



**THE 5TH WARS**

# **Star Wars: The Sith Wars: Book One: Invasion of the Mandalores**

**by J. W. Titus**

*as posted on [http://boards.theforce.net/Before\\_the\\_Saga/b10475/17858766/p1](http://boards.theforce.net/Before_the_Saga/b10475/17858766/p1)*

## **Chapter One**

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The angular shuttle emerged from hyperspace a short distance away from the night side of the lifeless, brown planetoid and swooped towards it like a hawkbat on the hunt. Red exhaust shot out of its dual engines in two comet-like tails that slowly faded into the darkness of space behind it. Nebula clouds of swirling blues and whites hung dim and still nearby; their eerie glow adding to the empty feel in this uncivilized sector of the galaxy. No one would have expected anything of significance to be happening out here in the middle of nowhere. Which was exactly what those that were there were counting on.

Admiral Ondi, Chief Commandant of the Vishovi Coalition's military forces, stood precise and rigid at the large view port in his personal chambers with hands clasped firm behind his back. His red uniform, with its golden shoulder tassels and black trim, was without crease and fit snugly on his tall, thin frame. Its gold buttons glimmered, the black, calf-high boots gleamed with a deep shine, and the dazzling display of metals on his breast drew automatic attention to themselves. His black hair, graying at the temples, was cut exactly to Vishovi military regulations and not a strand lay out of place. His thin, well-trimmed mustache was against military code, but being Commandant he was afforded some...*liberties*.

Admiral Ondi appeared the exact definition of a Vishovi military leader, and he acted with equal shrewdness.

His hook-nosed and thin-lipped face was intense as narrowed eyes inspected the moon-sized asteroid suspended in space outside the viewport. Pockets of light could be seen in clustered bursts across its surface, giving the impression of large cities populating the rock. But the concentrations of light weren't cities. They were vast ore mining camps.

Millions of slaves toiled down in the mines of the asteroid wearing low-

atmosphere, low-gravity suits. These slaves lead perilous lives because the giant mining machines they worked alongside held no regard for their safety, and they often rolled or dug right over the slaves if they got in their path.



**Admiral Ondi - Art by FalconFan**

Several of Ondi's enemies were down there on the asteroid. He often thought about their plight with great satisfaction and a contemptuous sneer. They had learned the awful price of daring to get in his way, and would forever know that it was he that had bested them.

His attention drifted from the planetoid's surface to the large cluster of ore-refinery freighters suspended in space above it. These ships were rough in appearance without any hull plating or other outward cosmetics and looked like nothing more than criss-crossing, skeletal framings of pipes and beams. These ships had been built as inexpensively and quickly as possible, so they lacked hyperdrive engines and had only minimal life-support systems for their small crews. Functionality was their main purpose, not comfort.

Hundreds of shuttles ferried back and forth from the surface of the asteroid carrying cargo holds filled with the raw ore. They dumped the ore into cargo bays on the refineries, then returned to the surface for another load in a never-ending cycle.

As his shuttle sped over the asteroid's north pole and towards the dayside of the planetoid Ondi inspected yet another long train of cargo shuttles just below him. These shuttles picked up the massive sheets of durasteel made in the refineries and transported them back to the dayside of the asteroid; where they would be put to a very good use.

A twinge of pleasure tugged at Ondi's upper lip as he watched the endless machinations outside the viