, fighting in these conditions would be unthinkable. With this in mind, there was only one thing to do.

“Quia, toss up here.”

At first Quia didn't understand. Then, in a heartbeat, the realization of their futility dawned on her. They only had one course of action and

A'Den was it. With this in mind, Quia brought back her arm and threw her weapon like a spear, upward, toward the Mandalorian.

A'Den caught the weapon with ease. A slight twist of her wrist brought the weapon around so that it was in the position where she needed it. She wasn't as confident with the weapon as Quia was, so throwing it was out of the question. She only had one shot at this and if she missed then she would more than likely lose Quia's weapon in the bog. Instead, A'Den redirected the thrusters on her jetpack and plunged toward the beast, blade first.

The blade, with the mass and momentum that was put behind it, struck with enough force that it not only pierced into the creature's massive singular eye, it continued to plunge deep into the beast until it was buried into the thing's form. The sharp vorpal blade sliced deep into the creature's brain and killed it on the spot. There was no escaping the death blow that came upon the beast.

Yet, despite the fact that the creature's brain was dead and no longer functioning, the rest of the thing's body hadn't come to that realization. Its form continued to twitch and moved about. Its tentacles continued to flail in all directions, although only mindlessly and with no direction or purpose. They grabbed at thin air and slammed themselves against massive trees. Thick ichor sprang from the beast from every place that had been stabbed or slashed. It was several minutes before the creature completely stopped moving and gave into its death throes.

"It's in there," Quia stated as she pointed toward the stone structure in front of them.

It had been about an hour after their encounter with the tentacle beast when they had finally reached their destination. They had continued to tread through the swamp and bog without saying a word, as if their encounter with the beast had been the only thing worthy of note and now that they had dealt with it, there was nothing else to talk about.

They had finally come upon a clearing some distance from the mountain range that they had flown over on their way here. The terrain had become too rocky for the water growth plants to survive, so none had grown this close. But it was more than just the rocky terrain that had kept the flora at bay. Here, at the swamp's edge, the closest trees and bushes

were all rotting and the closer the flora was to the structure ahead of the group, the further along a rotting process they were in. It was as if something sinister waited deep inside and its influence only brought death to those that treed too close to its home or invaded its territory.

The stone structure was more cut out of the mountainside than it was made from actual stone. There were steps that led up to the entrance that had been surrounded by stone columns. There were intricate designs of some ancient origin and Quia was certain that over time she would be able to identify them or even translate them if they had any meaning.

The entire place looked like some kind of long forgotten and ancient temple or shrine. There was just something about it, perhaps the remoteness or the amount of work and detail that had been put into the structure itself. Either way, there was an essence about it that inspired fear and awe.

Quia, Quintano, and A'Den all had to catch their breath before venturing forth. There seemed to be a horrible, twisting feel about the place. It had a foreboding feeling that emanated from deep inside, something that told them that somewhere, inside the bowls of this building, was something worse than the mutated swamp beast that they had faced. Yet, despite this, or perhaps because of it, they pushed on.

The inside of the temple was only lit by what little light from the outside had found its way in. Here the three of them could tell that what they had entered was an entry room. This area had no furniture and was only a wide area. There were several large humanoid statues of robed figures that lined the walls. Each had a grimacing look upon them, sometimes in pain, sometimes in horror, and sometimes in anger. In any case, nothing looked welcoming or inviting.

“...ha...ha...ha...ha...”

There came a menacing cackle of laughter that came from deeper in the fortress. It echoed and resonated from the hall leading further away from the entry and had a maniacal, sinister sound to it, as if the individual had waited for its prey to enter its lair and now had them right where he wanted them. It was old sounding and when it was finished the echo had continued for a short while longer making it seem as if the sound was coming from the very walls themselves or even from the statues.

“Who’s there?” A’Den shouted back into the darkness ahead of them. She was not so easily intimidated and wouldn’t be scared off by some laughter; especially after all they had been through just to get here.

No reply came.

“Just to let you know,” A’Den stated. “We do think that you’re funny.”

“No,” Quia said softly, “but I think he’s rather creepy.”

“Don’t worry,” Quintano said in attempt to comfort her. “We can easily take care of one creepy old man.” Although he attempted to be comforting and brave, he had to admit that she had a point. The laughter had gotten to him, like a scratch upon his soul.

A’Den flipped pulled out a flashlight from her gear that she had stored on her armor and led the way. Her hands had dropped to her sides and she was ready to draw her twin blasters at any moment. Quia took up the middle while Quintano took up the rear.

Quia continued to look at her data pad, more of wanting to know how quickly they could find the next holocron and get out of here rather than to find how to actually get to it. She forced her eyes upon her equipment and barely looked up. She didn’t want to see what was up ahead and she didn’t want to deal with whatever had made that laughter. She had to admit that this place had gotten to her and was weighing on her soul. The sooner they got out of here the better.

The display on her screen was suppose to show her a dot that represented the coordinates that she had entered, the distance between it and them, and the direction that they needed to travel to get there. This was no longer the case. The dot on her screen would appear and then disappear. It would multiply and she would have many different readings. It would surround them and move about as if it were alive. The distance and direction continued to change as well. At times it would say that the location was in front of them when the dot had move to their right. Another time it would say that they were right on top of it. Nothing made sense.

Quia gave her data pad a hit upon the side in an attempt to get it working again. She had hoped that humidity in the air hadn’t damaged it and her strike did bring it back to its original working order. However, she doubted that it was, in fact, the humidity. The more she thought about it

the more she was sure that the data pad would have been sealed well enough to be resistant to any humidity. On top of that the data pad would more likely show ghosts, or shadows, or even completely shut off rather than give these kinds of readings. It couldn't have been the humidity. This was something completely different. Something else was messing with her equipment and it only made this place that much creepier and only spurred her to want to leave that much more quickly. She gave her data pad another hit to bring the information back online.

They quickly walked together down the hall from the main reception area. The area became darker and darker the further they went along until darkness and shadows consumed the area. If it wasn't for A'Den's flashlight there would be no light at all.

The hall was filled with ornate columns along the walls. These offered no purpose to hold up the ceiling and were only placed for decorative purposes. Now, they only cast shadows as A'Den's light was cast upon them.

From time to time they came across various passageways that led away from the main hall that they were on. A quick turn to Quia got the information that was needed. She only struck her data pad again, shook her head, and pointed forward.

Sobbing filled the air. It was the sound of a female child somewhere down one of the halls. Her spirit seemed crushed and broken and it pulled on the heartstrings of all who heard it.

Quintano made a break toward the side hall where the sobbing had originated but was called back by A'Den.

"No, don't."

"What do you mean? There's someone..."

A'Den shook her head. "I don't pick up any heat signatures or movement. There's no one here but us. Besides, how could anyone survive out here? I'm picking up a lot of anomalies and power readings off and on. I'm sure it's a left over recording or something along those lines."

Quia took a deep sigh. At least she wasn't the only one with technological difficulties. But if this were the case, then someone or

something was messing with their equipment. She wondered if there was an electromagnetic anomaly and if this was true then even their blasters and her vorpal sonic weapons might malfunction.

Quintano went to give an argument against A'Den's announcement. He knew what he had heard. There was someone down here and he was going to save them. However, the moment that he went to say something, the sobbing stopped. Just like that, it was over. He turned and shouted down the hall.

“Hello? Anyone there?”

There was no reply.

A'Den had to admit that she hadn't been sure of her own explanation. She had heard the sobbing as well and had initially believed it. However, she had heard other things as well, things that she was sure that no one else had heard. She had heard whispers in her ear.

‘...Murderer...’

‘...Ungrateful...’

‘...Why did you leave...’

Each of these played upon her fears and guilt. She had never been so sure that she had given her parents enough time to come back and find her. She had never forgiven herself for killing the one person that had been kind. She had never forgiven herself for being so weak, weak enough to sob in times of hunger and fear, the very sobbing that she had heard.

She had recognized the sobbing as her own. She hadn't at first, but then the memories had come flooding back and so did all of the emotions with it. It wasn't that she didn't want anyone to go down the hall to find out that no one was there; she didn't want anyone to find out, through her, that this was her sobbing in her past.

“Over here.”

The three of them turned their attention down another hall to follow another voice, yet dismissed it again.

“No, this way.”

Again they turned, this time toward the entry way only to find that they were alone.

“Why did you leave me?”

“You abandoned us.”

“Leave this place.”

“There is only death.”

A scream of terror and pain cut through the air. There was agony and horror. There was a gut curling scream so disgusting that it tore through their souls and ripped into their hearts.

But it wasn't just one person screaming. There were three and it wasn't hard for the three of them to realize that it was their voices coming to them from all around them.

“I've got movement,” Quia said with fear in her voice.

“So do I,” confirmed A'Den.

“There are multiple hits,” Quia said frantically. “Incoming in all directions. They're all around us.”

“Not possible,” A'Den fired back. “We should have seen them by now. They're on top of us.”

There was movement in the shadows as A'Den moved forward. Something black and wispy cut across her beam of light only to disappear back into the darkness. Then another and another moved from the corner of their eyes only to retreat back into the bowls of the temple once again.

“What are they?” Quintano shouted as he drew his weapons.

“I don't know! I don't know!” Quia was almost in hysterics. She felt that she had failed both Quintano and A'Den. She had only wished to be here to help out and to find something about the past. She had hoped that her knowledge would be the one factor that would help guide them and make the discoveries that were needed. Now, she had nothing to offer.

“Run!” A’Den shouted as she made a mad dash deeper into the temple.

Both Quia and Quintano started to sprint to keep up with the Mandalorian. While they did, Quintano kept looking back toward their only escape while Quia continued to watch over her data pad. They did their best to keep everyone covered and informed of their situation as they made their mad dash toward the back of the temple.

“It should be straight ahead,” Quia stated between breaths as she continued to run along. She had to admit, although she had some fighting training that she had taught herself, she was mostly a scholar. She wasn’t in as physical shape as the other two and running like this was a strain at best.

Quia continued to strike her data pad in hopes that the ghosts and double images would dissipate. However, unlike the last few times, the images didn’t go away. Her data pad didn’t correct itself. The images weren’t double images, they were real.

Quintano kept seeing things move just beyond his peripheral vision. Everything was just at the corner of his eyes and every time that he moved to get a good look, it disappeared. Nothing remained long enough for him to even get a glimpse at what was stalking them; they all vanished back into the shadows before he could get a look.

As the three of them moved to the end of the great hall, they came out into what could only be described as some form of throne room. The room was larger than the greeting area with no other exits out. More pillars lined the wall giving more shadows when A’Den’s light shone across the room. At the far end of the room sat an oversized throne, larger than any regular individual would need to sit in.

“Now where?” A’Den asked impatiently.

“We’re here. It’s somewhere in this room.”

“Great, now find it. Quintano and I will cover you.”

Quia had to shake her head. It was up to her to find their next holocron while the others held off whatever it was that was stalking them. Hopefully it was nothing. Hopefully it was only their fears playing upon themselves and their paranoia that was conjuring up shadows that weren’t real and glitches that came and went as a coincidence. However, she

didn't think this was the case. She was sure, no matter how wrong she hoped she was, that there was really something out there and she had to hurry her search.

Quia looked up and down and all around for some sort of chest. She even looked for a vault, a niche, or even a hidden latch. Her fingers ran up and down every wall and she carefully examined each pillar and every statue. Nothing seemed out of place, at least from the perspective of the room as a whole, and nothing stood out of the ordinary.

It then dawned on her. Just because the last coordinates of the object told everyone that it was here didn't necessarily make it true. The holocron could have been moved, either deliberately re-hidden or perhaps already found and stolen. Maybe the information that had been given, the location of this holocron, was wrong. What if they were in the wrong place? If this was the case then they had no more clues to go on.

It was time to tell the others her fears. It was time to let them know that they had come all this way and had gone through all of this for no reason. She turned and stopped dead in her tracks.

Both Quintano and A'Den had started to open fire with their blasters. Their shots temporarily lit up the whole room, and only then was Quia able to see what they were shooting at. This froze the blood in her veins.

The beasts, or creatures, or whatever they were, were made of smoke and shadow. They were wispy in appearance and amorphous in shape. They floated like some sort of specter or ghost. The things had some semblance of a humanoid from time to time with faces and arms and hands appearing, but then would disappear back into a misty shadowy form that continued to fly about.

It was hard to keep track of just how many there were. The wisps would fly into and through each other and then blended back into the shadows. Each time they did this, their bodies merged and reemerged, they blended and separated, and in so doing it was difficult to tell where one began and another ended. However, it was easy enough to tell that the hall that they had come down was now full of these things. There was movement as far as they eye could see. There was no turning back, with or without the holocron.

A'Den fired several more shots from her twin blasters. Bolts of energy flew from them with accuracy and deliberation. Even without her skill and

training she couldn't miss, the shadow creatures were almost on top of them and every shot was nearly point blank. Even with the things moving about as they were, even with them trying to hide back into the shadows, A'Den was able to hit one and then another, only to have another to shoot at.

Each bolt hit and when it did it left a hole that went through each target that the blast found. For one brief moment there seemed to be an area where acid had burned through the shadow creature. The area around each wound bubbled and sizzled. Shadowy flames burst forth from each strike and there was a scream of agony that resonated within the room from a voice that seemed beyond time and space itself.

Yet, each time one was hit, the shadow wisp would re-enter the shadows and the darkness or even pass through another shadow creature and come back whole again. Nothing was effective. The only thing that was happening was the process of keeping these things at bay, and even then that wasn't going to last long. There were far too many shadows.

Quintano continued to blast as many as he could. Everything that moved and everything that caught his attention received another shot from his blaster. He had picked up on the fact that a single shot wasn't enough to destroy them and he was trying to plug as many shots as possible into each one, yet that proved to be more difficult than he imagined. With the shadows continually moving about and shifting in and out of each other, it wasn't easy to maintain a single one to try to hit it multiple times to see if he could damage it faster than the shadow wisp could heal.

The shadow creature seemed to come out of nowhere and with it being able to blend in to the darkness around them, it was almost impossible to have seen it at all, and once he had, it was too late. The creature of pure darkness slammed its body into Quintano and came out his back, passing through his form.

Quintano gave a silent scream, a scream that was carried back in time and space to when they had heard him scream before, as his breath was taken away. A stream of cold air escaped from his mouth. His body arched back while his knees buckled. A bit of ice formed around his chest where the wisp had struck him.

Quintano staggered back while he tried to catch his breath. It felt as if part of his life had been sucked out of him and he was fairly certain that

this was probably an accurate statement. It had only stunned him and weakened him, but he knew that there were enough of these creatures here to suck the very life out of him several times over.

Quintano shook his head and did his best to recover. He started to shoot with more vigor, out of panic. He couldn't take another hit like that. He had to keep them at bay. The only thing was, he couldn't figure out what was keeping the shadows back. He could tell that it wasn't the blaster fire. Although this did damage them, they should have swarmed over them by now. He shook his head again. He couldn't think straight. All he could do was keep shooting and hope that something, anything, would come to him.

Quia moved backwards as soon as the shadow creature came out of Quintano. It had flown toward her, but had stopped before realizing that Quintano was a closer prey to feast off of. She watched as the thing turned back toward the rogue and knew that there was nothing that she could do to save him. She was sure, or thought that she was sure, that her sonic blades would have little to no effect, although she really had nothing to go on to come to this conclusion. For all she really knew, her sonic blades could, in fact, do more damage than the blasters, but it really didn't matter. She couldn't reach the shadow creature in time.

The bolt from A'Den's blaster slammed into the shadow creature and as it did the wisp screamed in agony. It spun back around from its attack and retreated back into the shadows, no doubt to heal itself before coming back out to rejoin the fight. The situation was close, too close, and another moment later would have resulted in Quintano being hit again. There was no telling if he could have survived another hit like that.

As soon as Quia had moved backwards, she struck the throne with the back of her legs and fell upon it in a sitting position. Her arms fell upon the armrests, her head upon the headrest. From here, she was able to sense what it would be like for the Sith who had created the throne in the first place. It was here that she noticed the light glow that was now under her right arm.

It only took a second for her to look upon the armrest of the chair. The panel, hidden by darkness, was now lit up by the heat of her arm. There was a full heat signature imprint of where her arm had been, but didn't last long enough for anything to happen. What she needed was more heat before she could tell if this heat sensor activated anything.

“We need more light!” A’Den shouted as she blasted yet another shadow creature. “It’s what’s keeping them back. It’s the light of our blasts that’s keeping them at bay. Even my flashlight works against them, but there’s too many. We need more light!”

‘Heat?’ Quia thought to herself. ‘Light?’

Then it dawned on her. She had the answer to both of their problems and she hadn’t even realized it. Immediately she tossed the contents of her backpack upon the floor and when she found what she was looking for, she went into action. The shadow creatures had frightened her before, she had to admit, but now she knew what to do and how to do it. There was no longer fear, there was focus.

Quia took a jumping leap that launched her into the air. As her body flew she ignited the double lightsaber. The plasma energy shot out from both sides of the weapon and the light from it lit up just enough of the room to make a difference.

For one moment the shadow creatures hesitated. For one moment they realized that something fatal had just entered the battlefield. For one brief moment they realized that they could be completely and utterly destroyed. It was a moment too long.

Quia came down with a forward slash and caught the first shadow creature while it was still dazed. The lightsaber cut through the shadow wraith with ease and as it passed through the wispy form, the shadow burst into the black fire. Wherever the lightsaber touched, the creature’s form was burned away and by the time Quia had completed her attack and her blade had cut through the wispy thing all that was left were pieces of burned cloth that fell to the ground and faded to ash.

The librarian didn’t slow down to watch what she had done. She had only hoped that she would be able to make a difference in the battle. There wasn’t time to make sure that she had actually destroyed the thing or not, and if she hadn’t she hoped that both Quintano and A’Den would be able to follow up. Without even looking she continued her attack.

Quia thrust the lightsaber backwards and caught another shadow that was trying to come up behind her, melting it on the spot. She made a quick flick of her wrist and brought the whole weapon around and caught two more using a slashing arc. Suddenly she came to a stop and reversed her spin and brought the double lightsaber around, reversing her attack.

Two more were caught off guard. By the time she was done, at least a half dozen shadow wisps were laying at her feet turning to dust.

The room had filled with agonizing screams as one shadow beast after another was vaporized. For those that weren't attacked yet, there was another scream, that of panic. Those that had the fortune of not being immediately struck down, wailed in absolute terror as they fled the area as quickly as they could, leaving a few more to fall under the combined attacks of the three that they had come to feast upon.

"Wow, you're pretty good with that," Quintano stated, giving a compliment to Quia. "I guess it's more useful than just some ancient relic that belongs in a museum. You should keep it as your own weapon. It looks like it could do a lot of damage and seems to fit your fighting style. Yeah, you should definitely keep it."

Quia gave a blush. She wasn't used to compliments and she was sure that Quintano was flirting with her. But then again, Quintano seemed to flirt all the time and it was hard to tell if he was serious or if it was just part of his nature.

"No," Quia replied as she shut off the lightsaber. "Its balance is off for me. It's too light. I would rather use my own, but thanks for the compliment. No, I think I'll keep it and put it in a museum as soon as a new one is open." Again, Quia gave a slight blush as she turned away and headed toward the throne. She had a theory and if it panned out as well as her theory was against the shadow wisps then they should be able to get this holocron and be able to leave as quickly as possible. The sooner they got out of here the better, there was no telling if and or when the shadow beasts would return and if they did, if there would be even more of them this time.

A'Den gave a slight frown under her helmet and she was glad that no one could see it. She was sure that if looks could kill then she would have struck down Quintano right then and there. This was no time to be flirting with anyone, let alone Quia, especially with Quia.

Quia moved toward the throne and found the heat sensor once again. She should have known and cursed herself for not thinking about this earlier. Of course the Sith lord that had held this place would ensure that only another Sith would be able to follow his footsteps if he failed. He had not only guarded the room with creatures that would be easily destroyed by a lightsaber, a weapon that no Sith would be without, but he

would also hide the holocron in such a way that a lightsaber was needed to open its hidden location. With this in mind Quia ignited the lightsaber one more time and passed it over the heat sensor.

As the heat of the lightsaber got close enough to the sensor, the sensor lit up. Once the sensor was white hot from the passing heat, it activated the switch that was holding the latch to the hidden compartment. A slight click echoed in the room as a small panel opened up at the base of the throne.

Quia smiled as she bent down to pick up her prize.

The trek back was harder than any of them had expected. The sun had gone down and it was almost too dark to navigate. What little light there was from the stars had been blocked by the canopy made by the trees and other flora. This light was filtered and barely lit any passage along the way. A'Den's flashlight had helped, but the others had realized that she seemed upset about something and continued to walk too fast and was too far up ahead to make her light effective. Fortunately Quia was able to use her data pad and scan for Aro's communication and from there she was able to navigate through much of the bog.

Even while back at the Ebon Mortis A'Den wasn't very communicative and even when she did speak she was rather sharp and snappish. When confronted she would tell them that "nothing was wrong" or "It's been a long day". Neither Quia nor Quintano believed her.

It took a short bit for Aro to load up the information from the holocron and analyze it. The map section that was given still didn't give enough details as to where the final holocron was, but it did give, like all the other holocrons before it, the location of the next holocron.

"So where's our next destination?" Quintano asked.

"From what I can tell, the next holocron is unfortunately located on Qesh.

"What do you mean 'unfortunately'?"

“Its atmosphere is dangerous. It’s too poisonous to be subjected to for any length of time. If we are continuing on with this mission then may I recommend that we find supplies that will help us out?”

“Like, what kind of supplies?”

Chapter: Space Station Neo

“Welcome to Station Neo. We hope your stay with us is pleasant and accommodating. We offer a wide range of goods and services that can only be found...”

Quintano, Quia, and A'Den had stopped listening to the obnoxious feminine voice that was continually welcoming them to the space station ever since they had landed. The recording continued on for a few more sentences and spoke about how wonderful Station Neo was and how it was accommodating to all needs for all species. It would then repeat in several more languages before coming back to something they recognized. All in all the feminine computer voice was far too happy to greet any and all who came aboard and it was at this point did Quintano give thanks that Aro had his sarcastic and snarky programming instead of this one.

The landing bay had been like any other that they had visited. It was full of loader droids, protocol droids, astromechs, and advertising droids. It was full of pilots and co-pilots, and passengers. It was full of security, or at least those who thought that they were security, maintenance crew, and all sorts of individuals that came and went. It was full of wires and conduits. It was full of ships of all sizes.

In the desperate attempt to drown out the electronic feminine greeting was the noise that was being generated. Scores of droids and individuals were trying to talk all at once. Orders were shouted from one tech to another. The noise of large loaders and cranes could be heard. Engines came on and off again. Yet, despite it all, the welcome voice prevailed and continued on as if none of this mattered.

The greeting was no longer heard once they cleared the landing bay. But the noise of their surroundings didn't change much. There were shops and traders and hecklers and announcements wherever they went. It seemed that everyone had something to buy or sell here and no one was quiet about it. Everyone wanted everyone else's attention and it was difficult to block them all out and think clearly.

There were shops that sold computer parts and droid parts and ship parts. There were shops that sold clothing for all different types of terrains. (A nice dress had caught Quia's attention and she had stopped just long enough to give the outfit a nice look. Unfortunately it was too

long and she had lost the other two, but only momentarily). There were shops that sold plants and others that sold animals. Rare spices, crystals, and other items that weren't even identifiable were also for sale.

There were announcements of all kinds that were being broadcasted. Shuttles and ships that were taking on passengers were coming and going and their destinations were projected for all to hear. There were announcements of the Empire and announcements of the rebel alliance. There were announcements from the Hutts. News from all over the galaxy was being shown here.

Individuals moved and jostled about, going to and fro. There was a mass of individuals everywhere and from time to time there was barely any room to move.

There were restaurants and bars, although these were small and completely open to the passing crowd that moved from one hallway to the next. There was no privacy to enjoy company or the taste of food at these places as they seemed to serve as many customers as possible and process them so the next set could be served.

In a way, this space station reminded Quintano of Nar Shaddaa, except that everything seemed to be jammed closer together and there was more chaos. Even though this place had everything he would ever need, even Nar Shaddaa had places where he could go and have some peace.

Quia had to admit that she was starting to feel claustrophobic. She was used to larger spaces and far few individuals. She was used to being able to hear herself think. She was used to order and things at a much slower pace. This was all new to her. Even in Nar Shaddaa, at least the area where she had called home, there wasn't this much chaos. She started to feel as if the station was starting to collapse and that everyone around her was starting to press inward. She was sure that she was going to suffocate. She remembered her mantra and started to repeat it.

“Don't give in to fear. Fear leads to anger. Anger leads to hate. Hate leads to suffering. Anger, fear, and aggression are the forces of the dark side. Don't give in to fear. Fear leads to anger. Anger leads to hate. Hate leads to suffering. Anger, fear, and aggression are the forces of the dark side.”

A'Den kept an eye on any one that got too close, and that meant everyone. There were just too many here to keep track of and she knew that this was a security risk. They could be followed, stalked, tracked, or

even attacked. There was no reason why at least someone would recognize them from all of the notices that had been out. She was sure that there would either be a bounty or at least a few tales that had been passed along. She had been against this idea from the beginning, yet had no other idea to offer. She had hoped that by leaving her Mandalorian suit behind, in the Ebon Mortis with Aro, she would be less identifiable and since there were now three of them, instead of just two, there would be a lesser chance of being recognized. Still, the Ebon Mortis stood out like a sore thumb. She knew that it was only a matter of time before someone picked up their presence and they needed to be quick about their transaction if they wanted to all leave in one piece.

It had been Quintano's suggestion to come here. He didn't want to chance it by going back to the Nar Shaddaa. He had mentioned that a space station like this one would increase their chance of finding what they were looking for. Of course this increased the chance of being found. The next problem was to actually find a shop that had what they were looking for.

They had made a few inquiries from shop to shop asking if anyone knew where they could find hazmat suits and cleaning supplies. It wasn't just enough to get a suit that would keep out dangerous chemicals that were in the atmosphere, but they had to find medical supplies in case of exposure and cleaning agents for their suits. They didn't want to risk contaminating the whole ship when they were finished.

This had been problematic. Each individual that they asked had only tried to sell them their products instead of being helpful. Once the sale was finally rejected, they were sent away with a series of argumentative explicatives or were sent in the wrong direction. It took several attempts before they simply did the search on their own. This took more time than they had planned.

"Look," Fad Zul said as he nudged his partner. "Isn't that...?"

Fad Zul, like his partner, was a Duros. He was a little over two meters in height and was taller than his counterpart. Like all other Duros, Fad was blue-green in color and bald. His elongated face was nose-less and his orange eyes seem too large for his head.

His partner, Mul Vamdum, was shorter and more diminutive than Fad was. His skin color was purple and was rare among his species. Unlike Fad, Mul was the quiet one and was always on the lookout. If truth be

told, he had already seen the three that Fad had pointed out and had already ascertained that two of them were, indeed, the two that had been talked about over the chatter of the commlinks. He had already deduced that they were here trying to pick up supplies that would help them along on their quest since there would be absolutely no other reason for them to be here. This all gave credence to the fact that they were following information, and rather or not this led to any long forgotten treasure or not remained to be seen. However, it would lead to something, and that something was worth finding.

The two of them were bounty hunters. There had seemed to be plenty of need for off the books action and Fad and Mul were up to whatever the Empire or whoever else wanted them to do. As long as the money was good then their services were available. However, the need for bounty hunters was winding down and now they had to make their fortune in other aspects. Piracy had gotten them into trouble which was why they were here, in neutral territory, away from anyone that could find them and out of the jurisdiction of those that did.

Fad took a good look at the individuals and put their images into memory. Then, with this in mind, he took out his data pad. It took a moment to power it up and another to scroll through the images that had been displayed. The pictures of Quintano and A'Den had matched.

“Yup, those are them. You think they got it? And who’s the other?”

Mul gave a slight frown. He was always waiting for Fad to catch up to things that he had already figured out. “The map? Yeah, I’m sure of it now. Why else would they be here but to get supplies? As for the other woman...who cares? If she gets in the way then we’ll deal with her as we’ll deal with the others. Come on, let’s follow them. We can take care of them when they get back to the hanger bay or even follow them and have them find the treasure for us.”

Fad smiled at that. Finally, they had found a job that was going to make them rich and they didn’t have to do much in the process. The dangers would be minimum and they might actually have a little fun in the process since there one woman for each of them. He smiled again. Yes, he was going to enjoy this.

“Mee ga woosa?” The Gungan behind the counter questioned.

Quintano gave a deep sigh of frustration. He had already stated what he wanted once before and he didn't know why he needed to say it again. This place was already getting to him and his patience was wearing thin. The Gungan wasn't making things any easier.

“Like I said, I need three sets of hazmat suits, cleaning supplies, and medical...”

“Goog muugg foo.”

“No, no you're not listening. I'm not going to...I'm not trying to start...listen do you have any...”

The metal sliding door came down hard and slammed against the counter. The loud bang that it made could almost be heard over the continual and perpetual noise of their surroundings.

“Well, that went well,” A'Den stated in her sarcastic tone. “Do you always have this reaction with everyone you meet or are we just the lucky few?”

Quintano just shook his head and continued on as if he hadn't heard A'Den's remark or at least he had but hadn't registered her meaning.

“He thought that we were trying to start some biological or chemical war. Can you believe that?”

“So...where do we go from here?” Quia asked. “It's not like these things are abundant and every store has what we are looking for.”

“I don't know,” Quintano stated as he shook his head. “I just don't know. We could head back to Nar Shaddaa but we've already risked being seen here and we'll easily be identified there. I'm out of options.”

A'Den was already frustrated that they had come here in the first place and now that they had failed in retrieving what they were looking for the frustration had been pushed enough. It was time to cut their losses. She brought up her commlink.

“Aro, get the Ebon Mortis ready for takeoff. Our mission was a failure. We'll head out to...”

“Bleep...blup...meep...xxzt.”

“Wait...what? Why didn’t you say that earlier?”

“Boop...xxzt...mert...beep.”

“What’s he saying?” Quia asked.

“He said that he found a shipment that’s heading out. It’s full of hazmat supplies including suits. Apparently they’re needed on another planet and were bought here on this station. They’re set to leave any time.”

“Why didn’t he say that before?”

“He said that we hadn’t asked.”

Quia turned to Quintano. Her voice was now starting to reflect the same frustration that A’Den was feeling. “You know, I’m starting to hate that little droid of yours.”

“Don’t worry,” Quintano responded. “I’m flush that little tin can hunk of junk out into space the first chance that I get.”

“Wooo.”

“Wait...” Quintano stated. “He heard that?”

“I had kept the channel open,” A’Den said. “I thought that we might want to give Aro new directions based on our new situation.”

Quintano had to think about that for a while. The little droid had been a massive pain, but it usually did come in handy periodically. Perhaps now was one of those times when the astromech could be of some real service.

“Listen up you rust bucket,” Quintano said into A’Den’s commlink. “If you want to make up for this little snafu of yours then here’s what I want you to do.”

Aro extended his aperture and inputted it into the computer of the Ebon Mortis. He allowed his computer to reach out and connect with the mainframe of the ship. From there he reached out to the programs that he could find. The ship's scanner and commlink came online and from there Aro reached out to the space station's data log. He had already done this with his own programs to find the data that he was looking for, but he needed something stronger to heighten his abilities and the programs from the Ebon Mortis worked very nicely.

Once he reached the records he was looking for, he adjusted the destination of the two loader droids that he had found. They were carrying the equipment that was being requested by a different party and all he had to do was redirect them. He couldn't reprogram them to give up their cargo without the proper pass codes and he couldn't do this without getting up close and personal. He might be able to slightly change their course, but still couldn't get the cargo without a direct interface. But, he didn't want to meet with the loader droids out in the open where he could be seen. He had another idea instead.

As soon as Aro was able to find the route in the database, he tapped into the space station's security systems. It took awhile, but the station's systems weren't too difficult to break into, at least not on this level. Aro was sure that higher level protocols would be more difficult, but changing the route taken from one location to another, telling a loader droid or two to take a longer route to the same destination, wasn't much of a challenge. The challenge was to not leave an electronic trail behind. Once the owners of the droids figured out that they were late, and eventually missing, they would investigate and be able to do what he did and in the process find out where the orders had come from. Of course they might be gone by then, but that would still lead to the knowledge that the Ebon Mortis was involved and that would cause more troubles than they already had.

With the new route in place and the loader droids redirected, Aro quickly made his way out of the Ebon Mortis, locking it behind him, and made his way toward the meeting place. He crossed this landing bay and entered down one of the main halls without getting noticed. Here, he redirected his route and took two side passages and another utility corridor before he found the room that he was looking for. It didn't take long for the loader droids to arrive.

Aro knew that although these lesser droids didn't have a personality chip and so wouldn't make too much of a protest for being held up or

rerouted, they still had some security protocols. This meant that he had little time to do what he needed to do before the droids continued on their original mission. He could only stall them for so long and hopefully that was long enough.

It didn't take long for A'Den, Quintano, and Quia to make their way back down to the docking bay area. From there they took a look around to make sure that they weren't being followed before ducking into a maintenance hallway. The side passage was full of conduits and wires that lead from one docking bay area to another and would only be used by service employees if something was wrong. The passage led to another small utility room where they met up with Aro and the two loader droids.

“Boop...beep...zxxxt...mrp.”

“Yes, you did do a great job, Aro,” Quintano replied. “Although, this doesn't make up for all of the other times that you've messed up.”

“Woo...”

Quintano just had to shake his head. He truly didn't know what to do with this droid. It was too sarcastic and uninformative at the improper times to keep and too good at what he did do to let go. He wondered if he could just get a personality reprogramming for his astromech. But then, would he still have the same droid?

“Now, all we need to do is get them back to the Ebon Mortis and...”

“You won't be going anywhere.”

The newly arrived voice caught the attention of the three of them and when they turned back they were able to see the two that had followed them down into this utility room. Both of the Duros had pulled their blasters and had the drop on the three of them. There was no way to pull their weapons without being fired upon first.

“Now.” Fad stated. “You can just put those weapons of yours on the ground, nice and easy like.”

Quintano, Quia, and A'Den looked at each other, if only for the moment. They each gave the same look of defeat upon their faces. They

knew that if they wanted to live through this that it was best to do what they asked for, at least for now. One by one the three of them dropped their weapons.

“Good, very good.” Mul stated. “Now, we’ll be taking that map of yours.”

“I don’t know what you are talking about,” Quintano quipped.

A’Den had been too upset about having been taken by surprise to say anything other than what she would immediately regret. Quia, although having good fighting abilities, still wasn’t prepared for conflict. Her lack of experience kept her from saying much of anything at this point and she was more than willing to let Quintano do all of the talking for them.

“Perhaps if we start shooting then you might start remembering.”

“He doesn’t have it,” A’Den interjected. “I do. Do you think I would let him have something so valuable? He might actually lose it. If you want it, you’ll have to go through me.”

Both Fad and Mul turned their attention toward the Mandalorian. They took their eyes off of those that they had assumed were now defenseless. It was only for a moment. It was a mistake and the moment that Quia needed.

Although Quia had little experience in battle, she let her instincts of training kick in. She didn’t think about this as an actual fight but rather an extension of her training exercise. She immediately went into motion without even thinking.

Quia shifted her foot forward and caught hold of one of her blades with her toe. The sudden move caught the attention of the two that had come to rob them. Even as they spun back around to see what had happened, it was too late. Quia was already on top of them.

Quia’s blade flew up into the air just as she jumped upward. She caught the handle of her sonic weapon in mid-flight and came down hard upon the hand of her first opponent, the one named Fad. Her weapon cut through the alien’s wrist as if it was butter and his hand fell to the ground, his weapon still being gripped by his severed appendage.

As Fad started to scream in pain, Quia ducked and spun in reverse and came around Fad's backside. This gave her the cover she was looking for and kept her low so the other attacker couldn't see her coming. As she came out of her spin she reversed her grip on her blade and came at the next attacker with a backhanded slash. The weapon cut through the individual's stomach with ease. But before he could react, Quia planted her right foot and reversed her spin. Her second backhanded slash cut across the individual's chest, further cutting him open before he even hit the ground.

Within a heartbeat, Quia thrust her blade backwards and caught Fad in his back. She pierced through his body and impaled him on the spot. A quick removal of her blade let the now dead body drop.

'Damn,' Quintano thought to himself. 'Note to self, don't tick off Quia.'

A'Den only gave a smirk as she collected her weapons. She may not have liked the attention that Quintano was giving Quia or the fact that Quia seemed almost above them when it came to the knowledge that she had in history, however, she had to admit that the girl could fight and it was good to have her on their side.

Chapter: Qesh

The ship known as the Ebon Mortis cut through the green and yellow plums of gas that hung like thick clouds just below the cloud level. The toxic vapors parted, inviting the ship and its crew to enter the planet's atmosphere with the knowledge that many had entered but few had left. Now, the poisonous air would claim another set of victims and no one would be the wiser

The green and yellow layers gave way to a light purple layer and then a layer of reddish orange. Beyond this, the colors faded to an almost clear color of silver and blue, but the atmosphere didn't become less toxic. There was just no escaping the horrible and harmful air that covered the planet.

From the cockpit A'Den, Quintano, and Quia were able to see what the planet had to offer. They had heard stories, they all had. Everyone had heard stories of Qesh. It was worse than they had imagined.

From what they could tell, the planet looked like it was a dumping ground for all toxic and chemical run off and waste that could be found throughout the galaxy. The ground itself looked like it was nothing but mud. There didn't seem to be any solid surface anywhere, at least where they were. Even from their elevation, there were some spots that looked as if the mud was deep and thick and was able to swallow their ship whole if they tried to land on it.

There were pools of liquid, small lakes, and run off rivers with a stagnant fluid that simply sat and seemed to get worse by the moment. It was hard to tell what the liquid was but it seemed to be a mixture of various fuels, pollutants, and horrible drainage that all mixed together. Each pool was a variety of different colors that didn't mix well and each component; of whatever it was, sat on top of each other or side by side.

Fumes and vapors came up from these pools as their chemical compounds mixed. If the atmosphere wasn't bad enough, it was getting worse with each chemical reaction of the various mixtures. Getting anywhere near these would be fatal within moments if not immediately.

From time to time there could be seen fissures in the ground where the mud of the surface would slowly pour in while more fumes of light green

would gas outward. There would be one plum of exhaust after another, as if there were a processing plant deep within the core of the planet that was sending up its toxic waste. These exhaust bursts of gas would be sent sky high, high enough to mix with the vapors already in the air, adding to the toxins that was choking out what was left of the planet.

There was little plant life to be seen and when it was, it was scattered about barely clinging on to life. What few trees that were alive were sickly looking, decaying and warped beyond any sense of recognition. They were twisted and gnarled and were lacking any green to them. These trees were far enough away from the pools of waste and were usually on a higher hill away from the heavier smog that would roll across the ground.

There were some shrubs that seemed to fare better. These were spiky stick shrubs that seemed to be more like a large caltrop than anything else. These had more than likely had become a new species of plant over the years and would probably take over the planet's flora while everything that was still clinging to life eventually died off.

There were old derelict buildings that were scattered about, abandoned a long time ago. The weather and acidic atmosphere had done their due diligence upon the dwellings. The walls were pit marked and riddled with holes as the acid in the air was slowly trying to eat through them. Doors had come off of their hinges a long time ago and all windows were completely disintegrated.

Whoever had come through here last had made their presence known. There were graffiti tags over every building that there was access to. These seem to resemble some form of gang activity to either give warnings to other gangs or to claim a territory or to mark what had been found or might be found inside each building.

The structures themselves weren't very sound. Beyond the fact that they were being eaten alive and were missing doors and windows, it seemed that a vast majority of them were tilting at odd angles. These were half buried in the mud as if some quake had shaken the foundation and attempted to swallow them whole. Other buildings had exploded from the inside out by either chemical reactions or by ammunition and explosives going off. Still others were blown up from blasts from the outside, caving in the ceiling walls as a result of some war. A few were burned to the ground, others had only a few walls remaining and barely standing.

Some of these buildings were processing plants. These were identified by their poisonous and hazardous waste symbols. None of these were intact and most were lacking whatever product or byproduct that had stored or had created.

There were other buildings that had radioactive warning signs on them. This was the only warning given to stay away, and it seemed best to do so since these were also leaking whatever they had stored. Bubbling hot radioactive liquids were joining the spillage from other processing plants.

Shipyards and weapon storage centers were also leaking their contents. Fuel and melted computer components were mixing with blaster cells that had liquefied. Oil and antifreeze and hydraulic fluid continued to flow with the rest of the sewage and toxic waste that was dripping everywhere.

“How in the world does a planet end up this way?” Quintano asked in a state of awe and disgust. He really wasn’t expecting an answer. Quia gave him one anyway.

“Quesh was a processing planet. It was found out that the gases deep within the planet could be used, under the right manufacturing and processing, to make adrenals and enhancements. Some of these were actually beneficial for healing. Some of them were hallucinogenic. Some make the user stronger or just made him think that he was stronger. Others ate the person alive from the insides out. Mostly they just made the user a junkie. Perhaps that was the real point of the harvesting.”

“There would be drills that bore into the crust of the planet and burrow deep enough to find the gas pockets. Once a gas pocket was found, pipes were laid to lead to the nearest processing plant. There the gases would be treated or mixed with other gases to make a product before it was shipped out.”

“Of course not all experiments went well. History tells of several large fires that had broken out and had even caused underground gas fires. These would wreak havoc on all of the productions everywhere.”

“Not all of the pipes were secure. There were always problems with major leaks. The flora and fauna of the planet weren’t used to the poisonous and corrosive substances that were being brought up and large swaths of the once green swamp lands would be devastated.”

“This planet was fought over by different factions for many years; each side proclaiming the assets that the planet had to offer. In the end it had become far too much for the planet itself to handle.”

“After far too much drilling, too many pockets of gas released leaving unstable air pockets behind, and too much bombardment by the constant fighting, the planet started to have more than an unusual amount of quakes. Small quakes became large ones and the once contained pockets of corrosive and poisonous fumes were released in mass. The once lush green tropical swamp was soon destroyed.”

“The atmosphere became so toxic that everyone had to leave. It’s ironic really. The one thing that drew everyone here was the one thing that made everyone abandon the place. The very thing that was meant to help cure was now killing off the residence.”

“You seem to know a lot about Qesh,” Quintano stated in awe over her knowledge of the planet. She had seem to come up with some helpful insight every now and then, but this was an in depth history lesson.

Quia nodded. “As a historian and a member of the Agent of Ossus, the history of Qesh was one of our first lessons. It was and still is the greatest tragedy of how a planet became so inhospitable by ‘intelligent’ species, and what’s worse was the fact that it was all to get ‘enhancements’. It was a war to see who could control the drugs that were being mined.”

“Problem is,” Quia continued, “is that those who don’t learn from history are destined to repeat it. Kessel isn’t too far away from being the next planet that becomes devastated by the mining of ‘spice’. All of their drilling and digging is going to make the planet cave in upon itself and release who knows what into the air.”

“Then there is the fact that some of the Hutt clans still mine this stuff, here on Qesh, as well as do some desperate pirates that have a death wish. If the planet doesn’t kill them then the Hutts would if they get caught. Either way, the planet is still being stripped of its resources and all that is left behind is a toxic waste dump.”

Silence fell upon the cockpit as they all considered the impact that had befallen every planet in the known galaxy. There were far too many planets that were in the process of being destroyed and not enough being

taken care of. It was only a matter of time before some of the major planets in the core systems fell to the same fate as Quesh.

“We should wait till nightfall,” Quia stated breaking the silence. “When the planet cools down during the evening, the heavier gases become thicker, fall toward the ground and leave the air easier to breathe. Once the heat of the day starts up again then the gasses become thinner and rise back up. Still, we need to always use our protective gear at all times and keep our exposure to the elements to as minimum as possible.”

“I can take my suit,” A’Den said as she started to move toward deeper into the ship to where she had kept her Mandalorian armor. “It can protect me against the toxic atmosphere.”

“Yes,” Quia stated agreeing with her. “But it can’t protect you against the corrosive elements. The air outside could eat your armor in a short amount of time.”

“Fine,” A’Den sarcastically snapped back. She was just getting tired of ‘miss know it all’ and her ability to have all of the answers all of the time. However, she had to admit that Quia might have a point. She didn’t want her Mandalorian suit to be ruined over something that could be prevented. With this in mind A’Den made her way to her personal room to change into one of the hazmat outfits.

It was only a short time later did the three of them step out of the Ebon Mortis and into the corrosive atmosphere of Quesh, each wearing their protective hazmat outfits. The outside was worse than Quia had stated. The thick light greenish yellow fog hung in the air and swirled about them like a living thing. It danced and moved like a macabre spirit teasing them forward before evaporating into thin air.

The smell of the corrosive vapor penetrated their suits. It smelled of some chemical that they never wanted to smell again and yet doubted that this would ever be the case. They were sure that it would permeate their clothing and they would smell of the stuff for years to come. It watered their eyes and stung their mouths. They could even feel some of it in their lungs and they knew that their hazmat suits wouldn’t last too long if this much of the atmosphere was already getting past their filtration system.

The trees, or what could be considered trees, were nothing more than ugly thick pieces of wood that were sticking up out of the muddied ground. There was nothing in bloom and nothing resembling anything

green. They looked like they had died some time ago and had forgotten to fall down, a situation that would soon be remedied by the acidic atmosphere eating through their very core.

Odd looking swamp plants were trying to grow. These remained low to ground and seemed to have mutated to be able to survive and feed off of the toxins in the air and the ground. These stood about three feet tall with out-reaching vines. Large yellow flowers stood in the center of these plants and as the landing crew came close to each one, they could smell the horrible stench of decomposition that emanated from each one, a stench so bad that it slightly overpowered the odiferous smell of the chemical atmosphere.

The area that they had landed in was what was left of a small town. There were several buildings that were partially standing to give a semblance of what used to be. There was an area where small shuttles could be docked while traveling from one city to another. There was a tavern and a market place. There were processing stations and warehouses. The smaller buildings, such as personal dwellings, were all but gone and only their foundations remained.

The road that had run through this town was cracked and torn apart by growing weeds and pitted by the corrosive layers of atmosphere. There was little left of it and the pieces that were still available were at odd angles, making traveling difficult at best. This forced travel into the mud and closer to the plant life that was still trying to cling to its existence and closer to the stench that they gave off.

The largest building in the area was the most intact. It was several stories high and made out of a red marble with black veins that ran through it. There were several columns that held up a balcony overhead. A grand double door archway signaled the entrance. There were intricate carvings that surrounded the building, all withered and pitted from wear of the atmosphere. Over the double doors were symbols that neither A'Den nor Quintano could make out.

“This is the home of the glorious Sith Lord Darth Liveo,” Quia stated as she translated the symbols. Her voice was muffled through the hazmat mask she was wearing.

“Humility obviously wasn’t his forte,” A'Den responded.

“Well, at least we have the right place. If the next holocron is nearby, then I guess this is where we’ll find it,” Quintano chimed in as he moved forward to lead the way.

The massive double doors had fallen from their frames and were lying at odd angles, allowing easy ingress for any who desired entrance. There were no handles upon them and no mechanical features to explain how these very heavy doors would have been able to have been opened while they were still standing. Now, it was easy enough to step over them and move inside.

Inside seemed to have been set up as a great reception area. It seemed to have been furnished with large couches and a sitting area. These were now torn to shreds, tossed about, and mildewed beyond repair leaving them to be nothing like they were during their prime.

The party’s flashlights caught sight of the walls that surrounded the room and these told a story all themselves. For the most part, the walls contained graffiti from various pirates and smugglers that had come through here and had decided to make this place their stopping ground. But that wasn’t the most intriguing part. The part that had caught everyone’s eyes was the murals, or at least what was left of them. The massive paintings that would have taken up the entire wall still showed some part of what they used to be. The paintings showed various species having a great time with wealth and prosperity. None were without want. All seemed to be happy with everything they ever wanted rather it was riches, power, or company.

“I don’t get it,” Quintano stated, speaking not only what was on his mind, but on A’Den’s as well. “Why would a Sith Lord put up vast mural’s depicting the high life of others? Since when did Sith Lords celebrate the success of anyone else but themselves? I always got the impression that these Sith were horrible individuals and very selfish by nature.”

“You’re right,” Quia answered. “The Sith get their power from the dark side. The path to the dark side is fear. Fear leads to anger. Anger leads to hate. Hate leads to suffering. Anger, fear, and aggression are the forces of the dark side.”

“If these paintings were here during the Sith Lord’s reign, then he had them here for a different reason than to celebrate the success of others. It would be here for him to sit here and stare at them and to contemplate his

anger towards them, to envy them, to despise them. Yes, this would inspire his power to swell within him. This makes perfect sense since his chosen Sith Lord name translates to envy.”

Quintano could only shake his head. The more he learned about these Sith Lords the more he realized just how twisted and sick they were deep inside. With this in mind, if the treasure that was at the end of this treasure hunt was powerful enough to peak their interest and even enough to put aside their differences to utilize it, then whatever it is that they were after would be very destructive in the wrong hands. It was easy enough to understand that they weren't just after some hoard of ancient credits. What they were after was something so profound that even these Sith Lords were doing everything they could to not only safeguard it for their usage, but they were doing everything they could to power themselves to make themselves ready to use it. The Sith Lord on Taris was using radiation. This one was using envy. Perhaps this was less of a treasure hunt and more of a race to seize power.

“Hey, look, I found something.”

A'Den's voice cut through the silence and brought Quintano out of his reverie. He was sure that he was on the verge of piecing something together and it was just on the outskirts of his mind and that all he needed was a little bit of time and he could figure it out. If A'Den hadn't interrupted him then maybe he would have been able to finish his thought process. Then again, perhaps he needed the distraction so he could continue to think about this mystery on a subconscious level. With this in mind, he turned to see what A'Den had found.

Quintano's eye darted over toward A'Den voice and found what her flashlight was pointing toward. It used to be an intricately designed staircase leading upward. Now, it was only a shadow of its previous life. The design was all but faded away. The wood that once was a railing was now rotting in the places where it was still visible; most of it had fallen away. The steps had crumbled and had fallen in places making any journey upward more precarious. Despite this, or because of it, Quintano knew that this was going to be their next venture.

They ascended the stairs carefully, and not too close to each other out of fear that the whole set of stairs would give way at any moment, and at times it threatened to do so. Boards moaned in protest and creaked under their steps. At one time a stair broke under Quintano's weight and sent his leg through the hole that was created and only after a short time of pulling

himself free was he able to continue. This made them all a bit more cautious and from then on each stair was tested and tried before continuing forward.

The breaks in the stairway, where the steps had fallen, leaving gaps, were more difficult to transverse. They had to hop over one section and another, forcing the receiving stairs to take on more force than they wanted to take. This had left their hearts pounding. Yet, in the end, their progress had only been slowed and hampered, but not stopped.

The next level up had a hallway that went on beyond their vision and it was difficult to see which rooms had been dedicated to what purpose here. Whatever rooms were here would be inaccessible anyway. There were large holes where the hallways had collapsed. Bookshelves and statues had fallen over, further blocking ingress into the level beyond. There were even fallen debris from the room above that would need to have been transversed or even removed if they wanted to go any further. Fortunately Quia had consulted her data pad and had signaled them to go up to the next level.

On the third floor the stairs opened to a hall that ran from the forward portion of the building to the back. This was obviously a major route and was decorated as such. There were statues and paintings. There were bookcases and shelves. All of these were destroyed and now lay in ruin. Their remains were scattered about the hall and their true identity was forever lost with the exception of debris that was now scattered about. Quia motioned the other way, toward the front of the building.

Their short hall took them to a room that would have given the occupant a fantastic view of the small town while being above them all; that was if Qesh ever had a fantastic view. Perhaps in the mind of the Sith Lord that lived here the poisonous gas clouds was something that was worth watching, or perhaps it was his elevated level above the others. Either way, the only view that this had now, over the balcony that jaunted out from this room, was the swirling gasses that danced below all along the ruins of what used to be.

The room seemed to be a shrine all to itself. There were statues that were now in rubble. There artifacts that had sat upon shelves that were now dust. There were items that were now debris littering the floor that were no longer identifiable.

A throne of sorts sat in the middle of the room and from here the occupant had the view from the window and out toward the ledge. He could also see all of his trophies and the array of his collection. It seemed that the throne was on a swivel to allow him to view guests as they came in as well as those in the streets below him.

A computer console sat in front of the chair. Here anyone could keep tabs on reports, take incoming communications, or even watch radar screens. Data files could be brought up or security cameras could be watched. The Sith Lord would have everything he needed right under his fingertips.

A nod from Quia told the others that per her data pad, this was where the holocron was supposed to be, that was if it hadn't been moved or destroyed.

“Alright,” Quintano stated as he moved deeper into the room. “Let’s spread out and find this thing and get out of here as quickly as possible. Who knows how much time we have left before the atmosphere plays havoc with our suits.”

‘...or on the integrity of the Ebon Mortis,’ A’Den thought to herself. It would be one thing to have their suits damaged, but if the ship was damaged then there would be no way of getting off of this planet and the air would eat them alive in no time.

Quia made her way toward the computer console while the others went about the room. They continued to check for secret niches or buttons or hidden safes that would keep such an item secure. But she had a different idea. If the Sith Lord sat at his throne and kept tabs on those that worked for him and those that lived here in this village mining for him and kept tabs on every security system through this console, then why wouldn't he have the holocron here as well?

The archeologist tried her best to turn on the computer but found that nothing was operational. The power to this computer was no longer connected and the thought of finding any clue through it was no longer a viable idea. She had thought of calling Aro to them and have him give juice to power up the computer, but she tossed that aside. The acidic atmosphere would probably damage his system and then he would be useless to them if they did find another need for him later. She was about to give up on the computer as a clue altogether, a non-functioning computer was useless and worthless.

‘However, if that was the case’, Quia thought to herself, ‘then why isn’t this computer damaged as well?’

The answer came to her when she considered the metal that was being used. It was Beskar, otherwise known as Mandalorian ore. It was very strong and resilient and would withstand the corrosive nature of this planet. It could also, in large quantities, prevent a force user from utilizing his abilities, which was, if a holocron were surrounded by enough Beskar than it would go undetected. This discovery only conferred her suspicions, the only thing was, where was it?

Quia ran the questions through her mind and followed the logic. She carefully examined the console until she found a hidden button. She tentatively pressed it and when she did a panel moved up and revealed another panel behind it.

“I think I found something.”

Quintano and A’Den immediately stopped their search and came over to see Quia’s discovery. The panel that she discovered had a myriad of symbols, all of which were lit up in rows and columns. Neither of them understood what they meant, but they were almost certain that Quia did.

“So, what does it say?” A’Den asked.

“I assume there’s some power source still running,” Quintano chimed in.

“I’m sure there is some source of power somewhere,” Quia stated. “He would be a fool to hide his most valuable item behind an electric safe only to have the power go out. It’s probably some hidden generator down in the basement or somewhere safe, and I wouldn’t be surprised if it ran off of the gasses from outside, giving it a potentially unlimited fuel source.”

“Are you suggesting that this Sith Lord wanted this planet to be this way?” A’Den asked.

“I wouldn’t go that far, but then again he is a Sith Lord and anything is possible. Either way, I’m guessing that he took full advantage of every opportunity that he had.”

“Now for your original question,” Quia continued. “It doesn’t ‘say’ anything. These symbols all mean something and something very dangerous. This one means plague. This one means cancer. This one means death.”

“So, it’s a combination code or what?” A’Den asked.

“My guess is that this is a combination code of sorts. I’m also guessing that any wrong combination might just set off a surge of energy, or at least that’s what I would do if I were him. I might also make a discharge that only I would be immune to.”

“Does that mean that you would make a good Sith Lord?” A’Den asked with a bit of sarcasm. She was getting tired of hearing how Quia had most of the answers most of the time and now she was coming across like a ‘know it all’.

“Let’s hope no,” Quia stated missing the sarcasm bite. “Most of what I know is based on stories and assumptions. I can only guess, but if my guesses are correct then the Sith were horrible beyond the worst standards that we can imagine. I only hope that there aren’t any still around or any who wish to study their old ways.”

“Well, I guess the real question is, can you open it?” A’Den asked. If Quia was just going to continue to give them a history lesson each time they came across one of these things then maybe it would be better to just dump her off on some habitable planet and shot their way through anything that got in their way including bobby trapped chests.

Quia gave a sigh. It really did come down to rather or not she could open it. Using force, blasting it open, or even having Aro try to figure out its code could all be disastrous. What needed to be done was find the right sequence of symbols. But how many were there? Were there three symbols that needed to be pushed or eight or all sixteen? Were they in a pattern or based on their meaning?

A beep on the Quintano’s commlink told them that Aro was calling.

“Not now, Aro,” Quintano stated into his commlink. “We’re almost done. We should be...”

“Woot...woot...bleep...bleep...bleep.”

The tone of the incoming message sounded urgent and Quintano's response confirmed everyone's suspicions.

"We have company! Heading our way! At least a dozen smugglers are coming in our direction. They've already taken notice of the Ebon Mortis and it's only a matter of time before they find us."

A'Den walked over toward the large bay window area and looked out over the balcony. Here she could see the Ebon Mortis and the dozen or so individuals who had decided to take interest in the ship that she had claimed hers. Their flashlights were scanning every inch of the ship. There was no doubt that this was the finest ship that they had ever seen. They wanted to take it. No one was going to take anything away from her and she was going to fight for everything that she had worked so hard for. However, there were just too many of them. She needed to thin them out.

A'Den's mind went through the strategic advantages and disadvantages. She didn't know their strengths. She had no idea if they had long ranged weapons beyond normal blasters. A missile launcher, like the one she normally carried with her armor, would bring down the whole building and her with it. She no longer had her blaster reflective armor nor did she have her jet packs. She couldn't out fly them or out maneuver them.

As an advantage, she did have the high ground, they didn't know how well she fought or how many she had with her, and she could bottleneck anyone trying to come up the stairs. The stairs were probably her best option. She could drop them while anyone was on them, however, that left them without a means to get down.

She gave a deep sigh. The smugglers would find their way here anyway; it was the only building that was intact enough to be of any interest. Either that or they would start getting into her ship. Either way she had to act now before they lost any advantage. Knowing that this would probably hurt, she took a deep breath, pulled off her face mask and yelled down to the pirates.

"If you want the ship, you need the codes! If you want the codes then you'll need to come up here and get them!"

Immediately A'Den felt her throat and lungs burn. The gasses in the air started to eat away her body from the inside out. Her exposure had only been for a short time yet the damage was enough to cause her major discomfort. She put back on her breathing face mask as quickly as she

could, and even then it took a while. Her eyes watered as she tried to catch her breath. She gave several deep coughs as if she could expel the gasses from her lungs, but it was too late, the damage, although minimal, had been done.

“A’Den!” Shouted Quintano. “What in the world are you doing? Are you alright?”

“I’m bringing the fight to us before they damage the ship in their attempt to get inside. I’ll be alright. But they won’t be when I get done with them. Come on, we’ll hold them back on the stairs while Quia tries to unlock the next piece of our map.”

“And what then? Do you have an escape plan in case we get overrun or trapped up here?”

“I’m working on it,” A’Den stated as she headed toward the exit of the room. She had to get to the stairway before the smugglers did.

Quia darted her eyes over the symbols again. She understood the situation that they were in. She had to hurry and figure out the combination so they could withdraw and get to their ship and get back to safety. The only problem was, she didn’t work well under this kind of pressure. She could fight under pressure that was easy. She simply let the flow of battle be part of her. She would be able to let her mind automatically move through each sequence of predetermined set of moves that she had mastered.

However, trying to think under pressure was entirely different. She kept thinking about her time at the Jedi library. Her mind just couldn’t focus on the task at hand. She wanted time to research. She wanted time to second guess herself. She didn’t have that luxury, none of them did.

“What’s our plan?” Quintano asked as soon as he caught up with A’Den.

“First, we need to secure our location and blasters alone won’t do that. Here, help me with this statue.”

Quintano’s eyes went wide as soon as he figured out what the Mandalorian was proposing on doing. When she said that they were going to secure their location, this wasn’t what he had in mind.

“This is insane. It might stop them from coming up, but how are we going to get down?”

“Like I said,” A’Den responded. “I’m still working on that.”

“You don’t have a plan at all, do you?”

A’Den didn’t even answer as she got beside Quintano to push what was left of the heavy statue. He gave a deep sigh and followed her lead. The two of them began to push.

Their muscles strained against the heavy stone item. How it was ever brought up here in the first place was beyond them and they realized that by the deterioration of the floor, it was only a matter of time before this statue crashed through and made its way, on its own, to the levels below. They were just helping it get to its fate faster than it normally would have.

“There she is! Open fire!”

The announcement below let them know that they had been spotted. The blaster fire that started to come their way only gave further credence to this fact and was proof that these individuals meant business, although business that hadn’t been thought all the way through.

First, the smugglers were two levels down trying to shoot up, through the stairs, at individuals that not only had the higher ground but had concealment. This alone wasn’t a tactically smart idea. This, coupled with the fact that they were lousy shots, made their entire attack useless.

Second, they hadn’t realized that if A’Den had any code to get into the Ebon Mortis then they needed her alive. Shooting her would do them no good.

Blaster fire shot all around the two of them striking the floor and walls. The ceiling was hit sending pieces falling. Even parts of the statue were hit, proving that the statue itself was probably the most resilient item around.

“Hold your fire! We need her alive, at least for now. She hasn’t fired back so...so go up and get her.”

The announcement from below let them know that there was someone down there that had some intelligence. That might prove to be their

biggest problem that they would have to face, someone who actually knew what he was doing. This also meant that they would soon be running out of time. The situation would quickly escalate. The time to act was now.

Both Quintano and A'Den gave the heavy statue one more shove and when they did, gravity, time, and exposure to the weather did the rest. The weight and mass of the solid statue struck with force and purpose. It smashed into the stairs and broke everything that it touched. Wood shattered under its impact and fragments flew in all directions.

The smugglers that had the misfortune of attempting to scale the already unstable flight of stairs were in for a shock. They met the same fate that their stairs had. Some were dashed aside, a few were smashed by the falling mass, while others fell through the massive hole that was made and met their fate with the debris that fell with them.

“Stay away from the stairs! Get the grappling hooks. We’ll take them down one way or another. When we do we’ll take the ship even if we have to crack it open.”

Both A'Den and Quintano looked at each and nodded. They both knew what was coming next. They may have thinned out their company, but they had also further aggravated them. The smugglers would come up one way or another and there was only one way to stop them now. They both drew their blasters and started to open fire at anything that moved.

“Will you hurry up with that?” A'Den shouted back toward Quia. “We have our hands full and a little bit of haste would go a long way.”

Quia had to look at the symbols again. None of it was making any sense. They were all being blurred together. Her heart was starting to race. She was afraid that she wasn't going to be able to make it in time and it was frustrating her. She needed to calm down. The words of wisdom came to her head but she had no time to meditate upon them.

‘When need for meditation arrives, but time for its luxury does not, that is when meditation is most needed.’

The pearl of wisdom came back to her and started to fight against her desire to push through on her own. It was a saying that one of her teachers had said, or at least something similar. It was difficult to understand what it meant then. Now that she understood it, it was too difficult to follow.

She couldn't help but remember that particular teacher at the academy, the funny looking small green one with pointy ears. What was his name again? It was something strange. He rarely came to her class but when he did, he always made her laugh. Not only was his shape as odd as it got, but his inability to speak correctly only made the situation worse. She couldn't help but giggle.

Now she wished she hadn't. He had only come to teach, to help. Now she needed his help more than ever. She closed her eyes and tried to meditate, to calm herself down.

'Fear is the path to the dark side. Fear leads to anger. Anger leads to hate. Hate leads to suffering. Fear is the path to the dark side. Fear leads to anger. Anger leads to hate. Hate leads to suffering.'

As the words came back to her mind she was able to release her anxiety and refocus upon the situation. She couldn't let her mind slip into the dark side simply because she wasn't making headway of figuring out the mind of a Sith Lord who was already following the dark side.

Then it dawned on her. It wasn't just her mantra, it was his. It was the Sith Lord's mantra. This wasn't just a set of rules for her to avoid, but a set of rules for him to follow. So, if she needed to think like him, she needed to follow him. She looked at the symbols again.

"Terror, wrath, loathing, torment."

The four words that she was looking for were there, they were just written in a different symbol. Now all she had to do was follow it. If he followed these to get to his strength then she would as well. She pushed the four buttons in their proper order.

There was a sudden slight click as the panel slid open. Beyond was a small niche, small enough to hold its coveted treasure, the holocron.

"I've got it. I've got it. Let's get going."

That was all A'Den needed to hear. Both she and Quintano had been keeping the smugglers at bay with blaster fire and they had been able to take a couple more out, but it would only be a matter of time before one of the smugglers would get in a lucky shot or at least blast enough of the integrity of the flooring away and have them drop through. However,

with the fact that the holocron had been found, it was time to do something drastic, something that they couldn't do until they were ready to leave. That time was now.

A'Den remembered what Quia had guessed about the Sith Lord using the gasses outside as an energy source. If highly concentrated gasses were used as fuel then they would have to be flammable. The fact that nothing had exploded yet meant that there would need to be a higher level of combustion. She could take care of that.

With but a snap of her wrists, A'Den slammed her pistols back into place and pulled out her EE 3 Carbine rifle. Despite hearing the questionable comments from Quintano, she took an aim toward the far end of the entry room. The night air wind, what little there was, would have pushed any of the combustible gasses deeper into the house. The movement of the smugglers would have done the same. This meant that the heavier air would be pushed toward the corners of the room, or at least that's what she was hoping for. Without giving it a second thought to doubt herself, she pulled the trigger.

The entire bottom floor exploded in an inferno fireball. Flames rolled out across the floor and engulfed everything that it touched, only to add fuel to its fire. Furniture went up. Floor boards went up. Walls ignited. Even the very air caught fire and flames moved all across the air and danced about as if they had a life of their own. Its hunger sought out everything in its path and began to consume even the smugglers.

Screams of pain echoed from the chamber below. Cries of agony cut through the night. The smugglers never stood a chance against something that they couldn't fight. Their clothing caught fire. The very flammable air that they were breathing started to burn their lungs and cook them from the inside out. Their flesh was burned away.

The screams of agony eventual died as each one of the smugglers perished under their miserable fate. Their sounds were replaced by the roaring fire that had been caused. The roar of the flames was like a beast all its own, giving a warning that it was coming and that it wasn't going to stop until it had consumed everything that this house had to offer. It snapped and popped as it ate what it could find downstairs.

The lack of a stairway didn't slow the ever consuming beast down one bit. With the walls all alight, the fire followed its fuel source. Higher and higher the flames grew until they started to catch fire to the floor of the

second level. It was only a matter of time before the third level went up as well.

But the fire was only half of their problems. The chemical smoke was rising quickly and was already gathering at the base of their ceiling. As if the toxic fumes were bad enough to breathe on their own, the inhalation of this smoke would have only made it worse. It stung their eyes and bit at their flesh.

Both Quintano and A'Den realized that they were now trapped between the flames coming up and the smoke accumulating above them. There was nowhere to go.

“That’s it?! That’s your plan? You were going to set the building on fire with us in it?! That’s the worst plan I’ve ever heard of!” Quintano was not happy.

“Well it worked didn’t it?”

“Yes, I guess it did, if your plan was to burn us alive. Well at least now I’m ready to hear about your plan for getting us out of here.”

“Aro,” A'Den stated into her commlink. “Bring the ship around. We’ll need an emergency exit.”

The ever diligent astromech was already ready to receive any form of communications from the group. After he had picked up the fact that the smugglers were trying to gain access to the ship, he had prepared to do an emergency take off. The desperation only increased once the smugglers had gone inside the same building where everyone else was. The situation became critical when the very same building burst into flames.

Even before Aro had received his call, he was already going through the preflight requirements to get this ship off of the ground and into the air. It wasn’t a moment too soon. By the time A'Den had finished her emergency call; he had finished his task and turned the engines on.

As the secondary engines came to life, their thrusts blasted the flammable gasses that had built up underneath them. The resulting explosion rocked the ship and knocked it sideways, banging its port side wing upon the broken and uneven ground. The Ebon Mortis went into a minor spin that brought the ship back around only to smash into another building.

Stone and rubble fell upon the ship and bounced off of its hull. The vessel jostled about and the impact was ready to put the ship into another spin; that was until Aro was able to gain control of the situation. There was only another short moment of bringing the ship about before it was underway.

Aro used his expert piloting skills and brought the ship around to the flaming building. The fire was already reaching the roof in some cases and the only available safe spot was where Quintano, A'Den, and Quia were standing, on the very ledge of the balcony. They didn't have much time.

The astromech carefully edged the wing of the ship up towards the edge of the balcony and did his best to hold it steady. The fire was already causing a shift in the wind and it was difficult to hold the ship in one place. It was good enough. First Quia, then A'Den, and finally it was Quintano who jumped last upon the wing of the ship.

The travel to another landing area, away from the fire was a little longer than anyone really wanted to try flying while still on the wing of the ship. Although Aro kept the ship as low to the ground as possible it was still an unnerving ride, and when the astromech finally touched down, the three passengers were grateful to be on solid ground once again.

"Why didn't the area explode like that when we landed?" Quia asked as she made her way toward the cockpit of the ship.

"Bleep... bop... bop... blop... beep...beep."

"When did you know so much about atmospheric gasses and..." Quintano had stated to inquire Aro's knowledge but was cut off by the little droid.

"Whril..snip...snip...bleep."

"What do you mean, ever since you've been an astromech, what kind of answer is that?"

"Briwl...twirl...beep."

"Why you little..." Quintano's patience with the astromech was starting to wear thin yet again.

“What is he saying?” Quia asked.

“He said that the gasses didn’t go off when we landed because the pressure of auxiliary engines pushed the majority of the gasses away so they weren’t so concentrated as to ignite. On top of that, there are only pockets of incendiary gasses, not every area at every time had a potential of being explosive.”

“So you two could have blown yourselves up just by firing your blasters?” Quia inquired.

Quintano shook his head. “No, Aro said that since it was night it was colder than the daytime and because of this the gasses were heavy, which is why they were more condensed. Anyway, this meant they were closer to the ground, not up where we were.”

Quia nodded. It made sense and she was glad that they were in less danger than she had initially guessed. Still, this adventure was starting to get to her. She hadn’t realized just how dangerous things might be. As it was, she was happy that she had both Quintano and A’Den along.

“Well, I guess I better get Aro going on translating the map,” Quia stated as she made her way toward the astromech.

It only took a short time for Quia and Aro to put the last piece of the map together with the others that had been collected. From there, a short translation reviled where to get their next piece.

“So, where’s our next destination?” Quintano asked with enthusiasm. He was getting the hang of finding these holocrons and he was enjoying his company so he was looking forward to their next adventure together.

Quia shook her head. “Don’t be too thrilled that we’ve found out.”

“Why? What do you mean?”

“We’re heading to Hoth.”

Chapter: Supplies

The freighter ship Lug continued its dull and boring slog through space. The journey had been uneventful, as had been expected. The destination was to one of those almost forgotten about frozen moons that no one cared about. There were only a bunch of archeologist and scientists that thought that they could do some form of research that would later be important. Since it was out in the middle of nowhere, the crew of the Lug didn't have to worry about the Empire.

As it was, they didn't have to worry about smugglers or pirates either. There was nothing of real value aboard. There were only supplies needed for the scientists and even then there was nothing to get excited about. There were no major electronics or computers or even a single blaster. All there were was some jackets, blankets, and a few other mundane items.

Mart gave a deep sigh. He would almost rather have a raiding party try to board them or perhaps some run in with the Empire over this dreadfully boring job. There was nothing to do but load boxes, move them from one place to another, and unload boxes. What he wanted was action.

Mart Jatt couldn't could help but remember his time in the academy training to be a pilot for the resistance. He had dreamed of making a name for himself. However, because of some misunderstanding he ended up being here, a freighter pilot.

'It's for the best for everyone,' they said. 'Everyone has a role and every role is just as important as the other.'

He gave another smirk as that excuse came to his mind yet again. He wanted to tell the upper ranks what they could do with their proposition. However, a paycheck was a paycheck and for now this was what he had to deal with to get paid.

Mart flicked on another switch on the control panel and watched as another light came on. He adjusted a dial before readjusting it. He checked over one of the sensor arrays. None of these controls needed to be touched or monitored once the course was set and Mart knew that he was only fidgeting.

“I’m bored,” Mart said as he turned to his co-pilot, Gut Masy.

Gut gave out a deep sigh of frustration. This hadn’t been the first time that Mart had stated this, and it wasn’t the first time on this trip. Mart’s fidgetiness had been annoying the whole trip and they hadn’t even hit the halfway mark. It was going to be a long journey.

“Look, Mart,” Gut stated out of frustration. The pilot’s actions and remarks had finally gotten to him and he felt that if he didn’t at least say something, and soon, he was going to lose his patience all together. “I like you an all, but this complaining has got to stop. I’m the third co-pilot that you’ve had and...”

Gut wasn’t able to finish his sentence.

The Lug rocked with force as blaster fire struck its hull. Lights started to flash. An alarm went off. Power was lost to the engines. They were a sitting target.

“This is an ambassador ship with cargo and supplies!” Gut stated into the commlink of the ship hoping that their attacker would listen. “We are not a military ship! We have no weapons and are defenseless! Hold your fire! Hold your fire!”

Gut had hoped that he could reason with their attacker. He knew that one good hit would destroy the ship and him along with it. It wasn’t worth putting up a fight that couldn’t be won. The response back calmed his nerves, at least just a little bit.

“Prepare to be boarded. You will no other warning.”

Gut and Mart looked at each other and nodded. Neither of them wanted to be blown into fragments. While Mart started to power everything down it was Gut who responded to the message.

“We are powering down now. You will find that we have all of our necessary paperwork that allows us to be in this area with the proper manifests...”

“Paperwork isn’t necessary,” the voice stated from the other end. “You will prepare to be boarded.”

It didn't take long for the sound of the docking clamps to be engaged and it was shortly thereafter when the sound of a docking passage could be heard as the walkway between the two ships was employed. The hatch was opened from the other end and a boarding crew came aboard.

The three individuals that came aboard didn't look like any raiding party or even Imperial agents. As a matter of fact the three individuals looked more like miscast of what was to be expected. It was hard to read what they wanted or why they were here.

The first individual was a female Mandalorian in her full battle suit. Neither Gut nor Mart had heard of any Mandalorian raiders. They had heard that Mandalorians were honor driven, even if some of them turned freelance or even hired out as bounty hunters. They came to do a job, but theft wasn't one of them, or at least that was the rumor. The second individual was a male with two blasters. He looked too well kept and too well dressed to be raider. He could be a smuggler, but not a pirate. Finally there was a female that had two long blades across her back. This seemed odd, bringing a blade to a possible gun fight. Neither of these individuals seemed to be a fit for each other nor did they seem fit for raiding a cargo ship full of blankets.

"What's the meaning of this?" Mart stated as he moved forward to the Mandalorian. She had been the first to enter the Lug and if he could intimidate the most dangerous individual then the others would follow. The two blasters shoved into his face quieted him down very quickly.

Mart's eyes darted from the Mandalorian to the other two. He hoped that the others would say something, anything, which would prevent the Mandalorian from pulling the triggers. As he did, he stopped and let out a slight gasp.

"Quintano? Is that you? It is you. You realize that you are a wanted man ever since you left. You're going to be hunted down for this."

"And who is going to tell them, you?" Quintano replied. "Tell Jewels that I said hello, will you?"

This took Mart by surprise. He hadn't expected Quintano to be so unconcerned about his fate and Quintano even wanted him to report this incident to the very individual that held a grudge against him. There was something deeper than just a raiding party.

“We didn’t come here to banter,” A’Den stated as she pushed her blasters closer to Mart. “Hurry up. Find our supplies and let’s get out of here.”

Quia nodded and started off toward the hull of the ship. It was her job to find the supplies that were needed and take those and only those and nothing else. She stopped part way down and turned toward the two pilots of the ship.

“We’re sorry about this, we really are.”

It was after Quia had loaded the supplies that they needed did Quintano toss a small bag full of coins in Mart’s direction. This had only confused Mart that much more and by the time he reached for the pouch, the raiding party had left.

Chapter: Hoth

The Ebon Mortis skimmed through the crystal clear atmosphere of Hoth. This was a relief to the whole crew as they were getting tired of being jostled about when they were trying to land. On top of not having poor weather to worry about, the clear sky allowed them to see where they were going and gave them the ability to view where they wanted to land.

However, the view didn't have much to offer. The entire floor of the planet was covered with white snow. As far as they could see, there was nothing but white snow. Even when ridges or peaks tried to rise upward or jaunt they, these were also covered in white snow. There were no trees, no lakes, and nothing else that would give any splash of color; that was until they came up and over a snow covered ridge and dropped down into a valley.

The valley that they had dropped into had near sheer walls of ice that extended upwards to over thirty feet before they met with the valley floor below. These walls surrounded the valley and would have made it nearly impossible to climb in or out with the exception of a few trail that zigzagged across them.

Inside the valley the ground was bare of any snow or ice and when the crew of the Ebon Mortis started to ask themselves how this could have happened, they were able to see the cause. Several tall lava stacks jaunted up and out of the ground. They stood close to twenty feet in the air and were almost that wide in diameter at their base but only a fraction of that at their apex of their cone shaped form. All across their sides, lava was trying to peak outward and the only form of real color that of reddish-orange could be seen. It seemed that the only thing that was keeping the lava from spilling forward into a pure liquid form was the absolute cold of the planet and thus the battle of hot versus cold raged on keeping this valley in check from being covered and consumed with pure hot lava.

As A'Den circled around the coordinates that were given, she could see that there was a large cave entrance with only a minor walkway up to it from the valley below. This had given her, and the others, that this was their target area and it was worth taking a look. However, there was one thing that prevented her from landing and that was the placement of the lava columns.

From what A'Den could tell, the lava columns were too close to each other to allow the Ebon Mortis to land and they might even be too close together to allow anyone to walk safely among them. This meant that she was going to have to land the ship on top of one of the ledges above the valley and hike down. There were two problems with this. The first was the fact that the black color of the Ebon Mortis would stick out in contrast against the pure white snow and would be easily spotted by anyone in the area. The second problem was that they would have to find one of the trails leading down the near sheer ice walls and across the valley before they could reach a destination that might not even have what they were looking for. With a sigh, A'Den picked a spot near one of the closest trails down, which was on the opposite side of the valley of the cave, and landed.

It took a little bit of time to get their winter clothing on. They weren't used to the bulk of the clothing and it was difficult to put on each layer while the last layer was getting in the way.

The time they took to ensure that they were well prepared for the cold weather outside had a second bonus. A'Den didn't want to leave the ship while it was still warm from its flight. She had wanted the ship to cool down and match the coldness from the outside. If they couldn't hide the ship, they could at least allow the environment time to conceal it for them. By the time they were ready to leave, snow had covered the Ebon Mortis and the engines had cooled enough to not be able to be picked up on anyone's heat sensors. With any luck these things would be able to hide the ship long enough for them to get what they needed and leave before been spotted.

The cold temperature from outside hit them like a fist. Even with their protective clothing, the frigid environment struck hard and took their breath away. There was no doubt in everyone's mind that they had to hurry since exposure in this kind of weather would mean death.

"I'm really starting to hate this," Quintano stated. "Either the planet is too hot or too cold or too poisonous. Couldn't we just find one of these holocrons on a nice beach for once?"

"We need to hurry," Quia stated ignoring the comment from Quintano. "The temperatures outside drop dramatically once the sun sets. We don't want to be caught outside during the night."

Quintano only shook his head in frustration and followed the other two. It was going to be a long hike and he understood that he wasn't getting any closer by just standing here.

A'Den didn't bring her Mandalorian armor. Despite the fact that she would be able to fly down to the cave and check it out herself, she was sure that the frigid weather would wreak havoc upon her suit and she doubted that her jetpack would hold up long enough to keep her flying. She also doubted that the sensitive computer parts would be able to hold together under that kind of exposure. She was sure that the whole armor would freeze up with her inside and she would freeze with it.

The going was slower than they thought it would be. The loose snow wasn't thick enough to give any traction from the ice that it was covering. Every step was slick and it made travel difficult and even more so when they started the trailhead down the side of the cliff face. Each step was calculated and they slipped several times but not enough to fall the rest of the way down.

The walkway of the trail was treacherous and if they had been careful with their footing before they got here, then they were twice as much so as they made their descent. There was only room for one at a time and it made it more difficult to catch each other. To make matters worse, the heat coming off of the lava columns had made the ice even slicker.

After their long and arduous journey down the cliff face, the three of them arrived on the valley floor, a little worse for wear. Here, they experienced something that they hadn't taken in account. The temperature here, at the base of the valley, was incredibly different. It wasn't just slightly above melting point, thus keeping snow from sticking, it was well above that. The temperature was so hot that they each started to sweat with the amount of clothing that they had on.

"We should probably just leave our clothing here," Quintano stated as he started to remove his coat and gloves. "We can pick them up on the way back."

Quia stopped him. "That might not be such a good idea. I know that it's warm down here, and perhaps even too hot for these coats, but it won't be hot up there, in that cave. If you look, you can see the ice further back, away from the main entrance. We'll be freezing cold again once we get inside. Also, if this takes too long and the sun sets, this area might get cold enough to freeze up during the night."

Quintano rolled his eyes. Quia had a point, just not a point that he wanted to hear. With this in mind, he made sure that his outer layer of clothing remained on before going forward. He only hoped that Quia was right and that he didn't have to suffer the trip around the lava columns because he was already too warm.

A'Den led the way. She was already at her focused on the task at hand and she didn't want to listen to the banter of the other two. She had a mission to do and she was going to do it. With this in mind, she concentrated on each step rather than how much heat was being produced in this area.

The temperature only increased the further away from the ice wall they traveled. Sweat was starting to pour off of their bodies and started to soak the clothing that they were wearing. Each step started to become a labor as the heat that was radiating from the lava columns was blistering. The only thing that was keeping them from being boiled alive was the fact that the planet was cold enough to keep the heat from radiating too far from each pillar.

They had to wind their way between one set of columns after another, slowly picking their path that would have the most space between each pillar. Some of these lava columns were almost on top of each other and they had to circumnavigate around several groups in order to find a safe path that would lead them to the other side.

In some areas the heat was superheating the air and was making it difficult to breath. It was hard to take in the oxygen that was being eaten up by the lava. This made them light headed and it was becoming increasingly more and more difficult to think clearly.

To add to the lack of oxygen, the sulfuric and carbon gases that were being released were trapped here in this valley. The cold air from above was too heavy and continued to push against the warmer air. This continued to make breathing more difficult.

Their eyes began to water. Their throats began to burn. Their lungs started to hurt. Dizziness started to consume them and it was affecting their balance. They started to stumble and only after they had nearly crossed the whole valley had they realized that this was a mistake. They should have found a better way.

Even A'Den had to rethink the plan of flying in with her Mandalorian suit. But she had to remind herself that if the jet pack failed because it was too cold, or failed because there wasn't enough oxygen intake mixture, or failed because of lava fumes or even from it being too hot, then she would have crashed and she would have been worse off than she was now. No, this was still the best option they had. Even hovering over this spot and lowering individuals toward the cave entrance could prove to be disastrous to the engines of the Ebon Mortis.

By the time the three of them reached the other side and came upon the base of the walkway up toward the cavern in question, they were exhausted. They wanted to rest, but they knew that this would be a fatal mistake. If they stopped now then they would never start up again and here would be where their dead bodies would be found, short of their goal.

It took all of their strength to start their climb back up the short path to the cavern entrance. It wasn't all the way back up, only about ten feet or so, yet it felt like it was further than it actually was.

The inside of the cavern was cooler than the valley floor and here, at the entrance, ice could be seen beginning to form until it became thick further back. Quia had been correct. They would need their winter clothing in here.

Breathing had become easier here. They had come out of the heavier toxic fumes and had risen above it. They had also come out of the thinner air. As such, they had to stay here, at the entrance, for a short bit to catch their breath and let their dizziness pass.

The walls were rough at first and seemed to be formed naturally, but as they went deeper back the walls became smoother and less rough until they were completely worked with carved inlays. Someone had gone to great lengths to make very intricate detail in the carvings and yet had stopped short from being seen from the outside. This would give the comforts of decoration without being noticed.

The ice started to pick up more and more until they were nearly an inch thick or more in places. This blocked out the carvings and it was difficult to tell how much of the area was carved. The ice dramatically reduced the temperature once again. Here, the cold air was trapped and nothing warm enough came in to keep the ice from building. The three of them

wondered just much ice was allowed to form while this was still occupied and if the ice would someday completely fill and engulf this area.

As they traveled back even further, the light from outside was blocked out and they had to resort to using their flashlights. The light from their equipment glared off of the ice and came back at them with eerie reflections. Strange shadows danced upon the walls and crept along with them.

Small tunnels branched off of the main one that lead deeper inward. One look toward Quia told the other two that none of these seemed to be what they were looking for and both Quintano and A'Den gave a sigh of relief. These smaller tunnels, further away from any warm air, were almost completely frozen over it would take quite an undertaking to manage their way through any of these.

Eventually the three of them found the back of the tunnel that they had been following. This had dumped them into a large cavern. It was difficult to tell all of the furniture and items that used to be here since most of it had been iced over. However, there was one item that couldn't be missed. It was the throne that sat in the middle of the room.

The throne was a little too big for any regular sized occupant and this was probably meant to intimidate any who came to visit. The chair had intricate designs upon it and was probably the pride and joy of the individual who owned it. That individual was more than likely the one who still sat upon it.

The body had long been mummified and well preserved from the cold. It was difficult to tell what species it had been, but it was bipedal with two arms. There were no other unique features about the mummified corpse and even the clothing had rotted to such a point that it was difficult to tell what ethnic background he might have had.

In the right hand of the corpse was the holocron that they were looking for. It was merely resting in the mummified body's slightly curled hand and it seemed as if the body's extremity would fall off at any given moment and allow the holocron to drop from the cold dead hands of the previous own.

Although the sight of the dead mummified body and ease of how the holocron could be retrieved had stopped both A'Den and Quia in their paths, Quintano was not so easily persuaded or intimidated. Without

hesitation the smuggler merely walked up to the corpse and removed their prize from the dead body's grasp.

"That was easy," Quintano stated. "Now all we have to do is..."

Quintano's commlink buzzed and let him know that Aro was trying to get his attention. He fumbled through his bulky clothing until he was able to get a hold of his device. Once he had it, he still had to try to remove one of his gloves while not dropping his commlink or the holocron.

"Not now, Aro, we're trying get the..."

"Bleep...boop...boop...tweet."

"I really don't care about an incoming meteorite. This planet is known to have them so..."

"Whirl...beeps...twiss."

"What? Why didn't you say that before?"

"What did he say?" Quia asked with a bit of fear in her voice. She wondered what could be so important as to call them at time.

"He just said that the meteorite is going to impact in our general area. As long as we're..."

Quia shook her frantically. "No, no, that's not good. That's not good at all."

"We should be safe here," A'Den stated. "Right?"

"No. We need to leave and leave now." Quia was almost in panic.

"Why? What?"

"No time to explain. We need to get out of here as quickly as possible. Come on, let's go, now." Quia didn't even wait for a response from the others. She took off back towards the entrance of the cave as quickly as possible. Despite the fact that the floor was still slick with ice and that her bulky clothing was getting in the way, she made it to the entrance faster than she had expected and was just in time to watch what she had hoped wouldn't happen.

The other two caught up with Quia only few heartbeats later and although they hadn't been at the entrance as long as Quia had, they were able to witness the event as well. At first they were simply awestruck and enjoyed the show. Then, when it dawned on them the result of the impact, they were horrified.

The three of them could do nothing else but watch as the meteorite streaked across the sky and slammed into the upper part of the valley, further north from where they were. The impact sent a fireball well into the sky followed by ice chucks and huge boulders. This, in itself was an incredible sight to see, from this distance where it was safe. However, it was the aftermath that brought horror to the hearts of the crew of the Ebon Mortis.

The ground shook violently from the collision. The shockwave rippled through the valley with force and power. Pieces of the ice wall broke and fell. Crevasses started to form. Then, as the destruction moved down the valley, toward the crew of the Ebon Mortis, the worst of the devastating force could be seen and they all knew that there was nothing that they could do but watch as their destruction came upon them.

With the violent upheaval from the shockwave came the explosions of each lava column. The vents could hold no more and with the impact came the energy needed to release the pent up forces that had been built up throughout the ages. Hot lava was spewed into the air and blown sky high. One column after another after another was affected and exploded as the shockwave continued down the valley.

Lava fell and spilled upon the ground floor and started to build. It flowed and moved on its own, gathering strength as more and more columns blew. But even after the shockwave stopped, the lava flow continued and as it did, it took out another column and another, each time spilling more lava onto the ground and adding to its ever growing mass.

The crew of the Ebon Mortis realized, well before the lava had reached them, that they would be trapped. There would be no way to run across the valley and to the other side for they were struck by the flowing magma. Even if the lava didn't strike them initially, the building sulfuric fumes and poisonous vapors that were building would drop them quickly. There was no way out.

The three of them started to cough as the smoke, fumes, and vapors started to rise to their area. They began to back away from the entrance but they knew that there was nowhere else to go. They couldn't go down, that was already covered with magma and they couldn't go back since that would eventually fill up with gas and fumes and there would be no escape.

“Aro...Aro...we need your help ‘cough...cough’. Aro...can you read us? ‘Cough’. We’re trapped, can’t get out. Aro?”

Quintano’s voice was near panic as he tried to draw breath. He kept moving further back with the others, away from the entrance, in an attempt to get a better breath of oxygen but it was not use. The air was still getting thinner and thinner by the moment. To make matters worse, the temperature started to rise inside. At first it was just enough to start melting the ice but soon thereafter the heat started to be trapped inside. If they didn’t suffocate then they were going bake alive.

Aro had already calculated the trajectory of the falling meteorite. To follow a trajectory was well within his programming. From there he could only make assumptions, but he had to assume the worse. If the meteorite were to strike with enough force then the situation would not only be dire, it would be catastrophic. He immediately put in the call.

Before Quintano was able to reply with his first response, Aro was already in motion. He fired up the ship’s engines and already had the Ebon Mortis in flight by the time Quintano had responded. By the time that the distress call came in, he had already brought the ship around.

Aro had brought the Ebon Mortis high above the cave entrance, high enough to not have the oxygen depletion affect the engines. Once he was sure that he was in a safe space, or at least safe enough, Aro made his way to the tow cable of the ship. This cable was meant to help haul up items, but he had another idea for it.

“Bleep...tweet...tweet...whirl.”

“What do you mean...?” Quintano tried to ask but stopped himself mid-sentence. He saw what the little droid was trying to say. There, dangling down in front of the cave was the two cable that was being lowered.

“Quia, you go first,” Quintano stated.

“Me? Why me?”

“Because, if this mission fails, then you are the only one among us three that anyone would trust. The two of us already have a price on our heads and we’ll probably be shot or sent to some brig before anyone would listen to us. Then there’s the fact that you can translate any of the old data. If we can’t make it out, you need to finish the task and find a way to take your finding to Jewels. You got that?”

“But what about...?”

“Just do it. You need to follow the plan and stop asking questions. Now go.”

Quia nodded and as soon as Quintano handed her the holocron, she took toward the entrance as quickly as she could. She knew that time would be off the essence and the quicker she made it to the Ebon Mortis, the quicker the others could be saved.

Quintano had to wonder if this was how Jewels had felt when he started to question every command that she had given him to follow. She was only trying to get him to do the right thing at the right time since so many were depending on him. Now that the roles were reversed, he had a greater respect for his former commander and made a vow to tell her so if he ever got out of this alive.

“Do you really trust her? I mean, what if she just takes off the moment she gets aboard?”

A’Den’s question took him out of his reverie. He had to admit that his mind was starting to slip with all of the oxygen starting to dissipate and the fumes starting to rise.

Quintano just shook his head. “I doubt that would happen. I’m fairly certain that Aro has locked down the controls and won’t budge until we are all aboard.”

A’Den gave a deep sigh and hoped that Quintano was right. She would hate to have to experience the last moments of her life suffocating in a cave like this.

“You really didn’t send her off first because she had the greatest chance of making it we died here, did you?”

Quintano shook his head. “No. I’m fairly certain that with Aro’s help and with what we already know, either one of us could finish the quest. On the contrary, I sent her off first because she didn’t have the same constitution as either one of us. I doubted that she would have made it any longer and even if she did, she wouldn’t have the strength to hang on to the cable.”

A’Den had to think about that. Perhaps, in his own way, Quintano wasn’t so thoughtless after all.

Once they saw the tow cable come back down they realized that Quia had made it up safely. All they had to do now was follow.

“You go ahead,” Quintano stated.

A’Den was about to head off toward the cable when she stopped. She turned on the spot.

“This isn’t some chivalry act is it?” A’Den asked. “Because if it is I’ll hit you so hard you will forget the meaning.”

“You should know me by now, A’Den. It’s nothing like that at all. I’m sure that Aro will need your help keeping the Ebon Mortis in place.”

A’Den gave a smirk. She didn’t believe his excuse for one bit. However, if in fact he was lying and that he was trying to think of others more than himself, and especially her, then she had to consider how she felt about that. In the mean time she had to take the cable up and leave him behind.

Quintano watched as A’Den took the cable upward. Perhaps it was the fumes that were getting to him. But he doubted it. He was changing. This adventure was changing him. He started to see the value in those around him and their lives were becoming more important than his own.

“Well, it’s about time.”

The voice from behind him caught him off guard and Quintano turned quickly. He had recognized the voice before he had turned and knew who it was before seeing her.

“Jewels. How did you get here? When did you arrive? I thought that I was here by myself.”

“You are here by yourself,” the Lieutenant Coronel stated. “I’m not really here and you know it. It’s just the fumes from the lava below getting to you. You are hallucinating.”

“It’s only a minor inconvenience,” Quintano stated to the ghost in his mind.”

“It’s more than that,” Jewels continued. “You might die.”

“I didn’t want the others to have to face this alone. I figured that my military training, the training that you gave me, would help me.”

“It might not be enough.”

“I knew the risks when I stayed behind,” Quintano stated as he continued to try to catch his breath.

“I knew that you were a good man, somewhere deep inside. Believe it or not, I always pushed you so that man could someday come out.”

“Don’t listen to her.”

The second voice came from behind him, toward the entrance of the cavern. He didn’t have to turn around to know who it was, yet he did anyway. Despite the guilt that was washing over him, he knew that he still had to face her.

“You’ll never be any good,” Jessa said in an accusatory manor. “You abandoned me. You abandon everyone that you’ve ever known. You will never change, and you know it.”

“Jessa...look...I...” Quintano’s voice was trailing off as he started to walk toward the Twi’lek.

“It doesn’t matter what you say to me, or even to her,” Jessa said. “In the end you are nothing but a disappointment, as you have been and always will be. You were nothing but a disappointment to me, to her, and to yourself. You’re nothing but a disappointment to them. If you had any sense of being a ‘good man’, you would find your fate without the cable.” Jessa’s eyes looked beyond the entrance of the cavern. Her sight went

downward; toward the building lava. There was no mistaken what she meant.

“Don’t listen to her, Quintano,” Jewels said in a warning. “You can’t let guilt dictate how you will live your life, or even how you will end it. I’ve always had your best interest in mind, even when you don’t believe me. Believe me now.”

Quintano had to stop where he was. He had finally come to the realization that he had been walking closer and closer to the ledge. Now, he was at the very precipice that he was trying to avoid. He could feel the full blast of the lava below him. He could feel the dizziness try to overcome him. One final step would be all that would be needed.

“Quintano!” Jewels warned again. “Listen to me. I’ve always been your voice of reason. You need to listen.”

Quintano had to shake his head. “No, no I know what I must do now. Now I know why I stayed behind. I knew that I wasn’t going to make it.” He closed his eyes and let his body fall.

“Quintano!”

The cable hook caught his body in mid-flight.

“Quintano.”

Quintano woke with a start. He was lying comfortably on his bed. He body was much cooler and he was able to breathe.

The voice that woke him wasn’t the voice that had cried out to him when he had fallen. As a matter of fact, he knew exactly who it was and he was surprised to have the voice be hers. When his eyes opened he was able to take in the sight of the woman that he was there.

“It’s alright,” A’Den said. “Lay back down for a little while longer. You need the rest.”

“How?”

“It was a close call. It was touch and go there for a while. We thought that we had almost lost you.”

“The last thing that I remember...” Quintano’s voice trailed off in confusion.

“You must have slipped while trying to grab for the cable. We’re just glad that you managed to catch it while you fell.”

Quintano gave a sigh of relief. She didn’t know and as long as she didn’t know then that was how it was going to be. He wasn’t going to tell her knowing full well that the disappointment that he had imagined being would become a reality and she would never look at him the same again.

“You look like you have a question.” A’Den stated.

Quintano had to stop. Had his facial expressions given away his guilt? He had to think of something and fast.

“Why didn’t we try lowering down by the cable in the first place?”

A’Den had to shake her head. She had asked that very question earlier, right after they had hauled Quintano into the Ebon Mortis. But despite the fact that she had told Quia that she didn’t have an answer, she actually did have one, she just didn’t want to say what it was.

A’Den was sure that she, and the rest of them, had become lax. They hadn’t thought things through as they should have. They were too confident in what they were doing and hadn’t been taking the dangers more seriously. She vowed to herself to use more tactics from here on in. She vowed to herself that no one was going to die on this mission; not if she could help it.

“Just get some rest,” A’Den stated as she got up from the side of Quintano’s bed. “I’ll go check on our flight pattern.”

“Where to next?” A’Den asked Quia as she took the pilot’s chair.

“We’re setting course to our next planet, the planet named Voss.”

Chapter: Voss

The Ebon Mortis streaked across the light blue sky as it made its way across Voss's atmosphere. With the weather being mild and the temperature being temperate, the flight inbound had been smooth and easy. There had been nothing to worry about, at least for the most part.

"The Voss are leery of outsiders and we won't necessarily be welcomed."

This was Quia's warning as they were coming in toward the planet.

"It's best that we stay low and off of their radar. Fortunately the coordinates are away from any nearby city so we should be able to continue without disturbing the Voss."

"However," Quia had continued. "The Voss are known for their ability to have visions."

"What do you mean 'visions'?" Quintano had asked.

"Well, they are known to be able to see things in the future, before they happen."

Neither Quintano nor A'Den was impressed by yet another reference to the mystic arts that Quia continued to talk about. Yet, after all that they had been through, there actually might be something to this. If this was the case, and the Voss did have this ability, and the Voss could, in fact, see into the future, then the Ebon Mortis had already been spotted and their chance of recovering their next holocron without complications had just become slim to none.

Despite the fact that Quia had already suggested that the Voss may have already seen their arrival before they even came here, A'Den did her best to keep the Ebon Mortis low to the ground to keep it out of the view of radar. She used the terrain to hide the ship's heat signature and did her best to follow the curvature of any ridge that she had come upon.

They passed over verdant forests that were already starting to change color due to the onset of autumn. Green leaves were turning yellow,

orange and then red and in some areas it looked as if a patch of trees might be on fire due to their vibrant colors.

There were grasslands and planes that seemed to stretch on forever. There were many herds of different species that bolted out of fear as the shadow of the Ebon Mortis came upon them and left.

Rocky plateaus and high peaks were passed over. Some of these were high enough to have snow while others were located in desert terrain. Some were jagged while others were of slate and then there were those made of granite.

Pristine lakes were passed by. Here migratory birds that had come to settle in for the day were disturbed and flew off. There were birds of prey that swooped down from their aviaries to feed off of the fish. Large aquatic creatures breached the surface of the water to see what all the commotion had been before dropping back down and submerging into the water once again.

There was also a hints that there had been long lost civilizations that had come and gone. Crumbled buildings, broken down walls, and ruined foundations of structures and homes and old temples. These were being overtaken by their environment either being overgrown with weeds or were trying to be consumed by vines or simply by the weather itself. Either way, even these remains would someday disappear, and with them gone, so too would every story that they could have ever told would be washed away with them.

With the ruins of civilization came with it the ruins of war. There were old cannons, destroyed ships, blown apart bunkers, and ruined transport vehicles. These had shown that Voss had a violent past and yet even these, no matter how strong and resilient they were meant to be, they were also slowly decaying and would disappear with their more civilized ruins.

Despite all the ruins of temples and war machines, the planet was peaceful and serene. There were no storms or horrible terrain to try to navigate. There weren't any military installations to try to avoid, although they were all sure that there were probably some closer to the major cities, there just weren't any out here.

“See? Now this is what I’m talking about.” Quintano stated. “Why couldn’t all of the other holocrons be on planets like this? This will be

easy, you just see. It will be 'hidden' in one of these ruins, lying out in the open, just waiting for us to..."

Quintano's words trailed off as A'Den pulled the Ebon Mortis over a set of rocky plateaus. The terrain had blocked the view from the other side and once everyone saw it, there was a hush that came over the cockpit. None of the crew of the Ebon Mortis was prepared for what they saw.

In a complete contrast from the serene and peaceful planet that they had the pleasure of seeing up to this point, the view had completely changed. Instead of a plane full of grass and herds of creatures roaming about, the landscape started with a rotting, unfertile ground. Instead of vibrant plant life, there were only weeds. Instead of tall trees, there were sickly looking gnarls of rotting woods that was in a perpetual state of dying. Where the plant life refused to grow, the cracked hardened ground made of dust and hardened clay.

Beyond this field of decay and dust and desolation grew a forest of black woods. The trees were not only gnarled, like those growing on the wasteland, they were ebony black, devoid of any green. There were no leaves or fruit or anything that would give any semblance of life. The trees themselves were larger than the sickly looking ones that were trying to grow all by themselves in the wasteland and even their branches were bigger than the full trunks of their smaller flora.

Beyond just black and gnarly, the tree looked like they were rotting. Parts of their bark were peeled back and falling off on its own. Several large branches had fallen from dry rot. Everything about these trees screamed of disease and disarray.

The light from the sun above had a tough time penetrating the thick tangled branches that had formed a canopy over the area. It was as if there were a blight upon the land and the mere presence of light would offend it so the trees had grown to prevent such a thing from happening. Rather this was true or not, no one could really guess, but the feeling of foreboding grew by the moment.

All three of the crew members of the Ebon Mortis felt a pit grown in the stomachs as the ship drew closer and closer to the thick black woods. They couldn't place their finger upon it, yet it was a physical manifestation of something horrible, something of death. This was the one place, if any, to avoid. Yet, they all knew it, even when Quintano asked.

“Don’t tell me that we have to go in there.”

“I’m afraid so,” Quia stated with a soft voice, a voice that was uncertain that she wanted to go any further.

“How far do we have to go into that?” A’Den asked.

“Several clicks, I think.”

“What do you mean, you think?”

“My data pad is all messed up,” Quia stated as she gave it a good slap as if her physical abuse upon it might make it work better. “The closer we get, the worse it seems to get. It’s probably some electromagnetic field that’s being generated. This will play havoc on everything that we bring in and it’s probably the reason why this area looks like the way it does.”

Even though Quia had stated these words for A’Den and Quintano’s sake, she doubted that they believed her. Next time she lied, she would have to try harder. She was sure that it wasn’t some electromagnetic anomaly. She was sure what it was and it was one of the worse things that they had faced so far and if she was right, then she wasn’t sure how they were going to find their prize let alone walk out of this adventure alive.

Quia had studied the history of Voss, it was a requirement. Like many of the different planets that she and the rest of her class had to study, this one had a story to tell and a moral to teach. This one had taught them that there were horrors out in the galaxy that were the makers of nightmares, if not a personification of all of the commutation of nightmares throughout the galaxy itself. They had read that somewhere, somehow, this creature grew off of hatred and had grown to such a degree that it was a threat that would have ended all life, if allowed to continue.

To make matters worse, Voss had been torn apart by a war that had pitted ancestor against ancestor in a ravaging battle that almost wiped out each side. It was only after they had realized that they were related did the two sides finally stop, although the damage had been done. They had almost wiped each other to the point of extinction.

She had also come to study about the ways that the Voss viewed the force. They were seers but were ignorant about how fluid the future was. This made their visions to be taken literal and to be taken as accurate.

When the future didn't happen as the seer had foreseen then problems arose between the seer, who could do no wrong, and those that tried to speak the truth.

The Voss also saw the force as neither good nor bad. They didn't believe in a light side or a dark side. Where this simply might have meant that they didn't want to take sides in the struggle between Jedi and Sith, it also meant that they would ally with either one as they saw fit. This eventually let the Sith corrupt many Voss in their teachings and only served as a further catalyst to the fall of many of the planet's inhabitants the rise of the creature that was feeding off of all of this corruption.

Eventually the Voss were able to see the Sith for the manipulators that they were, were able to stop their war, and to finally destroy or at least seal away the beast that was threatening to rip them all apart. It had been a close call for the Voss and their planet and they were able to start to rebuild their civilization.

However, Quia had to ask herself if such a creature that had grown to such proportions as to threaten the whole galaxy could even be destroyed. She had to wonder if the thing could continue to grow with every prejudice, and every war that continued to make its way from one planet to another. She had to wonder if they were walking into a trap, a trap designed to feed them to this growing beast to give it more power and to set it free once again.

Quia had to shake her head. She didn't know what was coming over her. Her thoughts were dark and foreboding. She already had the feelings of hopelessness. But despite the odd thoughts that were going through her mind, she knew one thing for sure, there was something still in there and it was already starting to affect her.

A'Den circled the vast dark forest in order to find a place to land closer to their intended destination. She found nothing. There was no place inside the forest where she could land. All of the trees had grown so close together that not only were their branches intermixed making it difficult at best to force any sort of landing, but the trunks were too close to each other making it completely impossible. There was no way around it, they would have to land and walk in.

A'Den found a spot near the edge of the forest. She didn't want to land too close as to let any wildlife that might be in there a chance to take the Ebon Mortis by surprise. She had already assumed that Aro was going to

stay behind, as he had been told to do on every other mission and there was no reason why this mission would be any different. With this in mind, Aro would have a better chance of seeing anything aggressive that might come out of woods if they were further away from it.

After listening to Quia's comment of how her data pad wasn't working properly, she decided not to take her Mandalorian armor. Although she had already told herself that she would use better tactics, she wasn't going to put herself in a situation where her battle suit would shut down at the most inopportune time. However, she did make sure that she took her two blasters, her rifle, her flashlight, and she definitely made sure that she took her military grade dagger, the dagger that she hadn't had a need for but if all of her electronics were going to be affected, it just might be the only thing that she had left to defend herself.

The moment that the crew of the Ebon Mortis stepped outside they could immediately feel it. There was a coldness that struck their soul. It wasn't a physical coldness that they could feel across their bodies, but something that grabbed their hearts. It was as if there was a great sadness or something mournful had happened and had left its mark upon the land and this was what had permeated the air and into their spirits.

Their short walk to the edge of the woods was quiet and foreboding. They were afraid to break the silence lest they awakened the foul thing that held this area hostage. There was just something in the air and they couldn't put their finger on it, but it was as if something great and horrible was about to happen and the whole world was holding its breath waiting for the event.

As the three of the actually entered the forest, the aether feeling that had no physical sensation gave way to an actual physical form. There seemed to be a thin barrier that hung about the area. It gave way, only after a little bit of resistance, and allowed entry into the forest proper.

Even after they had entered, they continued to feel something in the air. It was as if the whole forest was in a different medium than just air and whatever they had walked into had permeated every aspect of the forest.

The area was worse than they had thought. The trees continued to grow at such odd and twisted angles that it was difficult to believe that they were all the same species of plants that grew like this but rather

something had weaved their growth and distorted them to this degree. Nothing grew straight.

The ebony color of the trees only added to the darkness that held this area like a blanket. What little light did penetrate through the tangled mass of gnarled branches was quickly absorbed by the darkness of the trees. There was hardly any light to see by.

The three of them immediately pulled out their flashlights to help light the way only to realize that Quia's problem with her data pad was now a problem with their flashlights. Their equipment started to flicker on and off as if they had some sort of a short in them and in effect created nothing more than a strobe pattern. This had become counterproductive and messed with their vision even worse than without any light at all. It didn't take long before they gave up on their decision to use their flashlights and put them away. They would allow their eyes to adjust to the best that they could and go from there.

A'Den put her hand up as a single for the other two to stop for a moment and when they did the Mandalorian pulled one of her blasters and gave a random shot out and away from the group. It was as bad as she thought. The blaster gave a slight fizzle before producing anything and even then the blast wasn't that powerful. Their weapons were no longer reliable. They wouldn't fire when they wanted and their final outcome was less than ideal. She would have to take this into consideration if they came across anything aggressive.

Quia gave her data pad a few more strikes which seemed to help long enough to give her the bearing that they needed before blinking random information yet again. The historian could only shake her head. She hoped that the information that they received was enough to lead them in the right direction and that they would be able to see what they were looking for without having to rely upon the piece of equipment for the rest of trip. She also hoped that it had given her the correct information needed. She would hate to have to be the one that lead the whole group around in circles.

They continued their journey deeper into the heart of the dark forest. Their eyes continued to dart from one area to another in an attempt to keep an eye out for anything that might be in the area. Nothing moved. There was nothing here and they weren't sure if this was a good sign or not. If something were here then they preferred that it came out so they could see it and deal with it. If nothing was here then that was a bad sign,

a very bad sign. It meant that anything with a consciousness had decided that this was a place to avoid and if this was the case then they weren't listening to the creatures that knew better than they did.

A shadow moved to their right and they all moved as one. Both A'Den and Quintano pulled their blasters, hoping that they would be in working order if the need arose. Quia had pulled her double staff and was sure that it would work, but had hoped that she wouldn't need to use it. There wasn't a whole lot of room to maneuver and she was afraid that her style of attack would only mean that her weapon would get caught or hung up in one of the branches.

Time passed and they waited. Their hearts beat hard against their chests and sweat started to bead against their foreheads. Nothing. There was nothing. It was only a shadow from the sunbeams that had made their way through the branches. With a sigh of relief they moved on.

They continued their hike. They ducked under branches and circumnavigated large trees. They moved over roots. They plodded forward with every step.

The whole forest was starting to all look the same. There was nothing to give away one part of the forest from another. There were black trees, with gnarled branches, and a few streams of sunlight. Every step was the same. Every turn was the same. Every passing moment was the same. It was A'Den who asked the question that was on everyone's mind.

"How much further?"

A'Den wasn't just asking how much more time that they had to spend in this dismal forest before finding their prize; she was asking if they were heading in the right direction. She knew and understood that Quia's data pad wasn't to be trusted, but it was the only thing they had from getting lost. It was the only hope that they had to get them out of here.

Quia pulled her data pad and turned it on again. She had turned it off since it had stopped giving her any information and had threatened to fizzle until it stopped working altogether. The lights came to life and the information appeared on her screen.

'Useless.'

Quia banged on her data pad in hopes that the malfunction was only that, a malfunction.

'Worthless.'

'Give up.'

'Unwanted.'

'Unneeded.'

'You couldn't save them before...'

'You can't save these either...'

Quia's heart started to sink. At first she thought that the data was malfunctioning and that she was merely seeing words upon the piece of equipment that she had planted there from her own imagination. Then the words seemed to reflect the data pad or even the quest itself. Then she realized that it was none of these but a reflection of her own account of life. She had been useless. She had been unwanted and unneeded. She couldn't have helped those before and she had felt that Quintano and A'Den didn't really need her help.

'Do them a favor...'

'The blaster will work as needed...'

'Do it...'

'End it...'

'End it all...'

'They are better off without you...'

Quia stopped. The data pad was telling her what she already knew. She was nothing but dead weight to these two. They didn't really need her. If she just...

"Quia? Anything wrong?"

Quintano's voice brought her back to the situation at hand. She shook her head and cleared her mind. As she did the data pad information changed to location and distance as if the instrument didn't want to be caught by anyone else displaying the words of uselessness.

"Yes, yes it's just the environment wrecking havoc on the equipment. I've got a location now. It's that way, not much further."

'Lies.'

Quintano had to turn around and see who had spoken to him. There was nothing but shadows.

'Lies. She doesn't think that you are worthy enough to tell the truth to.'

Quintano turned his head again and again to try to pick up who was whispering in his ear, but there was no one. Yet, he knew that he wouldn't actually see anyone, he didn't actually hear the words in his ears but rather in his mind and somehow his heart knew this words to be true.

'She's leading you to your death. She thinks that you deserve to die. You know this to be true. Remember Hotb?'

Guilt started to wash over him. He couldn't help but remember how he treated Jessa. He couldn't help but remember how he had lead these two that were with him on a mission that was becoming more and more dangerous with each planet. He was going to get them killed. They didn't need that from him. They didn't need him.

"Quintano?" A'Den asked.

"Just getting my bearings," Quintano replied.

'He's thinking about leaving. They all do. No one wants someone who is worthless.'

A'Den had to give a gasp. The voice in her head had become louder.

'He was never going to stay anyway. Why should he? He deserves better.'

The voice wasn't just louder, it was stronger. It was tugging on her heart and she believed it more and more. She didn't know what to believe anymore. It was getting harder and harder to think clearly.

A'Den's hand went to her blaster. It would be easier to shoot something that she could see but the voice was in her head. There was only one way to get rid of the voice.

A'Den let go of the blaster and shook her head. It seemed to her that this was what the voice wanted her to do. She had to fight it on a level that she couldn't understand. But there was one thing that she did understand. She had to focus on the mission.

"Come on," A'Den stated. "We need to finish this before it gets late and we won't have any light to see by to get back."

The others each gave a deep sigh as if the small bit of strength from A'Den to focus upon their quest was all they needed to shake the feelings that were overwhelming them. Without delay they started up again.

They continued to walk in silence, less enthusiastic to move on with each passing moment. The desire to finish the journey wasn't as compelling as it used to be. Doubt that they would even finish set in. Doubt that they would make it in time set in. Doubt that they would even make a difference set in. It was time to turn back and...

"There. Over there." Quia's voice had cut through the silent tension that was growing among them.

A'Den and Quintano stopped and at first didn't want to bother looking in the direction where Quia was pointing. It wasn't worth looking anyway. However, once they turned and saw what she was pointing at, their hope of actually finishing their quest started to come to life once again. Their journey was almost over.

Off in the distance, barely visible through the poor lighting and the fact that trees had grown around and through it, was a set of ruins. Parts of a wall and foundation could be seen from where they were. What had been a building were now fragments of a couple of supports and flooring.

The three of them crossed the distance with haste and when they got there they were able to see the set of ruins better. There were only a few walls that were still standing and just barely at that. What hadn't fallen into rubble were only fragments of what used to be. The walls reached only about half their height, at their highest peak, and fell about the place from there. The foundation, or at least what was left of it, had saplings trying to grow through it and the whole base of the building was full of cracks and

fissures. There was no ceiling and what was left of the sunlight came through and illuminated the fact of how desolate these sets of ruins were.

In one section of the set of ruins, the room had been all but cleared of the rubble, although the walls were still barely standing. This section of the building, or what was left of it, would have been bypassed as any other section of the ruins until they saw it. There, in the middle of the cracked and broken floor was the holocron that they were looking for.

“I thought that these Sith Lords of the past were supposed to be guarding these things. I don’t see any safes or traps or tests to get the holocron. Why would he just leave it out in the open?” A’Den had asked the very question that was on everyone’s mind.

“I don’t know”, Quintano stated. “Let’s just get it and leave as quickly as possible. I don’t know about you, but I’m starting to not like being here and I would rather be back at the ship as soon as we can.”

There were no objections from either Quia or A’Den. Although all three of them were tense and were waiting for some trap to spring or some great monster to appear or even some catastrophe to happen, they watched without protest as Quintano approached the holocron and picked it up. The moment that he did, their entire world changed.

The surroundings became a negative image of what it used to be. Black became ashen. White became dark grey. All color was washed away and was reversed and then drained until nothing made sense. Every item had a wispy smoke that came from it, as it had a spirit and this spirit was leaking out of everything around them.

“Where are we?” Quintano asked. His voice seemed far off and his words echoed as he spoke.

“We are in the dreamscape or a vision realm, depending on which culture you ask.” Quia’s answer was likewise heard from a far off distance.

“How do we get out of here?” A’Den asked nervously. She didn’t like to be in situations where she wasn’t in control and this was definitely one of those places. She knew that her weapon was only working intermittently and now she was in an area that she couldn’t escape. She couldn’t fight her way out of this and there was no way out. She did not like this at all.

“It’s not as simple as that,” Quia answered back. Her studies and her dealings with Jedi had taught her about this, but she had never visited it herself. She had wondered what it would be like. Now, however, she just wanted to leave as badly as the others did, and even more so since she knew and understood how they got here and what it would take to get out. She had to explain everything she knew about this place before it became too late.

“This isn’t so much a place as it is a state of being. We’ve been pulled here by an extremely powerful force user, and I know the two of you don’t believe in force users, but this is how we got here. The only way out is to have this force user let us out or we kill it, and if this thing is this powerful, then killing it will be very difficult at best.”

“Difficult or no,” A’Den stated. “Just have it show its face and deal with it. Do you hear me?! Show yourself!”

Then they saw it. They didn’t know how it got here, it just appeared. It hadn’t walked into the middle of the three of them; it was simply not there one moment and then there the next.

The beast was easily three meters tall and almost two meters wide. It towered over them. Its presence consumed them and enveloped the area. There was no mistaking that this thing, whatever it was, was the creature that had dragged them here and it didn’t look pleasant at all.

Its body was more made of smoke and wisps of ebony black against the negative area. There didn’t seem to be a physical body, only a semblance of one.

The form was simply filled with tendrils. Smoke tentacles moved and swayed with the creature from all over. They coiled about and snaked all about. Several score of these appendages were in constant motion and as such it was difficult to tell if there was anything other than these wispy tendrils.

To add to the horrific sight or terror, there were the eyes. There were eyes everywhere. There were eyes on all sides of the creature. They were on its torso and all long each wispy tendril. The eyes moved all about, as if they were merely floating in the smoky creature rather than being a part of it. They stared long and hard at each member of the crew of the Ebon Mortis and it felt as if each pair looked deep into their souls.

The words that came from the beast matched the voice that had been plaguing them all along. It had the authority and held the same power. There was no denying that this was the thing all along and now it was here.

“Useless. Is this the best that can be sent? You are all useless. You are worthless. Can’t you see all of the failures in your lives? Can’t you see how you’ve harmed so many? Can’t you see how much of a disappointment you have been to each other?”

Memories came flooding back to all three of them. They knew what he was talking about. Each of them had their hidden guilt and shame that they hadn’t shared. Each of them had their personal pain of failure.

“Unwanted. Unneeded. It’s hopeless. Rejected. Toss away.”

The words struck hard then they had before. It tore into them. Their hearts broke as their memories continued to flood them over and over again and again. The world around them faded away and each of them were back at the place where they had failed the most.

A’Den was abandoned. The shame that she felt for being left behind ripped into her soul again. She had tried so hard to prove her worth, but that had all come crashing down when her benefactor asked for more than she was willing to give. It came crashing down yet again as she watched Avidd get hit the explosion. Every scream, every tear, every drop of blood that was on her hands came back to haunt her and tell her that her life had been nothing but short of a horrible excuse. There was no reason to continue the charade any longer.

Quintano had to remember not only Jessa but Tessa as well. He had gotten then both killed. His inability to take anything seriously had put his squadron in jeopardy while he was in the alliance. He was a failure on all levels. He knew what had to be done to ensure that no one else would get hurt again.

Quia heard the screams yet again as she ran through the underground tunnels. The Jedi and those in training were dying and she was afraid. Was there anything that she could have done better than to have run away? Yes, she should have died with them and she knew it. She heard them calling for her. All she had to do was join them and her guilt of surviving through her cowardice would be gone.

Quia looked up and saw that both Quintano and A'Den had fallen to their knees in despair. All hope had been stripped from their souls. Tears were running down their faces. But that wasn't the worst of the situation.

Quintano and A'Den had both pulled their blasters and had pointed at their heads. Quia could see that the both of them were just about to pull the triggers and it was everything that they could do to prevent that from happening. It would only be a matter of time before their will power failed.

She wondered why the other two were affected worse than she was. Yes, she felt awful, but both A'Den and Quintano were suffering far worse than she was. She wondered if their nightmares were worse than hers. Then she realized that this wasn't the case at all. She had better training to hold off this kind of attack.

However, it wasn't going to be too much longer before she held a blaster to her head like they were. Quia also knew that she would have done so, if she had a blaster. The blades on her twin bladed staff would give the same result and she was tempted to use them. There would be no need to go on; especially without the other two and being trapped here would be a living hell, unless the creature ripped her to shreds first.

That thought caught her attention. Why hadn't the creature attacked them already? It had them dead to rights and neither one of them could defend themselves against anything at this point. Perhaps the creature couldn't. Perhaps it was because here it didn't have a physical body and it couldn't attack, at least not physically. The projection was only a spiritual manifestation of a form that it wanted to take on and not necessarily its real form. But then, wouldn't it still be able to make a spiritual manifestation of a physical attack?

Then it struck her. It couldn't do this, not because this was a spiritual form or a spiritual area, it couldn't because it didn't have a physical body. This reminded her of the shadow creatures from Dromund Kaas. They weren't physical either and the only way that they could harm them was through light. If this was the only way to fight this creature, then so be it.

With new determination, Quia rolled toward the creature and as she did she pulled out the lightsaber that A'Den had given her. The moment she came out of her roll she turned the weapon on and thrust forward.

The beast howled in pain. It was just a vocalization of its torment, but a mental blast that rocked the senses. It echoed in their brains and shattered their already broken souls.

From where the creature was there was a sudden shockwave the burst forth. A massive ripple shot out in all directions as if a meteor had struck and had sent out its wave of destructions. The whole dreamscape plane warped and twisted until it finally shattered under the impact.

Quia opened her eyes and saw them. Both Quintano and A'Den were recovering from the blast as well. They had been knocked over and were now in the process of trying to get back up. They, like she was, were in pain and were disoriented. They looked as she felt, worse for wear, and yet they were all recovering.

A'Den looked over toward Quia and then toward Quintano. There seemed to be a stream of unspoken words among them. There were shared feelings of guilt and shame that none of them wanted to share ever again. In a silent agreement that would never speak of this again.

"I'm glad that you had that," Quintano stated as he nodded toward the lightsaber that Quia was putting away, "and I'm glad that it worked."

Quia shook her head. "No. I don't think the lightsaber itself defeated the creature but rather the hope that I had in it that the lightsaber would. I think that it was growing on our negative thoughts, off of our despair and misery. It wasn't the power of the lightsaber itself that killed beast, like it did with the things back in Dromund Kaas. I think it was hope. It couldn't stand hope. I could have sworn that I saw it start to waver the moment that I made a move for it. The lightsaber was just a catalyst of the hope that I carried."

"Well, at least you destroyed it," A'Den stated adding to the conversation.

"No, I don't think that I did. I think it's badly wounded, but not killed. I'm not sure that it could ever be killed, but yes, I'm glad that it's over for now."

Quia looked over toward Quintano again to make sure that he had secured their latest holocron before looking at her data pad. She would need it to help them not get lost in this forest and she was sure that if they did then they would be walking in circles until that thing would be able to

regenerate and pull them back into the dreamscape again. She turned it on and was ready to give it a whack to get it going again, but it wasn't needed. The data pad turned on right away and stayed on. Quia had to wonder if the creature was affecting it earlier and if this was the case then it was best to get out as quickly as they could before the creature came back and redirected her data pad again.

The trip back through the forest went quicker than they thought. They were all anxious to get out and they were no longer looking for something that would try to come out of the shadows to attack them. They were no longer looking for a building or a structure that would hold the holocron. Now they were looking for the exit and it came not a moment too soon.

Although the sun was setting, there was enough light in the twilight to illuminate the scene before them. The Ebon Mortis was a sight for sore eyes and they were ready to board the ship and leave, except for one thing. They stopped there, at the edge of the forest and saw the lone figure that stood between them and their ship.

The female Voss was standing halfway between them and the Ebon Mortis. She was less than two meters tall and was probably Quia's height. Her red skin color was enhanced with deeper red markings. Her eyes were electric blue and without pupils, which meant that her eye color filled the fullness of her eyes giving her a wide eyed stare look.

For clothing she wore a light purple hooded robe and in many aspects Quia was reminded of a Jedi. She held a staff upright in one hand that looked more like a walking stick than a weapon, although Quia knew differently. She understood that in the right hands even a stick could be a deadly weapon. Since this Voss was probably a mystic, then the staff could prove to be fatal under the right circumstances.

Before any of them could do anything, the female Voss spoke. "I am Tala-Xo. Yes, I know about your mission. It is as it has been seen and is as it should be. Leave in peace."

The almost mechanical and flat tone of Tala had left them speechless. It was difficult to take in such a drastically different individual than they were used to seeing. Then, to add to that, the Voss was here as if she were expecting them and what she had said seemed to support this.

“So, does this mean that she’s not going to tell the others, or does it mean that they already know? And, if they do know, then do they know our outcome? Do we win?”

Quintano’s questions came on hard and fast, but no one knew the answers.

A’Den went through the preflight maneuvers. She had tried to keep herself busy in order to stop thinking about what had happened back there, in the woods. She was still shaking from the experience. She shook her head. She couldn’t let it get to her, she was stronger than that.

“Where to next?” A’Den asked as she turned slightly toward Quia.

“Corellia. We’re off to Corellia.”

Chapter: Corellia

“*I*mperial station this is the Blackbird requesting permission to land at Coronet City.”

A'Den's request came over the commlink that she transmitted on a different frequency that she generally used. She wanted to ensure that if this didn't go well then it would be that much more difficult to trace them after they blasted back out of the atmosphere. It was an identity and frequency that tried not to use too often since she knew that it would eventually catch up to her. Until then this ship was the freighter known as the Blackbird.

“Freighter Blackbird, send the appropriate code for clearance and stand by.”

A'Den punched in the required code. It was an old Imperial code, but it still worked. She had used it to get in and out of other Imperial held stations before, not like the military bases, star bases, or even a Corellian Cruiser, but stations such as this one. This was remote enough that the Empire proper wouldn't take notice where as a more heavily fortified section, such as Dromund Kaas or even Korriban would see through her ruse too quickly.

There was a moment of silence that seemed to drag on far too long. The crew of the Ebon Mortis started to wonder if the ruse had failed or if someone actually had done their job and did a cross search on the name and frequency and realized that the Blackbird couldn't possibly exist. Even when the Imperial agent on the side spoke there was still tension that clung in the air.

“Blackbird, your code is valid. Have a pleasant stay.”

Everyone gave a sigh of relief as A'Den maneuvered the Ebon Mortis down toward the planet named Corellia. It would have been all over for them if they weren't able to get to the surface and worse yet if the Empire started to chase them all over the galaxy.

The Ebon Mortis cut through the thin cloud layers of Corellia and the crew was able to see the sights below. All they could do is take in view with an appreciation of what they saw.

The serene azure blue ocean stretched on before them. It was the reflection of the clear blue sky above with a hint of the sun crossing across the water. Like Voss before, there were several aquatic mammals that swam in their pods and breached the waters as the Ebon Mortis flew by.

They flew over snow capped mountains of crystal clear ice. These were jagged peaks that rose majestically into the sky giving dazzling appearances.

A small forest fell across the backside of the mountains. Evergreens were mixed with deciduous trees. This gave the area a mixed color array of green, red, orange, and yellow. It almost seemed as if a fire were raging through the greenery, such was the vibrant color of the leaves.

The fields of farmland rolled over the hills and included multicolor patches of various foods. This gave a patchwork quilt pattern across the land.

As they approached Coronet City they couldn't help but marvel at the wonders that this civilization had to offer. Coronet City was known as the Jewel of Corellia and upon seeing it the crew of the Ebon Mortis could understand why.

There were large spiral buildings that stretched upwards, each with lit up windows giving the appearance of some living thing that was filled with bioluminescence. They could see a large open area zoo and botanical gardens. There were museums of various types. There was also a lifted mag-lev train that snaked from one area of the city to another.

A'Den slowed down the Ebon Mortis. She was in no hurry to land at the spaceport, the very spaceport where the "Blackbird" was supposed to land. They had to get off the radar if they wanted to fetch their prize, and while the city was marvelous and worthy of an exploration in its own right, they neither had the time nor the freedom since they were being hunted from all sides. They needed to get in and out and forget about Coronet City, at least for now. Perhaps when this was all over they would be able to visit, but until then they had a job to do.

As A'Den slowed down, she found a large freighter moving in toward the spaceport. With expert precision she maneuvered the Ebon Mortis

under the belly of the other ship. With this done A'Den was sure that the "Blackbird" would be lost from the radar of the city.

When she was ready, A'Den flipped on the stealth mode of the ship. Just as what had happened each time she had used the retrofitted device, all of the power to the ship started to drain. She watched as the engines, started to diminish in their energy. She watched as their navigation system, their targeting controls, and even their life support all dropped a notch. The controls of the Ebon Mortis were a little sluggish. None of these were of a major concern for now, but it was a reminder that she couldn't keep the stealth mode up for too long.

When she was sure that they had flown far enough toward Coronet City, A'Den banked to the port side and headed for a set of hills that overlooked the city. She brought the ship around the back side of the hills as she turned off the stealth mode knowing that the hills would block the radar in the area.

"Let me guess," Quintano stated. "We have to travel through some horrible swamp."

"No," Quia stated as she took another look at her data pad.

"Gaseous fields?"

"No."

"Sewer dumps?"

"No."

"Nightmare filled forests?"

"No."

"Then where are we going?"

"Over there," Quia responded while she pointed to an area ahead of them and slightly to their port side.

The building stood majestically on the top of the hill and had a view of the city as if it were its guardian. The dwelling was several stories tall and sprawled over a large area with several wings and attachments. There was

a pool in the back of the house surrounded by a garden of flowering trees. Off to one side were two small landing pads where the owner of the house and a guest could store small personal crafts. Off to another stood a building all by itself and if the crew of the Ebon Mortis could guess, it seemed to be a garage for smaller vehicles that could be taken into town.

A'Den kept the Ebon Mortis down low and skimmed across the building. She moved from one section to another keeping her ship tight with the dwelling. She was sure that being this close to the building and the landscape would continue to confuse any radar that might be trying to pick up something in this area.

With each pass of each section, the crew was able to get a better look at their next target. They were able to see if there were any defenses that they needed to take into consideration or even if there was anyone still living there. Any hint that they weren't welcomed and they could easily fly off, not something that they could do once they landed. When A'Den was satisfied that there was no immediate danger, she pulled the Ebon Mortis back around, found one of the landing pads, and landed.

"Now this is more like it," Quintano stated as he stepped outside and took a deep breath of fresh air. "It's not too hot, not too cold. There is no one shooting at us. There aren't any poisonous gasses. There aren't any strange shadows or beasts that we have to worry about. It's just a simple grab and stash operation. I like it."

A'Den gave a smirk as she put her Mandalorian helmet on completing the rest of the suit that she had put on. She wasn't going to let herself be as naïve as Quintano was, she had made that mistake too many times and she was going to make sure that she was prepared. Although the house had no automated defenses and no one seemed to mind that they buzzed the house like they did, A'Den didn't believe for one moment that this would be a simple grab and stash operation. That was why she had insisted on a flyby before landing. Now, she was going to be prepared for anything.

"Bloop...beep...tweet."

"No, sorry Aro," Quintano replied. "Not this time. You need to stay with the ship and see if you can block any radar that might be sent up this way. Also, we need to you track any frequencies in the area that might talk about us or about this location. Oh, and finally, we need you to try to tap into the building's computer system, if it has any. We might need you to

override any security systems that we might come across. And, of course, we need you to watch the ship while we're gone. Got all that?"

"Woo..." The tone from Aro sounded as if the astromech wasn't too pleased with the decision that was made and he was disappointed about being left behind yet again.

Although the building looked spectacular at first glance while they were in the air, this was no longer the case now that they were close up. A good number of the windows were broken. They were destroyed as to be noticed from a distance, but just enough to allow someone to gain entrance through an inner latch or lock. From the looks of things, there had been quite a bit of entrance through these means.

The doors from the back had been forced unlocked, but not forced open. This continued to give credence to their thoughts that whoever lived here, didn't live here anymore. This also gave a suspicion that there could be transients, gang members, or someone desperate enough to try to break into an ancient Sith Lord's house. Whatever the case, the area was isolated enough that no one would come if there were any disturbance at all.

A'Den motioned to the other two as she slowly opened one of the double doors in the back. It gave a loud squeak as if it hadn't been oiled in a long time, and this had probably been the case. With the sound that it had produced there was no longer any element of surprise on their part. If anyone was inside then they now knew that they were coming.

The inside of the once majestic mansion opened to a large living room area, or at least that's what it seemed that it would be if it were furnished. It was not. Whatever the room had for its contents were now gone. There was no furniture, no wall hangings, and not even a rug. It was totally bare, with a few exceptions. There was some graffiti of some gang symbols upon the wall as well as some trash that had been gathered in a couple of the corners. All in all it didn't look too bad but it was only a matter of time before this went totally downhill.

A'Den continued to lead the way with her blasters pulled. She kept her eyes open for any movement and anything that seemed to be out of place, outside the fact that all of the furniture and decorations had been removed. She made sure that each room was secure before moving on to the next one and although Quia had said that her data pad had the

coordinate of being upstairs, A'Den wanted to be sure that the downstairs was secure first before going up.

Each room was the same. There was nothing in them with the exception of some trash. Someone, or a group of individuals, must have come through here and cleaned everything out. There wasn't anything worth of any value left.

The second level up and the third level up offered only the same results. Everything had been cleaned out. The entire house had been completely looted.

The three of them eventually found what they could only imagine to be a great study. The room was one the top floor, center, above the main front door. A set of glass paneled double doors led out to a large outdoor balcony that gave the spectator a wonderful view of the city out and below. This would be the perfect place to sit, reflect, watch the city light up at night, and watch the sunset in the evening. This spot coordinated with the coordinate of Quia's data pad.

"Spread out and search everywhere, I'll keep guard." A'Den had given her order in almost a militaristic command. Although she was sure that the other two had sensed a slight coldness in her voice, she was also sure that they understood. They were all getting tired of having something get the drop on them.

Both Quia and Quintano moved about the room and searched everywhere that they could find. They searched the walls and the floor, since these were the only things to search. It was when Quia moved some of the trash that had accumulated in one area did she announce her find.

"I found something."

"You got it? We're good to go?" Quintano asked with excitement.

"No, not exactly. Look."

Quia moved the trash away from the wall so the others could see what she had discovered. There, behind the rubbish was the one thing she was hoping to find, but not exactly in the condition that she had hoped to find it. The small hidden niche near the floor had been broken into and whatever had been inside was now gone.

“You don’t think that it used to be in there, do you?” A’Den asked, although she already knew the answer, she just didn’t want to have her suspicions confirmed.

“That’s where I would put it,” Quia replied. “See, I would put a desk here and the niche would be right there were I could keep an eye on it.

The others nodded in agreement. That would be the perfect spot, if it hadn’t already been found. Now it was gone and anyone could have it.

“Where do we go from here?” Quia asked.

Quintano had to think. There was something nagging at him at the back of his head. It was as if he knew the answer but it just wasn’t coming to him. He had to take a step back and reexamine the whole situation and imagine himself as part of the process.

“Well, everything is broken into and removed,” Quintano stated while thinking aloud.

“Yes, it looks like it has been looted,” A’Den mentioned stating the obvious since that seemed to be what Quintano was doing.

“So, maybe sold to merchants? Yes, that’s what I would do. Imagine coming across this mansion and no one lived here. If I did, I would do the same. I would loot everything that I could find, especially if I were desperate. Then, I would take it all to the local merchant as quickly as I could before the owner of the house came back. I wouldn’t worry about which merchant, just the first one I could find really. I would need quick credits, so I wouldn’t want to find the best merchant for the best item. The quicker the sale, the better it would be.”

“So? Still, it could be anywhere,” Quia stated adding to the conversation. She hadn’t been able to follow Quintano’s logic. She had never lived on the street; she had always had a home. She had never had to sell anything just to get by.

“So, so no one would know how to get the data out of the holocron and even if they did it would contain a piece of a map that doesn’t make sense and some coordinates in an ancient language. Unless someone was in the know, this holocron wouldn’t make sense.”

“Again, I’m not following.”

“What if a merchant still has it and can’t sell it? What if it’s nothing but a trinket that no one wants? We would have heard from someone if they had it by now. We’ve made enough noise, especially with pirates coming after us. If someone had one of these and knew what it was about, we would have heard from them by now.”

“Do you really think that this is the case?” A’Den asked doubtfully.

“I don’t know, I’m just reaching for anything, false hope I guess. But it’s worth a shot, right?”

“Quintano,” A’Den stated. “Can you get Aro to do a search again, like he did on Hutta? If you are right then the market down there would be the place the search. We can have him do a tight search and hopefully he finds something or we’re back to square one.”

Quintano nodded as he brought up his commlink. “Aro, come in.”

“Boop...bleep...tweet...bzzt.”

“No, no, nothing like that. Now listen.”

“Bop...bop...twist...brlisp.”

“No. Again, please listen. You know how you tapped into the Hutta space station and had them do a scan for you on Hutta? Well, we need you to do that again. Since the holocrons all give off the same frequency, you only have to repeat the process.”

“Bzzt...zzt...bleep.”

“No, just scan the local merchant area below us. It shouldn’t take long. I know it’s a long shot, but it’s the only one we have.”

Aro gave a few more tweets of protest before signing off of the commlink. He wanted to make sure that everyone knew his frustrations about having to stay behind and do all of this work for them. Didn’t they know how difficult it was and how delicate of a procedure it had to be? One slight mess up and he would be caught. Of course he had a lot of practice back on Hypori, but they didn’t need to know that.

The astromech got started with his task. He attached himself into Ebon Mortis's computer bank and then tapped into the communications array. From there he broadcasted his signal straight up the space station that was orbiting the planet. It only took a short time to hack into the space station's system and start his scan.

"He's got a hit. I don't believe it."

Quintano's enthusiasm was echoed by Quia, but not so much by A'Den. She wasn't going to celebrate, at least not just yet. There would be time enough for that after they retrieved the holocron. Until then, there still could be so many different things that could go wrong and she wanted to keep her head and wits about her and be mindful of these events.

But she knew that what she was feeling wasn't just an act of duty to ensure their safety and security. She knew it was the fact that she had been so shaken up from the encounter in the woods that she still felt that she had to focus on something rather than the fact that she had been left in tears once again. She promised herself that this would never happen again, and yet it had.

But it wasn't just her past that had upset her, it was her future. She would be right back where she started the moment that this quest of theirs ended. She was afraid of being alone again. It wasn't that she couldn't make it on her own, it was the feeling of being alone, being unwanted, being unneeded that upset her so much. Perhaps she was trying to be overprotective so that the others would see her usefulness. Perhaps she was doing this to show just how much they needed her.

That was all fine for now, but she didn't know what that would mean for the future. Only time would tell. Until then, she would protect these two to the best of her ability, unlike how she had been able to protect Avidd Sha.

"Where is it?" Quia asked with enthusiasm in her voice.

"According to Aro, it's down there," Quintano stated as he went to the double door bay windows and pointed out. "It's not too far. We could probably hike it."

"Or, we could check out the garage for a speeder," A'Den had stated and when all eyes went to her she merely shrugged. "This suit isn't built to

go hiking in for any length of time, unless you haven't already noticed. I say we check out the garage first and see what we could come up with."

"Locked," Quintano stated the obvious as he tried the electronic keypad one more time.

The garage was in better shape than the house proper. Since there weren't any windows, there were none to be shattered to let in looters. This had led them to believe that whatever was inside was still intact and that hopefully that they would be able to find something that would suit their needs. If not then A'Den was resolved to trek the few kilometers needed.

Just as Quintano was about to pull his blaster to blow the electronic keypad, Quia put her hand out to stop him.

"What about Aro? Can't he try to get us in?"

Quintano had to stop and think. Of course the little droid could, but he hadn't even given him a thought. He had to admit that, although the astromech had proven himself time and time again, he still rarely considered the droid's importance or abilities until they were absolutely needed and even then he would put the droid back into the recesses of his mind. He had to admit that he had excluded Aro from so much of what they had done and he was sure that it all stemmed from not appreciating astromechs in general.

"She's right you know," A'Den said joining the conversation. "There's always time enough to blast something apart, but just remember that if you hit that the wrong way then it could seal us out for good."

Quintano shrugged and gave Aro a call.

"Bleep...bleep...boop...tweet."

"Yes, yes we all know that you are excited to be here," Quintano stated as the astromech rolled up to them. "But, can you get us inside?"

"Xxrt...Zzip...bzzz."

“Now listen here you little bucket of bolts, I ought to...” Quintano stopped and took a deep sigh. He should have known better than to try to have any conversation with this astromech.

When Aro was certain that he had won the battle of wills he turned his attention to the electronic keypad. He extended his armature into the socket and gave the receptacle a few spins. After a short time there was a slight hiss and the door to the garage opened.

“Wow, look at that,” Quia said as she went right up the vehicle that had been hidden behind the garage door.

The inside of the garage was a little dusty with a few cobwebs in the corner, all from neglect. However, outside that, everything else was in excellent condition. There was a workstation with several tools, all hanging in their racks waiting to be used on any vehicle that needed to be fixed. This would include the landspeeder that took up the majority and bulk of the room.

The vehicle was a Tantive IV landspeeder. It was sleek and long and was big enough to hold six crew and two pilots. It was in pristine condition and looked as if it had never been used.

“This is relatively new,” Quia continued. “And look, it’s in great condition. I’ve only seen a few of these on Coruscant and only by the rich or the elite. This Sith Lord must have been known in higher reaches of society. Since it’s a new model, it hasn’t been too long since his disappearance. I wonder what happened to him.”

“I don’t want to wait and find out,” Quintano stated as he jumped into the driver’s seat and started up the landspeeder. “Let’s go get our prize. Wait, Aro, what are you doing?”

“Zxert...bleep...bop...bloop.”

“No, you need to stay behind and...” Quintano stopped. He had just caught himself doing it again. “Alright, alright you can come along. Just stay out of trouble.”

“Woo...woo.”

The drive down to the edge of Coronet City was peaceful and uneventful. They had simply followed a small paved private road that lead from the magnificent mansion toward the city proper. They had been able to drive under deciduous trees that had changed their color and were already in bloom of red, orange, and yellow leaves.

Just as they arrived at the outskirts of Coronet City and were about to join the major road that would have led into the city proper, Quia pointed down a different bearing. Her direction led them to a small road that wound around a bit until it ended at the beginning of a large group of small portable stalls.

From what they could tell, this place was an open market. There were stalls everywhere and far too close to each other that would have made walking among them difficult at best, yet the patrons that were frequenting the market place were doing just that. They were crammed together and bumping into each other making the whole area packed tight. There was no way that the landspeeder was going to fit down the small narrow walkways that were available so it was left behind.

The stalls didn't make any sense, rhyme, or reason to their location to each other. There were stalls that sold odd and cheap jewelry, pottery, dishes, crystals, and clothing. There were small machine parts, and droids, and small ship parts. There were rugs, tapestries, and blankets. There was incense and spices. There were exotic foods and drinks. There were even small animals for sales. There was just about anything that could be thought of and just when the crew of the Ebon Mortis thought that they had seen it all, there was another item that corrected this concept. Finally, when they had thought that they had seen enough, the stalls started up again and again until there were duplicates and triplicates of various stores, shops, and stalls.

All of the items were inexpensive or downright cheap. None of this stuff had any great value, except for a piece or two that the sellers were buying but hadn't a clue of their real value. However, there were mostly items that looked like they were of value, and sometimes peddled as such, but were a cheap knock-off of the original.

Quintano, Quia, A'Den, and Aro all had to walk in single file as they meandered through the crowd. They hardly found any room without via someone for space to move. Some of the crowd gave A'Den a little more room since they didn't want to deal with an upset Mandalorian. Others

crowded Aro, not being able to see him until they were on top of him and almost tripping on him.

Quia had pulled her swords off of her back and carried them in her left hand while reading her data pad with her right. There were just far too many individuals here to trust that her swords would remain with her for any length of time without being snatched and taken away.

A Gamorrean pushed his way through, creating a wake that opened before him and then closed again once he had left. A Geonosian flew from one stall to the next. A Wookiee stood looking at a stall of rugs and nearly took up the whole front counter. Several Rodians were trying to barter with a species that couldn't be seen. A Besalisk was doing business with one of the merchants while his two lower limbs moved items off of the counter and into his pocket without being noticed. Jawas darted in and out of the crowd as did Ugnaughts.

“Are we close?” Quintano asked as he looked from one stall to another not able to see much of anything and a bit of everything.

“The coordinates that Aro gave us says that it should be around here somewhere,” Quia replied.

“Well, where is it?”

“It should be around two meters from here.”

“That means that we're right on top of it. I don't see it...”

“Can I help you? You seem lost. Perhaps in search of something to purchase?”

The voice that had come at them had almost blended into the crowd and almost hadn't been heard. Even once it had registered they had taken the offer of a sale as just another that they had heard far too many times since they had entered. It was Quintano who turned to reject the merchant's offer.

The merchant was a Toydarian. He was about one and a third meters tall and was flying on a set of wings on his back that were in constant motion. His skin color was bluish green. His facial tusks jaunted out of his lower jaw and rose up on each side of his snout. It was easy to see that the

merchant was trying to direct Quintano's attention to his wares with the three fingers on his hand.

The stall was no bigger than a few meters in width and depth. From what Quintano could see, the stall offered a lot of junk for sale, nothing that could be counted as anything of real value, despite what the Toydarian may have thought or may have suggested by the amount of security that he had at his station. The stall offered a mixture of what could already be found around the merchant square and nothing of any real interest or consideration.

Two Gamorrean guards were in the stall acting as sentry over the junk that the Toydarian had to offer. Their bulk took up more room than the rest of the useless items. They were armed with heavy axes and had the look that they were not only willing to use them but were proficient enough to use them properly. They were also armed each with blasters on their hips.

"I have everything you need, no? You'll see. If I don't have it, I can get it, right?"

Quintano's eyes went wide. There, under an old blanket that would have been passed by at a first glance, was the holocron that they were looking for. It was only a couple of meters away. It was so close and yet so far. He nudged the other two to get their notice and pointed towards their prize.

"How much is that cube?"

"How much?" The Toydarian repeated as he rubbed his chin with his hand as if it helped him think better.

"Well, it used to be one thousand Hutt currency, but since word has gotten to me that you are looking for it, I'll make you a deal. It is now two thousand."

"What? That's not a deal. That's more than you started off with. What kind of rip off is this? And you and I both know that no one has been talking about us searching for a trinket like that. What kind of game are you playing?"

“That’s what I call supply and demand. I have the supply and you have the demand. That’s not a rip off, that’s business and I would say that it was good business, very lucrative business, at least for me.”

“Why you little,” A’Den stated as she pulled both of her blasters from their holsters and pointed them at the flying creature. She was tired of all of this that they had been through. She had to admit that the crowd had pushed her patience too far and now she was going to take her frustrations out on the flying piece of dung that stood in their way.

The crowd around them started to panic and pull away from the scene. Various individuals tried to crowd others while some simply tried to get away. A few had taken advantage of the sudden situation and had palmed a few items from a nearby stall and had suddenly disappeared into the crowd.

The two Gamorrean guards had pulled their blasters out as well and had them pointing back at A’Den. Although she knew that she would be a better shot, she was more concerned about the Gamorrean guards missing and hitting the crowd instead. There would be a number of collateral damage before the shooting had stopped.

“Now, now,” the Toydarian stated without so much as a hint of fear in his voice. It was as if he were used to having blasters being pulled on him and it no longer acted as a threat.

“We wouldn’t want any unwanted shootings to happen, now do we? Do you think I’m a fool? Do you think that you are the first to try to simply take things from me? Well, I think you do and that will cost you. Now it’s three thousand.”

A’Den still wanted to blast the head right off of the creature. That might have gotten them into a fire fight and it might make them lose their only chance of getting the holocron, but it would make her feel a whole lot better. She shook her head, no, it wasn’t worth it, or least not yet. She slowly lowered her blasters.

“Fine, will you take credits?” Quintano asked.

“You can’t be serious, are you?” A’Den’s question was very direct. “You aren’t actually going to pay that much to this vile creature, are you?”

“What choice do we have?”

A'Den couldn't give an answer. If they wanted the holocron they would have to pay the creature's price. She shrugged and let Quintano continue.

"Ok, then," Quintano replied back to the Toydarian. "So now the question remains, will you take credits?"

"No, your credits aren't any good here. I'll take Hutt currency."

"We don't have that kind of funding," Quintano answered back.

"Well, bad for you then, huh?. I'm sure I can find a buyer. Do you think that you are the only ones who have come looking for this thing? My offer stands. Take it or leave it."

"We'll be back," Quintano said as he pulled the other two aside and deeper into the crowd that was starting to go about their business again. He didn't want the Toydarian to hear what they had to say.

"We need a plan," Quintano said as he stated the obvious.

"Why don't we just shot the little beast and be done with it?" A'Den asked with a bit of sarcasm. Although she already knew the answer, she was hoping that someone would give her a reason why she could go ahead with her plan instead of paying of the creature.

"Because, then we'll never be able to get out of the marketplace let alone be able to get off of this planet. We'll bring far too much attention to us and we'll lose everything." Again, it was Quintano who pointed out the obvious

"I knew that, I was just being sarcastic. However, I'm still open to blasting his smug smile right off of his face. Can we do that afterwards?"

"Wait," Quintano stated. "I might just have a plan. Aro, remember the time at the gambling hall on Hypori? Well, can you do it again?"

"Boop...xxrt...bleep."

"Fine, but you don't have to be sarcastic about it." With that Quintano turned to the others. "Come on, we have a holocron to purchase."

“Well, looks like you’ve come to your senses. Do you have the Hutt currency?”

“No, but I’m still here to offer you credits,” Quintano replied.

“And I said that I don’t take credits. Perhaps we have some form of miscommunication?”

Quintano shook his head. “No, I heard you the first few times. However, everyone has their price, how about four thousand credits?”

The Toydarian had to stop and think about that. Even he couldn’t pass up that many credits and he could always get that exchanged right away. Why they didn’t want to convert their credits into Hutt currency was beyond him but if they weren’t going to do it, he would do it for them, but for a price of course. And, if they wanted the useless cube that bad then it was time to see just how badly they really wanted it.

“Make it five thousand credits,” the Toydarian countered.

“Four and a half.”

“Fine,” the Toydarian said as he gave into the negotiations. “You got yourself a useless artifact. But let me guess, you don’t have that kind of currency on you and that you have to go fetch it and be right back. You want me to hold it for you. If that’s the case...”

Quintano shook his head. “You are right, I don’t have that on me, but we can transfer it directly into your account. You do have access to your account, don’t you?”

The Toydarian gave a smirk “Of course I do. I’m a Toydarian; I always have access to my account. Not many do, you know.” As he spoke he pulled out a small data pad and placed it on the counter. He put in a few commands before spinning it around for Quintano to use.

Instead of the smuggler gaining access to his account and transferring the credits, it was Aro who came over to use the data pad. He extended his armature and gave a few spins. When he was done, the astromech gave a few beeps.

“Aye, well that would do it,” the Toydarian stated with a happy grin on his face. “One useless cube coming up.”

“So, where did you get all of those credits?” A’Den asked. She had thought that she had known everything about him that she needed to know and if he had this kind of currency on him then she wanted to know about it. “Is it supposed to be a little secret that you have going with your astromech? Are you holding out on us?”

The four of them were trying to meander back toward the merchant square entrance. All they had to do now was make it back to the Ebon Mortis and find out where they had to go from here. They were doing their best to make way with all do haste before the Toydarian came to the realization of just how important this little cube could be.

Quintano shook his head. “No, I’m not holding out on you or on anyone, and no, I don’t actually have those credits. If I did then you wouldn’t have found me on Hypori.”

“But you were able to upload them to the Toydarian’s account.”

“That’s true, but they still weren’t mine.”

“Then who’s...”

“Oja the Hutt. He tried to have me imprisoned on Nar Kreetta while you were chasing me.”

“Yes, I remember.”

“Anyway, I haven’t been the only one who hasn’t appreciated Oja’s hospitality. Aro has been finding ways to upset the Hutt ever since we came to Hypori. The little astromech had been getting himself into a lot of trouble on that planet, on his own accord mind you. One of the things that he had been doing was breaking into Oja’s account. It was nothing major, just a little here and there, just enough to keep Oja guessing as to what was really going on. We had even caught wind that the big slug had suspected one of his employees of skimming off the top of the proceeds. Aro was getting good at it too, until he was almost caught.”

“Oja’s network of accountants had caught the transactions and had almost caught Aro’s meddling. They had traced the transmission all the way back to Hypori before Aro was able to shut down the transmission.

We were pretty sure that the next transmission would result in being caught.”

“Now, we better get going before Oja the Hutt realizes that someone has just stolen four and a half thousand credits from his account. Once he traces the transfer, it will lead him here to this terminal and I don’t want to be anywhere near here when that happens. Although I’m sure that the Toydarian would be able to say that someone else used his terminal, Oja the Hutt probably won’t believe him at first, but eventually I’m sure that Oja will piece everything together and realize that it was us.”

“I don’t know about leaving before Oja arrives,” A’Den stated. “I might want to watch what happens when the Hutt gets angry with the Toydarian. I want to see the little beast have its wings pulled off.”

“Um guys,” Quia stated as she interrupted the conversation from going any further. “We seem to have a problem.”

“What’s that?” A’Den asked as her hands dropped to her blasters.

“Where’s the landspeeder?”

Both A’Den and Quintano had to shake their heads as they came to the spot where they had left it. They both had only now come to the realization that they should have left someone behind to guard it. Now it was going to be a long walk back.

“Where are we heading to next?” A’Den asked as she went through the preflight routine.

Quia checked her translations one more time and cross-referenced them to the star chart once again. She had hoped that she had misread the information and that they were going somewhere else. Instead, she had only confirmed what she didn’t want to know.

“Illum, we’re going to Illum.”

Chapter: Ilum

The Ebon Mortis was slammed yet again and its occupants were jostled about one more time. The whole ship rocked with the force that was raging outside. It was as if the weather wanted to tear the ship apart and if this continued, it might do just that.

The atmosphere of Ilum had been wreaking havoc with the Ebon Mortis the moment that the ship started its descent. There was no getting around the torrent that was oppressing the planet. Very few individuals came here, or at least willingly came here, and so it wasn't common knowledge on how long one of these storms might last. The longest recorded storm lasted for several years and depending on which historian was talked to, the Great Storm of Ilum that had been named Decima, had lasted at least a decade.

The winds howled outside and despite the protection of the ship and its design, the sound still penetrated the ship's hull. It sounded as if some mighty beast was outside and screaming in protest that it wasn't able to break through the ship's outer plating. It also sounded as if the beast wasn't going to give up any time soon.

The Ebon Mortis was slammed again by the prevailing winds and Quia was thrown from her seat. She had attempted to re-buckle her strap to give her some more comfort after the last few jolts shoved her against the contraption. It had been her undoing. Her body flew several feet before her momentum was forcefully stopped by the very hard casing of the navigation system. For one moment she saw stars.

Quia's impact did more than just hurt her; it had also harmed the navigation system itself. The readings that the system was putting out blinked several times and threatened to go out all together before coming back online. This instrument was their only saving grace and without it they were flying blind.

"Get back into your seat," A'Den shouted above the racket that was generated by the storm outside. She grabbed the controls harder and tried again to get them under control.

Quintano undid his strap and made his way to Quia. Every step he took had to be supported by gripping one control panel or another. Each

moment was a turbulent ride that threatened to knock him down as well. It took longer than expected and it was more difficult than would have otherwise have been.

With the help of Quintano, Quia was able to make it back to her seat and re-buckle. It no longer mattered if she was comfortable or not. The throbbing on her head from where she had impacted the control panel was enough of a reminder that the buckle wasn't so bad after all.

Aro let out a series of tweets and buzzes, giving warning and distress signals that no one was listening to. He had started the moment they had entered the atmosphere and after a short time everyone had thought that the astromech was just upset that it wasn't piloting the ship. Now things were different. He was already losing his magnetic integrity in his legs. The storm outside was messing with his electronics and the series of battering winds were trying to toss him about. It was only a matter of time before he lost all integrity and was thrown across the cabin just like Quia had been.

The ice storm outside had been so thick that they had lost visibility the moment they entered it. There had been nothing but a whiteout with no hope of any break in sight. If they were going to land, they were going in blind.

Fortunately they were able to rely on their navigation system to get them through the whiteout winter electrical blizzard. Unfortunately the electrical systems were being disrupted by the lightning outside. Quia's crash into the navigational system didn't help matters. All of their radar equipment was fading in and out. There were shadows on their screen that would be there one moment and gone the next. Nothing made sense and at times they really were flying blind.

Another bolt of lightning flashed in front of them and it was strong enough to cut through the whiteout and light up the inner cockpit of the ship. The glare was also strong enough to temporarily blind those that were trying to fly their ship and everyone had to cover their eyes.

With the bolt came the electromagnetic blast. Although unseen, it wasn't unfelt. Several circuits along the stations blew and sent showers of electrical sparks into the air. Even Aro, with his electromagnetic shielding, suffered damage and several of his circuits blew as well. Several of the screens turned black from the intense heat that had been generated and a small fire broke out across the targeting system.

“Aro, the fire!” Quintano shouted above the noise from outside.

Quintano hadn't needed to bother. The astromech was already on the scene and was spraying down the section with co2. This was one of his main functions as an astromech, to put out fires and repair the damage across the ship as needed. Once the fire was out, he would start working on repairing the fried electronics.

The ship buckled one more time. Alarms started to go off. The lights flickered until they powered down leaving the cabin in darkness for a brief moment. Then, the red emergency lights kicked on and left the area covered in a red glow.

“Life support is gone. There are minor electrical issues across the whole ship. Navigations are almost gone. Targeting is offline. Weapons are down. Hyper drive is damaged.” A'Den was listing one damaged piece of equipment after another.

“I am tempted to say ‘To Hell’ with your quest and turn this ship around.” A'Den continued as she fought with the controls once again. “The only problem is, with the amount of damage we've taken and the fact that we'll have to pass back through that storm, I don't think we'll make it through. I doubt this ship is space worthy any longer. We'll have to make some major repairs once we land. This means we're going down rather we want to or not, rather we like it or not. So, hang on.”

For one brief moment the storm cleared. A'Den was as much confused as relieved. It was to her horror when she found out why the storm wasn't so bad. They had just dropped into the backside of a mountain and were being temporarily shielded. The problem was, they were now way too close and at the speed they were going, they were going to splatter across the hard unforgiving side of a glacier.

A'Den turned the controls hard to the right, banking sideways. The ship spun on its axis and flipped with its starboard side wing down. Its belly became exposed to the glacier as the ship flew sideways in A'Den's attempt to give them more room between the glacier peaks.

A'Den, Quintano, and Quia all fell sideways in their seats and if they hadn't been buckled up they would have been flung to the side of the ship. Their bodies pushed against their restraints and the straps threatened to cut off their circulation.

The belly of the Ebon Mortis skimmed against one glacier as the top skimmed across another. The whole ship just barely fit between the two glaciers and even then the hull hit enough rock and ice to send an avalanche spiraling down.

A'Den banked hard to the right again, sending the Ebon Mortis into a slight spiral spin. The ship just barely struck the next pillar of stone as it moved away from the mountain top. The Ebon Mortis shook under the impact and all of the occupants aboard were now concerned that the integrity of the hull was soon going to be compromised if it hadn't been already.

The ship's engines were too hot for the next glacier that was passed by. The glacier became superheated and as it was, it snapped, cracked, and split wide open. Huge chunks of ice, rock, and debris shot everywhere in an awesome explosion that rocked the area. Two more avalanches were started by the sound alone and another was started by the flying debris.

A'Den fought with the controls again and righted the ship. She could feel the wind continue to fight against her with every move she made. Her muscles strained. Sweat came out across her forehead.

Then it happened. The Ebon Mortis came out of the worst of the storm and came underneath it. Although the wind was still bad and the echoes of the thunder from the lightning could still be heard, the ship was easier to handle. The promise of a crash was no longer a threat. All she had to do now was find that clearing that they had found on the geo-map.

The whiteout cleared and the scene before them was worse than they had expected. All about them were mountains that reached well into the clouds and it was nothing short of a miracle or at least a tribute to A'Den's piloting skills that they had made it through alive. Only now did they realize how foolish it was to try to navigate through this mountainous range and only someone who was completely familiar with the terrain or someone suicidal would even try. There was nothing but mountains in all directions and it had crossed everyone's minds of just how difficult it was going to be to get out of here.

Every mountain was covered with snow and ice which only aided in their disappearance and camouflage into the rest of the landscape. Any snow storm would completely hide this mountainous range. However, the ice and glaciers that were covering the mountainside weren't like any other

that the crew of the Ebon Mortis had seen. There were large white blue ice crystals, easily the size of the Ebon Mortis or even larger, sticking up through the mountain sides. Some were like spikes while others the shape of crystals, all were thick enough to tear a ship apart if it were to get too close.

All across the ground, near the base of the mountains, there were more of these crystals as if to give a warning or to act as a protection against intruders. It was difficult to tell, even this close up, if these crystals were just an ice formation or if they were mineral crystals that were forming or a combination of the two. Either way, travel by foot anywhere near the mountains was going to be difficult at best and at worst, impossible.

The large crystals continued to make their appearance known all across the tundra here between the mountains, although not as compact as near the mountains. With some maneuvering and a sharp eye look out, the Ebon Mortis would be able to find a place to land among them, but the landing couldn't be haphazardous as this would result in ripping the ship to shreds.

There were snow rises and glacier runoffs. There were snow drifts. There were rock formations that cut through the ground at odd angles, some large enough to land on.

A'Den breathed a sigh of relief. If they hadn't cleared the whiteout then they would have been in danger of slamming into the jagged terrain below. Now, all she had to do was try to land on top of one of the large flat rocks that were jaunting upward but at a low enough angle to not be a threat of dumping the ship off the moment they landed. It didn't take long for her to find one.

A'Den continued to fight with the controls as she maneuvered the Ebon Mortis into a landing. The crosswinds here were fierce, and although they weren't as bad as the winds higher up in altitude, they were still bad enough to throw a ship this size against the large crystalline shapes, a disaster that would happen if one were to relax after coming out of the storm. With her last bit of will, sitting on her last bit of nerve, she finally brought the ship to rest on the only structure that would support it without cutting it to shreds. She gave a final sigh of relief as she started to power down the engines.

“I know that we are saving the galaxy and all but I hope this is all worth it and that there is at least some treasure that has enough monetary value to fix up this ship or you two will owe me a new one.”

A'Den's comment went unanswered as both Quintano and Quia were just both glad to still be alive. Yet, their concerns started to echo the words that hadn't been said. Each planet seemed to be more and more dangerous than the last. It was getting difficult to believe that they would even survive long enough to get the maps to figure out how to stop a militant group from getting a power source that they were having more and more difficulty believing was actually real. It wasn't that the clues hadn't been specific enough, it was just easier to imagine warm food, a comfortable bed, and good ale rather than risking their lives over something that no one else either cared about or believed in. It was easier to give up than to continue. Yet, they knew that somewhere, deep in their character, they would never give up until they found and secured this power source, rather it was real or not.

“The systems show that it's below freezing out there,” Quia stated as she looked over one of the control panels that were still blinking in and out. “We'll have to use the thermal wear we used on Hoth.”

This was a given seeing how they had just flown through a blizzard whiteout snowstorm and had landed on a field of glaciers, ice, and snow. Yet, Quia wanted to make sure that everyone was aware that this was a climate to be taken seriously. She had studied enough about Ilum and the importance that it had with the various wars throughout the years to know that even in the best of conditions, too many individuals had frozen to death and that was if they were fortunate.

“Don't forget about the predators,” Quia continued. “There are creatures here that have thick hides and are used to the cold. A simple blaster won't put them down. To them, you are just food. Then there might be pirates, junk raiders, and ...”

“We get it,” A'Den snapped. “It's a dangerous place. Don't worry; I have no intention on turning into an icicle or a meal for some beast. Let's just get this piece of the map and then move on to the last one.”

A'Den's mood wasn't pleasant. She had just blindly flown their craft through some of the most horrible weather she had ever known and had just prevented them from bouncing off of the mountains. She didn't want

to be lectured on how dangerous this was, she already knew first hand and the quicker they got off of this planet the better.

The three of them moved deeper into the ship to find the rooms that they had each picked to sleep and store their personal equipment. Here they would find the gear that they would need for the freezing cold weather outside and it didn't take long before they were all ready at the entry ramp.

“Stay with ship, Aro,” Quintano stated as he started to leave.

“Whirl...click...click...beep...zzzt.”

“Because the electrical storm that we are having will continue to pound your electrical magnetic shielding until it fries your insides. If we don't get the navigations back up online, we'll have to rely on your systems. It's best to use the ship's shielding to help prevent any further damage to you while you fix the ship.”

“Beep...beep...whirl...woo.”

“No, that's not the only reason why we have you around. Of course I don't want you fried simply because you might be our only chance to get us out of here. Look, just stay with the ship and fix it, ok? The terrain is horrible, you'll get snow into all of your systems, your insides will freeze, and besides, there's enough damage across the whole ship that will keep you busy. Now stay behind and fix the ship. We'll be back soon.”

“Woo.”

Quintano ignored that last comment. This was exactly why he never wanted an astromech in the first place. Without looking back toward the droid, he walked down the landing plank to join the others.

The frigid cold weather hit them like a fist, even through their protective layers. Unlike Hoth, a place that was just very cold, this was the coldest planet known to them and there didn't seem to be anything they had or even could have that would keep them warm. They immediately realized that they had to find this piece of the map quickly and any delay would be disastrous.

Just as the cold was cutting through their clothing layers, the glare of the snow and ice were cutting through their protective goggles. With each

bolt of lightning that transpired, the whole place lit up. The flashes of light would have been blinding to them without the dark goggles, but even with them, it was sometimes difficult to see.

Quia took out her data pad and did a quick scan. She didn't want the delicate piece of equipment exposed to the icy air for too long. She also didn't want it exposed to the electromagnetic disturbances that they were having due to the electrical storm overhead. If they lost her data pad or the information that they had stored inside of it became corrupt then their quest was over. Even with their backup copies and with Aro's help, it would still take time to get back into the search, and time wasn't on their side. Not only could it get colder, but the wind could kick up and the overhead storm could be down upon them. They had a very small window of opportunity and it was now or never.

As it was, the data pad flickered in and out and she had to strike it twice to get it up and going. She took another look at the eight overlaid maps and the notes that were on them. With each map needed to find the next, this was the only way to find the next map.

"About three clicks in that direction," Quia stated, muffled through the clothing that was covering her face.

A'Den had to shake her head. The direction where Quia was pointing ended in about two clicks at the base of the mountains. If her readings were correct, then the holocron that held the next map was deep within the mountain itself. On top of this, they would have to walk the full two clicks through deep snow, snow banks, and uneven terrain. With a sigh of resolve she started out, leading the others toward the mountain range in front of them.

The going was rough at best. The ground beneath the snow was all broken and uneven. With the snow packs there was a misconception that the terrain was more even than it was and after a few yards into the trek, it was found out to be otherwise. The three of them were constantly finding and falling into snow drifts. Some of these pitfalls were easily overcome without too much problems while there were other times when someone would fall waist deep and would need help with getting pulled out.

The sky overhead never did clear. The whiteout could be seen from here and the three of them had to admit that they had never seen the underbelly of a blizzard and now they had they hoped to never see it again. The sky above them continued to dance with white swirls as snow

and ice were being whipped about overhead. Lightning would continue to flash every once in a while, lighting up the whole scene. It was just a reminder that they had to fly through that one more time in order to leave. Failure to make it through would mean being stuck here until it cleared. That would be a death sentence since it was cold enough to freeze over their ship and the fact that they didn't have enough supplies to last long in this weather. They would have to make it through the first time.

As they continued, the three of them had to circumnavigate several large chunks of exposed rock slabs that stuck out from the ground for no apparent reason. This slowed their progress even further and by the time they reached the base of the mountain they were already exhausted from a trip that would have otherwise have been easy.

The mountain towered high above them and disappeared into the overhead blizzard above. It rose almost vertically as it continued to climb into the sky. Here, at its base, there were several large boulders that had come crashing down from the last landslide as well as large pieces of hardened snow and ice from the last avalanche. On top of this, there were several large crystals that stood at various angles, pointing way up into the sky. They had come to the end of their trek and there was nowhere else to go.

A'Den gave an inquired look toward Quia to make sure that she was reading her data pad correctly or that she had translated the archaic language appropriately. There was a part of her that was tired of this whole thing and that this was their dead end. She didn't get the response that she wanted.

"I'm showing a cavern system inside. The opening must be blocked by the last avalanche."

A'Den gave the whole situation a once over. The snow and ice had precariously fallen in such a way that any wrong move would collapse another avalanche upon them. They had blasters; this needed a crew with lifter bots, drills, and loaders. It would take days, even with all of them.

That was it. A'Den was done. Now they had come as far as they could go, there was no going forward. It was time to finally give up this quest and let someone else deal with the possible threat to the galaxy over some possible power source. With a turn, she started to walk back toward the Ebon Mortis.

“Hey look,” Quintano stated. “The crystals held back enough of the avalanche. If I can just...”

The rogue smuggler squatted down and turned sideways. He pushed his body through the small, tight hole and after a short bit he was able to wiggle his way through. It was a short time later that he voice could be heard from within the cavern system inside.

“It’s a bit snug, but I’m in.”

Quia turned to A’Den, gave a shrug and followed Quintano. She easily found the route that he had taken. There was a small area between a few of the large crystals that had held back the avalanche. It would have easily gone unnoticed and in a year or two, or at least the next avalanche, this would also be completely covered and inaccessible. With a little bit of work she was able to squeeze through.

A’Den resigned herself to give the expedition another try. All they had to do is find this one and one more. However, she wasn’t going to stand for any more disappointments. They had been through so much and it had only been one clue leading to another with no real proof that their quest was real. Everything just led to more questions and more damage to her ship.

A’Den shook her head. It was all just getting to her. What she needed to do was finish what was in front of them and go from there. With resolve, A’Den was able to push her way through the opening and into the cavern beyond.

With the ice and snowstorm overhead and the thick ice avalanche that blocked the way, there was little to no light in area beyond. Quintano had already turned on his flashlight and Quia was starting to dig hers out. A’Den followed suit but made sure that she kept one hand on her blaster at all times.

What used to be here was hard to tell. Everything was covered in a thick layer of ice. The tunnel probably used to be a carved out hallway but was now an icy shaft. The thick ice had grown to such a degree that they could only move down it while walking single file. There were no footholds or handholds along the way so walking was slow.

There were various tunnels that led off from the main one and Quia had to stop and check her data pad and then recheck the offshoot path.

She could only guess where those smaller paths went off to. A few of them she could tell just wouldn't get them to where they were going; others she just decided to stay on the main path. There were others that were completely frozen and wouldn't allow any form of ingress without completely excavating them.

After a trek that went far too long the three of them were able to come to the end of the main tunnel. Here it dumped into a fairly large cavern.

Like the rest of the tunnels that environment that they had just gone through, this cavern was frozen over in so many places that it was difficult to get the full aspect of the area. But what they were able to see left them in awe. There were computers and a wide variety of machines that lined the walls. All of the equipment was frozen over enough to prevent them from being of any use but not enough to see their detail.

There were many different tubes, large enough to hold a normal sized individual, similar to bacta tanks. These were all hooked up to the various machines and computers. At first this had looked as if it might have been a sick bay of some sorts, but then after seeing the images inside the tubes, the crew of the Ebon Mortis was able to see the truth about them.

"They are all the same," Quia stated. "It's the same individual in each one."

"Clones," A'Den stated.

She knew about clones, her whole family did. There had been an attempt to start up a new clone factory and her family had been asked to be part of the program since the original base pattern was no longer alive. The Empire had stated that there was still a clone of the original base pattern, but they couldn't take a clone to make a clone. They needed an original D.N.A. base pattern. They said that her family should be proud to have been chosen. Of course her parent said 'no'. She was young when her parents had been asked. It was right before they disappeared.

"I don't get it," Quintano stated. "Why would a Sith Lord want more versions of himself?"

"Psychic transfers," Quia answered. "If each Sith Lord was looking for a way to prolong his life until technology caught up with, then this one was probably trying to clone himself and then transfer his soul from one to another as needed."

“Well it doesn’t look like he was able to get around finishing his project. Come on, let’s look for ...” Quintano stopped his suggestion the moment the beam of his flashlight hit the back end of the chamber.

There, against the far wall, was a throne that would give a view to everything here in the room; that was if all of the lights were on. Upon the floor, next to it was a skeleton with its right arm outstretched on the ground. In its skeletal hand was the holocron.

“Let’s just get that and get out of here, quickly.” Quintano’s voice has a bit of concern in his tone. He wasn’t always so easily shaken, but this had struck a nerve, probably because of all of what they had already been through. As much as he hated to have to admit, his mind was already running wild with the thoughts of that corpse getting back up and attacking them.

It was A’Den who had walked over and snatched the holocron from the grasp of the cold dead hand of the Sith Lord. She could almost see the irony in it. She was sure that the Sith Lord’s thoughts had been that the only way that the holocron would be taken from him would be from his cold dead hand and here she was doing that very same thing.

Their trip back through the ice tunnel was faster than when they had originally come through. All they had to do was to focus on getting out. It was a straight shot and then through the opening. From there it was only a small hike back and they would be gone.

The squeeze through the avalanche was easier than it had been when they first came through. They had already widened the opening as they had entered and it was wider at this point which made it less difficult to start their exit. It didn’t take long to finally reach the outside.

“Now all we have to do is...” A’Den was never able to finish her sentence.

The ground shook as if a mini quake was striking in the immediate area. Glaciers around them cracked and split. The sound of the breaking ice echoed across the area and was magnified back and it sounded as if the whole mountain side was going to collapse around them. Then it happened.

Various avalanches from one mountain to another started. Tons of snow, rock, ice, and large crystals fell from their perches and combined with more debris until a half a dozen or so mountains were covered with falling debris, barreling down upon the tundra. As it all crashed to the ground, they shot up ice into all directions. Large crystal pieces were shattered by the downfall and shattered as well. It felt as if the whole ring of mountains would come crashing down and fill this very spot.

Rock slabs that were sitting at their odd angles slipped and started to fall. Snow banks shifted and fell into crevasse. Holes opened up all across the tundra.

Suddenly the ground burst open and from the new hole came a beast from their nightmares. The creature was easily twenty feet wide and as it came out from its burrow, it was difficult to tell just how long the beast was, but it was already towering over the three of them. Its body was mostly white, to blend in with its surroundings, with the exception of a light blue coloring across the base of its scales. The top portion of the giant worm ended with facial horns that jaunted out, ending in sharp deadly points.

“An ice worm?!” A’Den questioned Quia out of almost sheer panic. “I thought they were extinct. You’re the historian. Shouldn’t you warn us about these things?”

“I thought they were extinct as well. They were hunted for their tough scales; they’re strong enough to hold back a blaster fire.”

“So in other words,” Quintano stated. “We don’t stand a chance.”

Ignoring Quia’s warning and Quintano’s negativity, A’Den drew both of her blasters and started to fire away. Her aim was perfect, and how could she miss? The thing was huge, and even though it moved about, its movements weren’t that difficult to track and its size made it almost impossible to miss.

Quintano followed suit. He had watched A’Den’s blasters bounce off of the creature’s hide even as he reached for his weapons. He was sure that with his added fire power they would be able to pierce through the tough scales that covered the beast, or perhaps they would get lucky and hit a soft, vital spot.

Their fire power did nothing to slow the worm down and hardly even phased it. If the creature was even bothered by being shot at, then it didn't even show it. Instead the mighty beast pulled back half of its body. Then, with all of its strength it lunged forward. As it did, its mouth opened wide.

For one moment fear had gripped the three of them. A'Den, Quintano, and Quia could all see the various rows of sharp teeth that became exposed. The multiple circular rows of teeth spiraled around the creature's mouth and descended slightly into the beast's throat so there would be no way of escaping a horrible and painful death.

The beast lunged forward to capture its prey. Its mouth was wide enough to swallow any one of them whole. Death descended upon its prey.

Quia broke right. She knew that she didn't have anything that she could use to harm the giant ice worm. Even if she did use the lightsaber, which might do more damage, she would still have to make her way over broken terrain, slick ice and jagged rocks just to make it to the beast. She had no footing. All she could do was stay out of the way and hope that Quintano and A'Den could take care of the ice worm.

Quintano rolled to his left. He found a massive jagged piece of solid rock covered with ice to use as cover. Knowing that the ice worm would have to eat at least half of the slab of granite just to get to him, Quintano was certain that he was fine, at least for the time being. With this in mind, he started to open a new barrage of fire.

Quintano's blasts were focused upon the ice worm's mouth in hopes that the inside of the worm wasn't as impenetrable as its outsides were. He hoped that he would be able to at least hit a tender spot. He was wrong. None of his blasts had any effect upon the ice worm with one exception. The worm now knew where he was.

A'Den took to flight. She ignited her jet back and let it carry her upward and around the ice worm. She kept herself just out of reach of the beast, although she really had no idea just how big the thing was and how far it really could reach. With this in mind, she gave herself plenty of room while keeping her controls on the forefront of her consciousness. If the ice worm did spring forward, she would have enough time to react and pull further back, or at least she hoped that she would.

Seeing that her blasters weren't having any effect, A'Den slammed them back into her holsters and pulled out her EE 3 Carbine rifle. With range on her side and a heavier weapon, she opened fire. A'Den shot blast after blast.

The shots struck the ice worm with force and power. Pieces of its armor plating scales flew off under the onslaught of the weapon. The ice worm let out a howl of pain and discomfort, but only that. It wasn't hurt enough for it to be fatal. It wasn't hurt enough to be wounded. But it was hurt enough to now have its fullest attention be directed toward A'Den. Now it was angry.

The ice worm thrust forward toward the flying Mandalorian and snapped its great maw down upon the area where she used to be. Then it turned and snapped again and again, each time one step behind the individual that had caused it pain. He had her on the run and it was enough to stop her from firing but it wasn't enough to put an end to her, at least not yet. She would have to come down sometime and when she did it was sure that she would be the first to fall.

"Get out of there!" A'Den yelled at Quia and Quintano. The two of them had been pinned down and they had nowhere to go. Now that the ice worm was going after her, the other two had a chance to get on the move. But it wasn't just their safety that she was concerned about. She had a plan and that plan included those two to move out of the way.

With all due haste both Quia and Quintano bolted from their positions. They didn't have to worry about A'Den since she was able to fly and as long as she could keep the ice worm's attention then they could make a break for the Ebon Mortis. This they did. They moved as quickly as they could over the broken terrain. They plowed through the snow and helped each other off the ice. There was a long way to go and time wasn't their ally.

A'Den flew back toward the mouth of the cave and let the ice worm close rank. She wanted to ensure that the beast was close enough for her plan to work. As soon as she was as close to the cave entrance as possible and as soon as the ice worm was as close to her as she felt comfortable with, then she focused on her targeting system. A'Den wasn't sure that her missile would do any form of direct damage to the ice worm that would put it down for good, and she wasn't so sure that she would be able to target the creature with it moving about as it was, but she had a

different idea, one that just might work. When she was satisfied with her shot, she launched her missile.

The projectile flew upward and struck its target. The massive sheet of ice and rock exploded in an array of debris that flew in all directions. At first the rubble flew upwards, and then it came down and with it everything that stood in its way.

The resulting avalanche started to pick up speed and momentum. It built up mass. It became a living, breathing thing that bore down upon its prey below it. It roared. It screamed. It tumbled. It came.

A'Den waited until the last second as the ice worm made its lunge toward her. Then, she shot out of her spot with as much speed as she could muster from her jetpack. The roar of her engines against the icy backdrop only increased the mass of the avalanche.

A'Den flew out of the area just as the avalanche struck. Its impact was devastating and filled with power. It slammed into the space where A'Den used to be and where the ice worm was now. It fell and fell and fell. It thundered down from above and buried the area in tones of rubble.

The Mandalorian continued her flight toward Quia and Quintano. She gave a cursory look back to ensure that nothing was breaking through the fallen debris, to make sure that the ice worm was no longer a threat. A'Den gave a sigh of relief when she saw nothing emerge from the avalanche.

The three of them continued their trek back to the Ebon Mortis. They continued to make their way around the jagged slabs of granite that thrust up out of the ground. They continued to sludge through deep snow banks.

Their journey was exhausting. Their journey toward the cave initially had taken so much out of them and then the fight with the worm had taken its toll. This would have been easier if the environment was warmer and their bodies weren't utilizing so much energy to keep them warm from the cold. This would have been easier if they didn't have to push so hard through the snow banks. As it was, the journey was grueling.

The Ebon Mortis stood like a beacon, like a refuge from the unbearable environment. They couldn't wait to get inside and get warm. They

couldn't wait until they could lie down and rest, and when the door closed behind them and they gave a sigh of relief.

"Aro," A'Den said as she plopped down in the pilot's chair. "Let's get us out of here."

"Boop...beep...xxrt."

"Just off of this planet. Quia can figure out where we are going as we take off. Is everything fixed?"

"Bzzt...xxrt...bleep."

"Listen, I don't have the time or the patience for your mouth. Now just get this ship airborne."

Aro heard what A'Den had said and didn't say. He had known just how to push everyone's buttons. Now, he was at risk of pushing them too far. He quit his chatter and went to work.

The Ebon Mortis roared to life. It rumbled with power. It started to take off.

The ship suddenly came to an abrupt stop. Its violent cessation caused the crew of the Ebon Mortis to be flung forward and be thrown against bulkheads and computer banks. The ship just sat there, in midflight, unable to maneuver any further. Even when A'Den gave the ship a little more thrust, the Ebon Mortis didn't budge.

Quintano staggered his way toward the airlock, the door that he had only recently entered through. The ship sat at an angle, held in position and it was difficult to walk in a straight line, directly toward his goal. Once there he opened the portal to see what was keeping them grounded.

"I see our problem," Quintano yelled toward the front of the ship. "It's that worm! It's got us by the wing! We can't stabilize to get the thrusters in the right spot!"

"Damn it!" A'Den stated as she slammed her fist onto the console. "Why won't that thing die?"

Quintano reached for his blaster again, but then stopped. He already knew that his weapons wouldn't be effective against the creature. He

needed a new strategy. Then, his eyes saw it. With a new plan in mind he quickly made his way to the cockpit.

“Aro! Open up the exterior speakers. No, don’t ask questions, just do it. Attach them to the amplifiers and crank them up full blast.”

“What in the world are you doing?” A’Den asked.

“No time to explain. Quia, get ready with your vorpal blade.”

“But why...”

A’Den was able to piece together the plan before Quintano was able to reply. “Because your sword, at that frequency, amplified will be enough to crack through the ice as if it were crystal. I’m already boosting the power supplies through the amplifiers and refocusing the outer speakers to direct their output to only one location. It should be enough. Ready?”

Quia gave a nod as she pulled one of her sonic blades from its sheath. She had never thought about using the weapon’s sonic ability as a weapon. It was only a secondary effect of the way the blade vibrated to cut through its target. At the signal she activated her weapon.

The sound produced sonic blast that cut through the air. With it being amplified, the sound sent one shock wave after another outwards from the ship. The sound waves struck the ice field with force and power. They vibrated the brittle ice until the ice sheet could take no more.

There was a thunderous clap as one crack after another snaked through the ice field. It snapped and popped as it broke asunder. The cracks grew and snaked away from the Ebon Mortis until their integrity gave way.

The ice worm let out a scream of frustration as the very ground beneath it broke apart. That scream released its grasp from the Ebon Mortis and sent the monstrosity falling into the chasm that had been created.

Without the weight of the ice worm holding on to the ship, the Ebon Mortis was able to fly off to safety.

The trip back through the snow storm wasn't as bad going in. Since they had no idea what the planet looked like going down, they had to take it slowly. Now, all they had to do was go up, and A'Den wasted no time in taking the ship beyond the planet's atmosphere.

"Getting ready to make the jump to hyperspace, just let me know the coordinates when you're ready," A'Den stated.

"The last one is on Raxus Prime."

"Oh?" Quintano stated. "We're in luck. I might know someone there who owes me a favor."

Chapter: Raxus Prime

The thick smog parted as the Ebon Mortis was expertly piloted and cut its way through the disgusting atmosphere that surrounded the planet. The billowing smoke and smog combined with the cloud cover was threatening to cut off the light from the sun above and was in the process of choking out the remaining life on the planet below. At times the smog was so bad that it hid the visibility of incoming ships and even their presence on the radar, as it was doing now.

Quia had informed them that during the hottest parts of the day was when the smog would be the thickest and would wreak the most havoc on radar and visibility. It would be far easier to enter the atmosphere during this time than any other. Of course that worked both ways. If no one could see them, then they couldn't see anyone else. This meant that they would be flying in blind.

There were a few moments where navigations by computer or by sight were gone. They simply cruised into the smog without knowing what might also be inside. For all they knew, there could be other pilots trying the same stunt. There could be large towers that could be hit. At any moment they could smash into an unknown item and have their journey end real fast.

It was almost a relief when they came out of the smog bank. They had thought that they would have a better sight at least. They were wrong.

Raxus Prime had been called the junkyard of the galaxy. Everyone had heard that. Everyone had different thoughts of what it meant, since only the individuals who ever had the displeasure of going there had ever found out. What they saw was beyond any concept that they had imagined.

There were a few metal towers scattered about, standing above the surface of the planet. Each of these seemed to be made haphazardly with old ship haul pieces and plating from various other items. The whole "city", if it could be called that, was nothing but a patchwork material from random pieces. Nothing looked structurally sound and it seemed that every building would collapse under its own weight and add to the junk piles that were beneath them.

Each tower was coned to each other through a series of enclosed walkway and sky bridges that allowed individuals to travel from one to the other without venturing outside and from the looks of things it was best if the major population remained inside. Like the buildings that they were connecting, these sky bridges were also a patchwork of random shielding, plating, and metallic framework that was disjointed and slapped together without rhyme or reason.

Littering the ground for as far as the eye could see were piles of junk. There were scrap metal, broken ships, and industrial metal debris. It was as if the entire galaxy had decided to dump everything metal, computerized, or mechanical that was no longer wanted or needed, here to rust away. Some of these piles were half the size of the buildings, piled so high that they threatened to topple over, and by the looks of things some already had. These piles were a hodgepodge of pieces that had no order or resemblance to each other. These unwanted pieces of junk were just dumped on whatever pile seemed to be steady enough to hold another load. It was said that this is the place where droids go to die and from the looks of things, this was probably true.

There were shipping freighters and barges that had docked themselves, hovering in one place, above several of these piles. Here, the freighters were opening their bottom bay doors and dropping their load of garbage and refuse upon the already sky-high piles beneath them. The sky, in places where these ships were, was raining metal fragments, ship pieces, computer parts, broken droids, and every waste material that could be imagined.

There were computer operated cranes with large claws which swung from one pile to the next, picking up massive amounts of junk parts. This would disrupt the piles and send a few of these crashing to the ground. The crane claws weren't very effective and many of them would lose half of their load before finishing their journey to their destination.

Each trash heap that was picked up was dropped close to recycle and reclamation buildings. Here, workers would pull out pieces that could be reused and made into other things. Computer parts would be separated and placed into bins. Specialty parts would be gathered. Anything that was still partially functional would be collected, bagged, and tagged for resale, some for "as-is" while others needed some form of labor or upgrade to get working again.

Everything else that was unusable was sent to the conveyor belts that would lead to the smelting bays. Metal pieces would bounce along from one belt to another, mostly falling off and needed to be put back on by a worker or a labor droid. Then, when they reached their destination, they would be dropped into the smelting bays to be melted down and cooled into blocks of metal that could be sold or manufactured into other parts.

Although the system of this recycling seemed to be ideal, as was its initial plan, the fact was these processing and smelting plants were very inefficient. The reclaimed metals that they produced weren't pure and so many of their products had massive flaws. There had been reports of ship hulls that broke apart while a ship was in mid-flight, reports of droids malfunctioning, shield plating that would have weak spots and would melt when exposed to temperatures that the whole plating should have been able to withstand, and finally there were weapons that simply exploded upon usage.

To make matters worse, the factories, reclamation plants, and processing plants didn't follow any protocol when it came to environmental practices. Huge plumes of thick black smoke billowed out from large smoke stacks. The sky was continually filled with the carbon dioxide fumes and carbon monoxide that was being pumped into the atmosphere which continued to hang and give the planet a perpetual and artificial cloud cover. Sunlight was blocked out and the entire feel of the planet felt like it was under oppression. What little illumination there was from the sun was filtered down until there was a light red glow, the only sign that it was still day.

To further add to the pollutants, the processing plants were also pumping out toxic waste streams full of poisonous runoffs. Slag and dross, unwanted and unused byproducts of the smelting, would flow out of these building and begin to pool. There were small ponds and lakes that were created full of melted rust and liquid waste and heavy metal pollutants. These were hazardous areas, not only being full of toxins that would destroy any living creature that would enter the lake or drink from it, but the poisonous fumes that escaped the area was deadly enough to kill any who got close. There were warning signs that these were dangerous places, but they had been knocked over and the fences that had been constructed were weak, rusted, broken, or no longer in existence. There was really no warning for any who were ignorant.

The processing plants also didn't follow any labor practices either. There were no real safety protocols to follow except for one and that was

to “watch your head; there are others that want your job.” There was no recourse for anyone that was harmed, maimed, or even killed while on the job. The supervisors didn’t tolerate “sloppiness” on the job and anyone that got hurt was by their own sloppiness. It was never the fault of the factory or of its working practices. It was always the fault of the worker and if the worker got hurt then it wasn’t their problem. There were always more workers to fill the gap. The supervisors also didn’t tolerate paperwork. As far as they were concerned, there had never been an accident, ever. Nothing had been recorded or reported despite the fact that many of these shops had a very high turnover.

But one didn’t need to work for a processing plant. There were plenty who were trying to strike it out on their own. There were many Jawas and scroungers of different species that decided to take their lives and fate into their own hands and work the junk pile on their own. Scrounger ships would fly in, in a similar fashion to how the Ebon Mortis had, and try to find a place to land. If a place could be found, these scroungers would leave their ships in mass and start gathering as much stuff as they could. They each knew that at any time a larger piece might come crashing down upon their heads or even their ship. One wrong item removed would bring down a whole precariously made pile. One wrong step and a trip would send someone falling to their death by impalement from some sharp metal item sticking at an odd angle. One wrong turn of fate and a falling piece from either a barge ship dropping off its cargo or a piece of refuge from a crane claw would ruin their day and their life.

Yet the payout was good enough and nobody knew what treasure they might actually find. Sometimes there were would be weapons that just needed a part or just needed to be fixed that could be kept or sold on the black market to the highest bidder with the deepest pockets, no questions asked. There were rare parts to ships that were in need of such. There were computer parts that were still good. With the right engineering skills and tools, almost anything could be built out of this rubbish and it was all free for the taking, if one wanted to risk one’s life.

Of all the species that were scrounging for parts, the Jawas made up the bulk of them. They came here frequently from different ships, each from different tribes. Although each tribe wasn’t competitive, there was plenty to go around; they weren’t necessarily helpful to any other tribe either. If a Jawa fell while gathering supplies then it was left behind, without mourning, and the salvaging continued as if nothing had happened.

The Jawas were primarily looking for droid parts. There were always droids to fix and parts were always needed. There were even full droids that could be found that were just gotten rid of for a better or newer model. The Jawas had the corner of the market for just about any droid that was needed or any part for said droids. However, they didn't necessarily have the corner of the market for making repairs that worked. Buying from these scavengers were always a "buyer beware" as the droids were always sold "as is." As long as a droid was working well enough to be sold then it was fixed well enough.

Another species that made up a bulk of the salvaging crew were the Ugnaughts. These short creatures seemed to love to work on anything that they could get their hands on and had no problems selling it to whoever was willing to pay for it. It seemed that their whole existence was to work as some mechanic or engineer or laborer and they always seemed busy looking for some part or fixing another. Unlike the Jawas who were too picky about what they pulled, only parts that might work, things that would take a little bit of fixing, or looking for the right part, the Ugnaughts had no qualms about taking whatever they could get their hands on. They seemed to want it all and nothing was spared. They would overload their ships until their maximum capacity was reached and then tried to fill in more before taking off. Often an Ugnaught or two were left behind just to make the load a little lighter and to add room to add more junk.

Finally there were the labor droids. Since working out here in the open was so dangerous many had created labor droids and had sent them out for salvaging and scrounging. These humanoid hauler and lifter droids could be programmed to find certain items and could focus only on these things and nothing else. They could also be able to handle the poisonous weather and horrible working conditions. They would be stronger and more reliable. At least that's what the idea was anyway. There were two problems with this.

The first was that the Jawas considered the droids to be fair game to their reclamation process. Usually they just took the droids that were too damaged after an incident had harmed them beyond their ability to return back to the factory from where they came. However, if the Jawas thought that they could get away with it, they would drop a restraining bolt on any active droid that they found and hauled it off into one of their ships to be reprogrammed. Claiming a new one was far easier than trying to build an old one.

The second problem was the fact that the labor droids, each and every one of them, seemed to have reprogrammed themselves. The droids had stopped returning with their haul and started to build something of their own. No one knew what they were building or why and no one could get close enough to figure it out. Anyone who attempted to stop them was immediately attacked. The Jawas were able to get around this by only taking droids that had moved away from a group and were easily overpowered. But if the Jawas had figured out anything, they never said. Periodically the Ugnaughts would also be attacked if they got too close to a cluster of droids or if they took the item that the droids were looking for. In some cases the labor and lifter droids had armed and upgraded themselves with parts that they could find.

All of this could be seen by the crew of the Ebon Mortis as they came in low under the cloud cover. It was obvious that this planet was a dangerous place, as much so as any other that they had to visit. It was best to lay low and get out of here as soon as possible. If anyone here heard about what they were doing or the fact that the last holocron, holocron Theta was here on this planet and not too far away from them, then there would be an army descending upon them so fast that there would be nothing they could do to prevent the unavoidable.

A'Den kept the Ebon Mortis low as to confuse any radar that might be watching them. She doubted that they would be initially noticed since there were so many barges, supply ships, cargo ships, falling debris, and other rogue ships coming and going. To everyone else they would just be another blip on the screen that came and went and that was if they were spotted at all.

As she navigated through the maze of junk piles, some high enough to bury the ship if they decided to collapse, A'Den did her best to follow the paths that were between the piles and to keep away from the falling refuse and garbage from the incoming ships. At times the spaces between the piles were narrow and she couldn't help but to scrape across them, sending a cascade of scrap falling to the ground below.

A'Den eventually maneuvered her way towards one of the processing plants. As she came in, she reduced her speed and lowered her altitude until she was at the same height as the landing bay on the second floor of the building that she was heading toward. Here was their destination.

The bay door to the landing bay had been left open, a practice not commonly done on the account that there was no telling what might fly

in. There were just too much opposition to keep this open and too many spies that watched who was coming and who was going with each processing plant. If the crew of the Ebon Mortis wanted to be unnoticed, then they had to be quick. A'Den had already been notified of this so she knew that she had move in with accuracy and swiftness. This she did with full expertise.

Despite the fact that A'Den didn't like going into situations that she wasn't prepared for, she brought the Ebon Mortis into the landing bay under Quintano's assurance that everything would be alright. Of course she had to remember that they had been sold out by Brob on Nar Shaddaa and Quintano trusted him as well. She didn't have a good feeling about this. Having the massive metal bay door slam shut behind them didn't help matters either.

As A'Den went through the landing sequence she was able to take the landing bay into her view. She had expected the area to be as chaotic as the outside, full of junk, piles of debris, and loaded with lifter droids and welding bots. She had expected conveyer belts and manufacturing machines. She had expected to see grease stains and oil slicks. Instead, it was none of the above.

The landing bay was pristine. It was the cleanest space she had ever seen. The landing strip was clearly marked. All tools and parts were put away into cabinets and out of sight. The floor itself was completely white while the landing strip was detailed out with inset light blue lights, marking the way. The entire area looked far too sterile to be anything other than a medical room.

It was Quintano who eagerly led the way down the landing ramp. He was excited to see his old friend again, a friend that he could trust with his life, as opposed to a few others that he had recently run across. He was also excited to be so close to the end of the quest. Between the two of these factors he had forgotten to warn the rest of the crew, a thought that only now crossed his mind.

"Oh, I forgot to mention. Charon is a great guy and all; it's just that I should warn you. He's..."

"Look out!" A'Den stated as she pushed Quintano away. She dropped to one knee in an attempt to make herself a smaller target while trying to hide behind some of the support brackets of the landing walkway. She had thought that she would have been ready for anything. She had

thought that she had seen everything that the galaxy had to offer. The creature that had come through the door at the far end of the landing bay had proven her wrong on both counts.

The creature was reptilian. Its top half resembled the top half of most bipedal creatures. It had two arms. However, its arms were almost an extension of its skin, almost like wings. Upon each hand the creature had only four fingers. The bottom half was what made the creature a monstrosity. This portion of the beast was similar to a snake. It had a long massive tail that started with the creature's torso and if A'Den would take a guess she would have to estimate that the creature was just shy of two meters from head to the end of its tail. It looked to be lean and thin, probably no more than sixty five kilograms at the most, but it looked all muscle and A'Den was sure that the beast was wicked fast. Its body was covered in fine scales that were a rust color with a mixture of reds and oranges that gave the impression that the snake beast was almost on fire. On top of its scales, the beast wore a leather vest and around its waist was a utility belt full of pockets and a holster on one side.

It would be easy enough for the creature to pull his weapon out of his holster and start firing. It would be easy enough for the thing to slither across the floor and get the drop on them. She was going to make sure that it wasn't going to do either of these.

"I've got..." A'Den had started her sentence but was immediately cut off.

"Don't shoot! Don't shoot!"

Quintano's response came as quickly as he could get it out. A'Den's push had sent him sprawling off of the landing ramp and had sent him crashing unceremoniously to the ground. It had taken a bit of time to untangle himself and to come around to A'Den's front.

"A'Den, this is Charon Obol, he's a Sluissi He's the best mechanic that I know. There isn't anything that he can't fix or make, given time. Charon, this is A'Den, a Mandalorian. She's usually a 'shoot first, ask questions later' individual. She's a nice enough individual once you get to know her though. She meant no insult, I'm sure"

A'Den gave a smirk to the last few remarks as she slowly lowered her weapons and put them away. She would have had a little more 'heads up'

about the fact that they were about to meet a half snake reptilian individual.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you,” Charon said with a slight hissing sound as he spoke. His forked reptilian tongue over exaggerated a few of the words. He gave a slight bow. “No insult taken. It’s an unusual reaction, one I’m quite used to. And who is this?”

Quia had stepped down onto the ramp and had stopped short. With A’Den’s reaction of drawing her blasters and the appearance of this reptilian creature she simply didn’t know what to do. It was when Quintano had explained that this was his contact was she able to relax, at least a little bit, although she had to admit that she felt very uncomfortable around this creature.

It was at this time that she felt guilt. She had come across a good number of species during her training and knew that there were more than she would ever meet. She had been taught that every sentient species was to be treated with equality. However, there were just some that she always felt awkward around. Now she had to add this one to the list as well.

“This is Quia,” Quintano stated. “She’s a historian and archeologist.”

“Ah,” Charon replied. “A keeper of history, a seeker of truth, a bringer of enlightenment and a font of knowledge. By keeping our history we may learn from it lest we forget and be forgotten and are fated to repeat our mistakes. May your knowledge bring wisdom. May your wisdom bring insight. May your insight bring peace.”

Quia had to blush. She had never felt so flattered in her life. She had been told by many that her profession wasn’t important. She had heard how it was useless in the real world, and she had found out just how true that was outside of the great Jedi Library. While inside the order she had found purpose but once it all came crashing down, she had often found doubt in her career. This was why she had pushed her “experience” upon both A’Den and Quintano, to make it look as if she were more important than she really was.

Now, all that of that was pushed away by this reptilian alien, an alien that she had found revolting. He had treated her far better than she had him. She may have considered herself knowledgeable, but now she had been put to shame and had come to the realization that she still had a lot to learn, especially with things that couldn’t be learned on a data disk.

“And this is Aro, our trusted astromech. He’s bit of a sarcastic rust bucket of spare parts. I think there’s something wrong with his personality chip. However, all things considered, he usually pulls through in the end. You wouldn’t happen to have an extra personality chip, do you?”

“Wooo...bxxt...mrt...beep...boop.”

The Sluissi smiled. “Yesss, of coursse I have an exxtra persssonality chip. But why would I want to change thissss asstromech’sss persssonality? I like him jusstt the way he issss.”

“Beep...beep...beep.”

Charon listened to the excitement in the astromech’s voice and smiled again. It always did him wonders to listen to droids with unique personalities. He understood what Quintano could never come to realize. These droids either had complete artificial intelligence or they were very close to having it. This brought up a whole tone of different philosophical ideas and situations that just boggled the mind. This went as far as wondering that if a ship’s computer had a personality, did that make the whole ship a living entity. There was a lot to ponder. But that was for a later discussion.

“I ssee he’s an R-0 model, an older asstromech. I ttthought that you didn’t like asstromechsss.

“I know, I know, and this one is one of the worst ones that I’ve had. No offense Aro. But I have to admit that he’s grown on me and I don’t know what I would do without him.”

Again Charon smiled. “But you haven’t come here to discuss asstromechsss, have you?”

“No. I’ve come looking for a lead that might save the galaxy.”

“Sssince when have you become the hero type?”

“Since I’ve realized that not only am I a part of that same galaxy, but the people that I’ve come to care about are as well.”

Chapter: Darth Egens Dolor

*I*t wasn't long after their encounter with Charon did Quintano, Quia, and A'Den leave the manufacturing plant and set off on foot through the planet of Raxus Prime. With all of the species that were seeking spare parts, they were sure that Aro would be picked up and carried off before any of them realized what had happened. This, on top of the fact that there were large magnets that could accidentally wipe the droid's memory and programming core and the poor astromech would run the risk of being nothing more than a piece of junk. With this in mind, they thought that it was best of Aro stayed behind.

They all made sure that they had geared up as best as they could with the knowledge of the planet. Both Quintano and Quia had borrowed very light weight hazmat suits with helmets that would protect them from the various chemical spills, toxic gas fumes, and radioactive leaks that were abound. A'Den had brought her Mandalorian suit complete with all her weaponry. There had been far too many times where she had been disappointed in herself and had come to fully regret when she hadn't taken it. Now, she was sure that she would need it, not only because of the toxic atmosphere, but because of the nature of their surroundings.

Their trek around the various junk pillars took longer than they had thought. The destination on Quia's data pad had shown that they weren't that far away. However, their path wasn't in a straight line. Each pile of junk and debris that stood in their way had to be circumnavigated and when they did, they usually found yet another pile and another that they had to journey around in order to get back to their original trek. In a couple of cases they had to venture completely out of their way and even had to go in the opposite direction a few times.

The thought of flying their ship, the Ebon Mortis, was out of the question. They would be noticed far too quickly and would have either been shot down or followed. Either way, their journey would have been cut short. These were their driving factors to make their journey by walking, but even this had disadvantages, even beyond the extra jaunts that they had to take.

There were times when they had to duck behind the hull of a ship or the mass of some large machinery in order to avoid being noticed. This had further slowed them down and although A'Den had simply wanted to

blast their way through, even she knew better. Any blaster fire would not only bring more individuals to their area and run a high risk of their plan being found out, and would not only increase their chance of being wounded, incapacitated, or dead, but it also ran the risk of igniting flammable gasses or having a stray shot hit a combustible fuel source. A stray blast could even destabilize a massive pile and bring the whole thing down. Stealth and patience had to be the course, but in doing so they took more time to make it to their destination than they had anticipated.

“It should be just around this pile,” Quia pointed out as she confirmed with her data pad. “We’re almost on top of it.”

Of course both A’Den and Quintano knew that although Quia’s data pad and the map that it was resourcing from did tell them where they might find the next holocron, it didn’t tell them how they would find it, what might be guarding it, what traps might be warding it, and what else to expect. They had even come to know that her data pad had been susceptible to “dark force” energies and could have false readings. For all they knew, they would find nothing around this pile of rusted junk except for more junk.

The sight before them told them that they had, in fact, found something of importance. It had caught them by such a surprise that they had to backtrack a few steps to duck and hide behind two large and broken computer banks that had been nearby. It was now that they realized where all of the rogue droid went and where they had come from.

From where the three of them had hidden they could see droids coming in from various locations to the spot that was not too far in front of them. Here there was a massive horizontal double door that, instead of standing up, was laying down and allowed ingress and egress into the world below them. The droids emerged into space beyond with loads of various and specific computer parts and mechanical pieces only to have others come back out empty handed.

“Don’t tell me that we have to go through them to get what we are looking for,” Quintano stated, hoping that he was wrong.

“Unfortunately, yes we do,” Quia confirmed Quintano’s fear.

“I told you not to tell me that.”

“Will you two please stop your banter; we don’t have the time for it. Now, we need to find a way to get down there without having to fight off all of those droids.”

Quintano thought a while. What they needed was a distraction. He needed to find something to make all of the droids leave at once. Since none of them seemed to be battle droids or security bots he doubted that trying to them lead the droids on a wild chase would work. The droids might be equipped with lasers or were weaponized to some degree, but their programming seemed to be more about collecting raw materials first and guard duty second. The only thing that would attract them would be something that they thought would be needed to bring back here.

“Any thoughts?” A’Den asked.

“Shh, I’m thinking.”

“It can’t be that difficult.”

“I thought you said that this wasn’t the time for banter.”

“That was a moment ago,” A’Den snapped back. “But I’ve come to realize that when you are frustrated you actually make better decisions.”

Quintano was about to fire back some kind of snappish remark, but then had to stop. Was this really the case? He had to shake his head. She had no idea what she was talking about.

“Aro, come in,” Quintano stated into his commlink. He hoped that the little droid hadn’t shut off its commlink just to spite them or had decided to just simply ignore them when they needed him the most.

“Bleep...beep...bloop...xxzrt.”

“No, we’re not in any trouble.”

“Merp...zim...beep.”

“Why you little,” Quintano had to take a deep breath and calm down. The astromech was really starting to get on his nerves. “Yes, I’m sure, now listen. Here’s what I need you to do.”

Aro moved with purpose. He moved his armature into the communications array one more time. With a few twists, he was able to connect the scanners with the array and move through protocols until he found the right one.

The scanners came online and Aro moved through the reading. He recalibrated them to find droids that were still semi-active. All he needed to do was to find one that still had enough power to receive and transmit messages. It wasn't too difficult to find at least a few. He narrowed down his focus to one that was in just the right spot. From there he sent his message. The protocol of a dying BX-series commando droid was relayed and broadcasted through the barely functioning protocol droid.

Quintano, Quia, and A'Den watched from their hidden location as one droid after another moved with deliberation. They each dropped their load, if they had any, and moved in mass, in swarm, toward the other side of the pile of scrap metal, machinery, and old computers. They had all received the message that a commando droid had been found. It's exceptional engineering and the high protocol secrets that it might contain within its memory core would be a prize for anyone who was seeking unique parts, and as Quintano had hoped, these droids took the bait.

Aro continued to watch the scene through his connection with the radar. The droids that had gone rogue started their descent upon the spot where the transmission was coming from. Of course they were going to be disappointed about not finding their prize. However, the same couldn't be said about the Jawas or the Ugnought when they descend on the very spot and find many working droids ready for the taking.

“Boop...bleep...xxrt.”

“Great job Aro. Thanks we owe you one,” Quintano stated back into his commlink.

“Beep...mert...tweet...zert.”

“What do you mean ‘several’? Why, I ought to... never mind. I’ll deal with you when we get back. Now hold down the ship, we’ll need it to make a run toward the Republic when we’re done and we don’t want to delay.”

The three of them moved as quickly as they could. Although they were sure that the droids had moved on, at least that’s what Aro had said had happened, and that they hadn’t seen another droid for a while, they wanted to take every precaution that they could. One slip up and they might lose whatever advantage that they had going for them. They crossed the relatively short distance fairly quickly.

The ramp beyond the double doors wasn’t very steep and it was easy enough to descend to the deeper level. Along the way they could hear the humming of electricity and could feel the vibrations of machinery across the ramp which they were walking upon. These only became stronger and stronger as they moved further downward.

The ramp opened up into a large open area. The vast room was fortified with metal walls and metal beams and went beyond their view. On their left and their right was a set of conveyer belts where they assumed that the droids dropped their loads before running off to get another set of meticulously sought after material, computer parts, and resources.

The conveyer belts moved from this point to places deeper into the room. As they traveled, pieces were picked up by robotic arms and moved to others places. Here they were disassembled by other robotic arms until a valuable piece or a memory core was found. The unwanted pieces were discarded while the sought after piece was moved to yet another section where it was carefully attached to an every growing mass.

Quia, Quintano, and A’Den had moved along the room from one area to another taking in the whole scene while trying to find the holocron that they were looking for. They moved deeper and deeper into the vast chamber. With their weapons drawn they were ready for anything. They were ready for droids to come out of the shadows and attack them. They were ready for automated security systems to turn on. They weren’t ready for what they got instead.

“I’ve been expecting you.”

The Wraith landed near the manufacturing plant tower that stretched well into the sky. Valas had expertly maneuvered the ship around the junkyard of Raxus Prime and past the pillars of rubbish and debris to get here. It would have been a difficult task for anyone else, but not for him.

The agent had kept close to each tower of debris and let their presence confuse any radar that might have tried to detect his presence. He hid under incoming ships and even on top of them. He had, in all aspects, been invisible. He was sure that the occupants of this building hadn't seen him coming and now that he was here, he would take them by surprise and retrieve what he had come for.

Charon moved from one screen to another. He had seen the incoming ship and had already plotted its course to here. After Quintano had spoken of the secrecy that was needed, Charon was sure that the smuggler was going to be followed and so he watched every ship that came in. There were regulars that didn't need to be watched. A few rogue ships came and went. But when the Fury-Class Imperial Interceptor came through the atmospheric clouds, Charon knew that he had spotted the ship that he was looking for.

Charon had to admit that the pilot was good, very good. However, the pilot of the Interceptor hadn't done anything that he hadn't seen before. On top of that, Charon had many pieces of equipment that he had designed himself, pieces that were operating well above the normal standards, and this included his radar and tracking equipment. The interceptor had been followed every inch of the way.

With precision Charon moved to another station. He hadn't been able to keep his business for this long without knowing how to take care of it and that meant making sure that his security, the security that he had created from the ground up, was the best around. With a single push of a button, Charon activated his security system and brought all protocols to life.

Valas pulled himself up to the ledge of the second floor. There had been no entrance on the first floor and he realized the necessity to keep any ingress and egress up higher than on the ground. Anything would be

able to get through these doors eventually if they were lower. However, even if these doors were higher still, they still wouldn't be able to keep him out.

The agent reached into one of his many pockets and took out a small electronic device. He carefully placed it on the side of the massive door and pushed a few buttons. The device beeped a few times before there was a loud click and massive door started to rise.

Even though the sound of the opening bay door was loud, Valas was able to hear the sounds beyond it. He had ignored the roar of the machines that were operating the portal. Instead, he focused on the higher pitched gears and the ticking that was being made as metal points were clicking across the metal floor. He knew what this had to be.

Blaster fire burst forth and shot past Valas as he pulled his body back from the entrance. The sound that the blasters made and clicking on the floor told Valas what he was up against. These were battle droids and there were at least two of them. They had been sent here to stop him from entering. The question was, had they been here all along or had he been spotted. If the first, then all he had to do was take care of them and then move on. If the second was thought was accurate, then he could face even more opposition. This could also mean that the crew of the Ebon Mortis could be notified and alerted to what was about to happen next. Either way he had to move quickly and efficiently.

Valas reached into his pocket and pulled out a small spherical device, gave a couple of pushed on a couple of the buttons and tossed it into the landing bay. He may not have had the fire power to blast the droid out of existence, but he had the next best thing. He hadn't become one of the best agents by not coming prepared.

The sphere bounced twice before it went off. Then, with only a slight bang, there was a sudden burst of light that shot out in all directions. This stopped the battle droids dead in their tracks. The E.M.P. did its job well enough.

Valas did a slight jump inside and came to a roll. As he came out, he had come up with his sniper rifle in hand and in the ready. His eyes took in the scene. It wasn't the fact that he was looking for more droids, he had already determined that there weren't any in the immediate area. Instead he was scanning the ceiling and walls for any automated systems. He found them.

The Imperial agent rolled again as two blasts struck where he had been. He had already gotten a bearing on where they were going to be shot from before they had targeted him. The two automated blasters in the opposing corners of the room were expected.

Valas came out of one roll and pulled the trigger on his sniper rifle then rolled again before the second security system could get a bearing on him. When he came out of that roll he opened fire again. Within several heartbeats the two automated blaster systems were destroyed.

The slight slithering sound at the far end of the landing bay caught Valas's attention before the blaster fire had a chance to cut him down. He was already in motion as the suppressive fire blasted the area where he used to be. His maneuver had brought him to one side of a cabinet, then, before he finished his run down its length that would have given him further cover and would have brought him closer to the shooter, he doubled back. His opponent would be waiting for him to use the best strategy possible, so he chose a different option.

The Imperial agent peered around the corner from here he had entered for covered. At the far end of the room he could see the Sluissi moving toward the area that he had expected to exit from. He had one shot.

Charon moved quickly to the side where he had expected the assailant to come from. A fast spin down the cabinet's edge would have been enough to catch the intruder off guard. He wasn't there.

The blast struck the coolant above his head. The freezing gust of frozen coolant struck. He could feel his muscles start to tighten. As a cold blooded creature he couldn't regulate his body temperature; that was regulated by outside forces. The cold was seizing him up. His advantage of speed had been compromised. He would have been able to out maneuver any attacker. Now, he was slowed and his body was no longer reactive. There was no way to counter attack. He needed to leave to not only regroup, but to let his muscles warm back up before he could even think about getting back into combat.

Valas watched as the Sluissi slithered away from the thick cloud of freezing coolant that was being discharged. He had hoped that it had been enough to stop the Sluissi so he could get in another shot and stop him for good. Now the Sluissi was on the run. It needed to be stopped before

he could recuperate or even find reinforcements. The agent was off like a shot.

As Valas rounded he watched as the Sluissi dove into a hole in the ground. Apparently the creature had created an escape plan that would allow him, and only him, quick access and easy egress. However, that was going to be its tomb as well.

Valas pulled another spherical device from his pocket and tossed it into the hole and to the tunnel beyond. The loud boom told him that the grenade had done its job. Either the Sluissi had been hit and killed or the passage was sealed. Either way, that was the last he was going to see the Sluissi for awhile at least, at it would be enough time to do what he needed to do and leave.

Without a second thought, knowing that he had no time to lose, Valas made his way to the Ebon Mortis. He had seen it as he had entered the landing bay and had placed its presence in the back of his mind until he was ready to process that information. Now he was at its door.

The Imperial agent pulled out his electronic device one more time. It had opened the doors to the landing bay and now it would serve its purpose one more time. A few clicks and the door to the Ebon Mortis opened.

Aro had watched the scene play out in the landing bay and what he saw was disturbing. The Imperial agent had used an E.M.P. to decimate the two battle droids. This would be devastating to him and he knew that he didn't stand a chance against an attack like that. The only way to beat it was to shut down until the intruder left.

Valas made a quick look and found no opposition. With the crew out hunting for the last holocron, he had figured that he would find none, yet he was no fool and was never careless. When he was certain that there was no one to stop him, he made his way through the Ebon Mortis in search of his prize.

It didn't take long to find the nine holocrons in the master suite. This had been the first place to look since the Mandalorian who had claimed the ship to now be her own would be the one to call the shots and so would be the one to keep these treasures. This made his hunt easier than had been expected and within a short amount of time he had left the ship and was on his way back to the Wraith.

Aro turned himself back on while using the least amount of power necessary. He didn't want to alert the intruder of his presence if he was still here. A quick scan of the ship told him that he was alone. Another scan told him that an Imperial Interceptor was taking off from outside. The intruder was gone and more than likely on his way to steal the tenth holocron from the rest of the crew of the Ebon Mortis. Aro knew that he had to warn them.

The message wasn't going through. Wherever they were, there was a shielding around them that prevented communications from being received. There was no way that Aro could warn the others in time. The only thing he could do was warn them personally. Without thinking about his own safety, Aro set off in search of the others and hoped that he would be able to make it in time.

The mechanical male voice echoed throughout the whole underground grand room and seemed to come from everywhere all at once. It had a cold and distant sound, almost uncaring as to the situation in itself. However, when it spoke, it spoke with absolute power and authority.

“Who are you?” A'Den stated rather loudly in the attempt to ensure that her voice was heard to whoever was trying to intimidate them. “Come on out and show yourself.”

Suddenly the computer bank, the one that stood from the ground floor to the ceiling came to life. Lights flashed and blinked. Screens came on. The computer itself spoke.

“I am Darth Egenz Dolor. I am suffering. I am pain. I am agony. I am your death and the destroyer of worlds.”

“I remember. I sat on the Sith Council with the others. We plotted against him with our scheme. I was the one to make the technology while other did their part and when all was ready we would power our weapons with the greatest power of all.”

“Our mission failed and I came here. I waited for the next generation to come. They didn't. I grew old. I worked on the

technology that was needed and perfected it. Still I waited. Soon my body became frail. I was close, too close. I needed to see this through and all I needed was the other nine pieces.”

“I thought about going after them myself, however, my frail body was failing me. I’ve found a way to download my consciousness into this computer and upon doing so I’ve come to realize that time was on my side. I knew that the pieces would come to me, they would have to, and all I needed to do was to wait.”

“To further complicate my journey to go after the maps were the various wars. Each war would put me at risk of being found out. However, I used this to my advantage. I was able to test each new incarnation of my weapon and once I found a flaw, I would send a new design to a new group of technicians to build another set for me. I was able to watch time and again how each weapon would fare.”

“During my time I created more weapons and further engineered what is needed. I become more powerful with each passing year and each passing eon. I’ve come to realize that flesh and bones are weak. I will have all life made in my image and their consciousness will meld with mine or it will be destroyed. All that is needed now is a ship and those pieces of the map that you possess.”

“I don’t tell you this for you to simply know who I am, that much doesn’t matter. What does matter is that you understand my determination, my will, to finish my task. I will become a living weapon with enough firepower to destroy whole stars and whole systems will fall before my might. I will have those pieces of the map and I will bring this galaxy under my rule.”

“I hate to tell you this,” Quintano stated. “But someone else has already found your power source. We’re here to try to stop them. So if you would kindly tell us...”

“Impossible. The planet you seek could not be found without the map. Even though I know where it is, there is still the need to have the map to journey through the various singularities safely. Anyone who has told you that they don’t need the map has lied. This means that they have ensured that you gain the map for them. I’m sure that it’s only a matter of time before they show up to claim the whole map for themselves.”

“However, that won’t be happening. You will give me the other nine pieces and I will deal with them. Now you can either give them to me or I’ll take them from you. Either way I shall prevail.”

It then dawned upon them that they had been set up. The transmission that they had received had appealed to their sense of morality. Now, that sense of morality had been exploited. Still it was best to gain the last holocron before anyone else did.

Quintano saw both A’Den and Quia start to move. They were getting ready to deal with this sinister computer and initiate an attack before it had the opportunity to do it to them. He needed to stall.

“The Empire seems to have a very strong hold upon the galaxy. I doubt that they would just sit idly by and let you take over their plan of galaxy domination.”

“I am aware of their plans. I am also aware that they will fail and by my calculations their newest battle will be the turning point in their war. They will be ripe for the picking. The time is now and you will decide rather you will serve me as an upload conscious or you will die.”

“Well, here’s a hint.” Quintano’s words were the only warning the computer had as he snapped both of his blasters from their holsters and opened fire. As he did, he could see A’Den follow suit.

Bolts of blaster fire struck the computer hard. Fragments of the machine flew in all directions. Screens shattered. Electronics blew apart. Wires became exposed and blew electrical sparks in all directions. An electrical fire broke out.

“Do you really think that I can be defeated that easily?”

The sound came from another computer and then another. The essence of the machine was everywhere.

“Now you will come to know my full power. Behold. I am Darth Egenz Dolor. I am your death.”

There was movement to their right and then to their left. Pieces of machinery started to move on their own. They came together. Legs were formed. Arms were formed. A torso and head could be seen. When it was finished the massive mechanical beast took up nearly the whole space to the ceiling.

“Now die.”

The giant robotic machine threw a punch forward that would have smashed Quintano into the ground had he not moved fast enough. Instead there was a loud crash as the metallic fist struck the floor and left nothing but a crater filled with rubble where the flooring used to be.

Quintano had rolled away from the telegraphed strike. The thing may have been big, but it was slow. He thought that this might be an easy fight. He was wrong.

Large wires snaked out of the arm and caught hold of the smuggler. They intertwined around and started to choke the life from his body. To make things worse, electricity danced across the smuggler’s form. It wouldn’t take long to end this pathetic creature’s life. But that wasn’t the Sith Lord’s goal. Indeed, the form would die, but he would have the smuggler’s mind.

As Quintano's body continued to shake and be strangled, a smaller wire with a very sharp point on the end of it snaked around and to the back of Quintano's skull. It measured its destination and pulled back for the strike.

Quia turned on her doubled bladed vorpal staff and kicked off. She came down hard upon the smaller wire with all of her might. Her blade cut right through it with ease, sending sparks in all directions.

With the initial danger done, Quia turned her attention to the larger wires. She cut and sliced until Quintano was free. But for every wire she cut, there seemed to be two more that came out from another location of the giant machine. The tendrils were everywhere. She spun and came down on one only to twirl and come down upon another.

A'Den brought her jetpack to life. If Quintano and Quia could keep this thing busy then maybe she could find a soft spot. She started to blast away at any part of the machine's body that she could find as she continued to fly all about the thing.

Each bolt found its mark. Like the computer that she had helped blow apart, screens were shattered and pieces were destroyed. Fragments flew away. A small electrical fire broke out.

But it was all in vein. For every piece that she was able to damage, another piece was being fixed. The machine was repairing itself, even to the point of pulling parts from other pieces of machinery.

The machine launched another fist attack toward Quia and Quintano. Like the first attack it had only found the floor and had managed to create a small crater. Also like the first attack several more wire tendrils shot out and started to whip around and attempt to capture the two that were on the ground.

As for the one that was flying around and being a nuisance, it was time to take care of her. Small blaster turrets became exposed as a panel dropped from its torso. Its computer started to track the Mandalorian and when it was ready, it opened fire.

A'Den continued to fly around, but this time in a more erratic pattern. She was trying to stay one step ahead of being blasted out of the air while trying to continue her offensive. She was getting nowhere. She was spending too much time trying to avoid the blaster fire and not enough

time doing damage that it didn't take long before the machine had fully fixed itself.

As second set of turrets came out from the machine's form and then a third set. The air was being filled with blaster fire and A'Den was having a problem trying to avoid them all. She maneuvered her jetpack until it took her deeper into the chamber and behind one of the metal support beams.

A'Den couldn't help but watch at Quintano and Quia continued to be harassed by the wires that were whipping around. Quia was caught by the ankle and was starting to be lifted off of the ground until Quintano blasted the large wire. This let Quia unceremoniously drop to the ground. Quintano was struck hard. He rolled with it but A'Den could tell that he was having a hard time breathing. It would only be a matter of time before they fail.

A'Den focused. She had to find a weakness for this thing. The machine simply had to have one.

Then it dawned on her. The machine wasn't plugged in. This meant that it had an internal power source. All she had to do now was find it and turn it off. Her eyes scanned the machine. The machine had moved its arms and legs and its head around. This meant that these things were more exposed and thus more expendable. The only thing not expendable was the area that was highly guarded, the torso. This was why the machine kept rebuilding the area, to protect its power.

The problem now was the turrets would cut her down if she tried to get too close. She would have to stay here and make her shot and make sure that it was powerful enough, she probably only had one shot at this. With this in mind she switched over to her EE 3 Carbine rifle. However, she still needed to have the area exposed and she couldn't have enough fire power to do that and keep it exposed. But, there was one person who could.

“Quia! Strike here.”

Quia heard the command from across the room. She couldn't see where A'Den was directing her so she could only assume that the spot was on the other side of the machine. She hoped that Quintano could hold his own for a short time while she followed A'Den's suggestion.

Quia leapt over another thick wire that came at her and landed on the robotic arm. Her feet carried her up the armature until she reached the machine's shoulder. Without even stopping she let her eyes take in the back side of the mechanical creature. There, between three turrets was a small red dot, a pinpoint from A'Den's targeting laser on her rifle. The direction was clear enough.

Quia jumped from her spot and flew through the air. While she did she spun around so that she was able to face the machine. Her arms, still holding her weapon, came up and over her head. As she came down, she slammed her weapon into the hull of the machine.

The metal backing of the robotic creature sliced open and A'Den got a quick glance inside. She was right. She could see a power generator inside. It had taken only a moment to spot it and even then it was almost a moment too late. The thing started to repair itself once again. She took her shot.

There was an explosion that rocked the whole landscape. Pieces of the machine flew in all directions. Sections of its arms and legs simply fell off. Smoke rose from its systems as electrical wires were overloaded. Other systems simply failed. The machine fell over, lifeless and in rubble.

"Now, where is the..." Quintano started to ask. However Quia answered his question for him before he was allowed to finish.

"There it is," Quia stated as she pointed toward something in the middle of the rubble from the machine.

Both Quintano and A'Den scanned the area until they saw it as well. The cube shaped holocron had been inside the living computer and now was ready to be plucked away.

"Finally," Quintano stated as he bent down to pick up the holocron. "It's the last one. Now we can..."

"I'll take that."

The voice from the back of the room, toward the very ramp they had used to descend into this chamber, caused the three of them to turn around. There they saw two individuals. The first was an Imperial officer. The second seemed more like a monk or a priest with his clothing and

cloak, yet there with the colors that he wore and the expression upon his face, it was doubtful that whatever he was affiliated with wasn't good.

Quia let out a gasp. Although she didn't know who this was, she knew that this individual was a Sith Lord. There was no denying the outfit. This was bad. This was very bad.

"Over my dead body," Quintano stated as he gently tossed the holocron in his hand. The way he figured it, there were only two who stood in their way and there were three of them. And, of the two who opposed them, only one was armed and he hadn't even drawn his blaster. If these two wanted a fight then it was going to be a very short fight.

"That can be arranged." Darth Ablaof replied.

Sudden Darth Ablaof's eyes narrowed. "Your thoughts betray you."

"Quintano! Don't..." Quia wasn't able to finish her sentence.

Quicker than anyone had realized what had happened, the smuggler pulled out her blaster and opened fire. He had the drop on them. He had them dead to rights.

Darth Ablaof snapped his hand upward. As he did, the blaster fire from Quintano's weapon was deflected away, harmlessly. Another snap of his wrist and a focus upon a fallen piece of debris from the once living computer sent a mass of metal flying towards Quintano.

Quintano was hit hard. His body flew several feet and struck up against part of the warehouse. Blood poured from his forehead as his form lay lifeless.

A'Den bolted towards Quintano to see if he was alright. She bent over his body. The smuggler wasn't moving. From what she could tell, his breathing was shallow and weak. He had lost a lot of blood and was losing more. He needed to be gotten to a medic and fast, but that was if she could remove the rubble that had pinned him. She gave a glance upward.

Darth Ablaof reached out his hand. The last holocron that had fallen from Quintano's hand flew from where it fell and soared through the air. Within a heartbeat, it was in his hand.

"Now, with this in hand, the galaxy shall tremble under my might."

Quia's eyes had been wide ever since the Sith Lord had entered the area. Her heart felt as if her heart were to beat through her chest. Sweat was pouring from her head. They were out of their league. It would have been best to run.

She shook her head. She couldn't. She just couldn't. There were too many people that were going to die if she just did nothing. Even if she were to die today, perhaps she could make just enough of a difference to stop him. Quia stepped forward.

"I can't let you take that," Quia said as she pulled forth the double bladed lightsaber staff and ignited it. "I'll do whatever it takes..."

"Ah, I see that you've found my lightsaber. I'll take that as well." Darth Ablao gave another motion with his hand.

Quia felt a tug upon the lightsaber. At first it was only minor. Then the tug became a pull and weapon flew from her grip, sailed through the air, and landed in the Sith Lord's hand.

Darth Ablao turned from the three that had done their job so well. Now they were no longer needed and no longer a threat. There was no need to stay here any longer. He had taken only a couple of steps back toward the ramp that would take him up to the planet's surface when he heard it. He felt her intention. She had been brave enough to try to stand up to him, and for this he was going to spare her life. However, if she wanted a fight then he would give it to her. Darth Ablao tossed the holocron to Draks and turned back around.

Quia had pulled her double bladed vorpall staff. She wasn't going to let him go without a fight.

"As you wish," Darth Ablao stated as he flipped his weapon in his hand. He made several steps to close the gap and stopped within arm's reach. He would give her the fight she wanted and then cut her in half.

There was a moment of tension that filled the air. Then everything exploded in a whirl of movement.

Quia went on the offensive. She brought her weapon in for a simple jab, a feint that the Sith Lord had to parry. As her weapon was knocked aside, she let it spin in her hands and allowed the second blade to come

back around for a second attack. This was also knocked aside with ease. This put her into a reversal spin that brought her weapon back around down low. She suddenly stopped and reversed her attack bringing in a downward blow that should have caught the Sith Lord off guard.

Darth Ablaof blocked yet another blow and then another as his opponent continued to display her ability to utilize her weapon. Any lesser being and she would have won by now. In some aspects she reminded him of his two apprentices. In any other circumstances he would have tried to entice her over to the dark side and teach her how to be a bit more aggressive and give a better dazzling display to disorient her opponents. But, as it was, there were other, more important things that needed to be done. It was too bad that he had to kill her.

A'Den continued to give a glance or two toward the battle between Quia and the intruder. If Quia could just keep him busy long enough then she would have a chance to pull the rubble off of Quintano. She pulled again on a very large piece of rebar.

Quia pulled away from the battle. The Sith Lord was fast. He was good. She was barely keeping up with him and he wasn't even working up a sweat. She had been on the offensive and he on the defensive. He was already wearing her down without even trying. She had to have a moment to catch her breath and come up with a different strategy.

"Impressive," Darth Ablaof stated as he twirled his double lightsaber in his right hand. "I recognize the style. It's a bit crude and needs refinement. You might have even been a good candidate for a Jedi. Too bad I can't let that happen."

Quia kicked off once again. Since the Sith Lord was taking his time bragging, there was a chance to catch him off guard. The slight movement of his wrist told her otherwise. Her body was tossed aside as if she were worthless and useless and no longer to be given any thought about. Her body struck hard against some unforgiving item. She saw stars. She saw him move towards her.

Darth Ablaof flipped his double lightsaber in his hand and brought it up and over his head. A final thrust would be all that it would take.

"Xxxrtt!"

The battle cry from the astromech had caught everyone's attention. It was just enough to bring the Sith Lord a cause for inaction. It was just enough for him to prevent his killing blow. Instead he flipped his weapon in his hand one more time and spun on the ball of his foot. As he did, he let his weapon take the lead.

Aro came rolling down the ramp as quickly as he could. He bypassed the Imperial officer as if he weren't important, and since he had caught the officer off guard, Aro was sure that he wasn't a threat, at least not as much of a threat that Quia was facing. When he was far enough down the ramp, the astromech turned on his jet thrusters that were enabled in his support legs and launched himself through the air. All he had to do with knock himself into the attacker. It would be enough to save Quia.

The lightsaber cut right through the astromech and sliced it in two. There was a mechanical scream as if the astromech could actually feel pain before the chamber fell quiet and two halves of the droid that used to be named Aro fell to the ground.

Without giving the droid a second thought, Darth Ablaoof flipped his lightsaber back around and brought it back over his head. Now, without further distractions, he would finish what he started.

"NO!" A'Den screamed. They had faced so much. It couldn't end like this. Before she could come to her senses and think about the repercussions, A'Den focused on her guidance system and fired the missile on her back.

The projectile flew through the air with accuracy. For one moment she knew that she had him. She would take him down even if it meant sacrificing them all. Then, he did the impossible.

Darth Ablaoof spun just in time. The Mandalorian had hid her intentions behind emotions, rather she knew it or not. A moment later and he would have been hit by the full force of the incoming missile. She was good. He was better.

Darth Ablaoof snapped his hand toward the projectile. He hadn't been able to catch it full on, only nudge it. It was enough.

The missile changed its course and flew upwards instead of forward. It slammed into the ceiling of the underground chamber and blew.

The explosion rocked the whole chamber. Everything shook. Support beams buckled until they could hold no more. The inevitable happened.

The ceiling blew apart in all directions and dropped. Debris and rubble fell by the tons. Metal supports, solid ground, computer parts, and machinery came crashing down in one mighty collapse.

Lieutenant Draks's eyes went wide the moment he saw the missile being fired. He turned and ran back up the ramp toward safety. He hoped that he would be spared. He was wrong.

The concussion of the blast blew the lieutenant several feet forward, forcing him to land face first into the ground. He fought to stay conscious. His body felt like hell. He moaned with a bruised form and a few broken bones. He rose and took in the scene.

The explosion had been devastating. Where there used to be ground level was now a crater filled with rock, rubble, debris, and metal. Everyone that had been under the cave-in was now buried under tons of material. There was no way anyone could have...

A small rock moved to one side, then another. A piece of rebar was shoved aside. Lieutenant Draks thought that he was imagining what he was seeing. Then, it happened.

The hand shot up from the ground.

There was a moment's pause as if the world was holding its breath as to what was about to happen next. That moment came with awe. Rubble moved by the ton. It was lifted into the air, bit by bit, and tossed aside as if some invisible hand of some giant had been a part of this. The debris was cleared in a small area and from there he came.

Darth Ablaf slowly walked out of the crater that had been made as if nothing important had happened.

"Where do we go from here?" Lieutenant Draks Kelen asked with a bit of fear in his voice. He knew that the Sith Lord was powerful, he just didn't know how powerful.

"We'll now make our way to the planet named Xarus. I'm familiar with the planet's name, but I've never been able to figure out its location. Now,

with this holocron, and the other nine, I'll be able to find it and claim what is rightfully mine.”

“Come,” Lord Darth Ablaoof continued. “We must go. We have a galaxy to rule.”

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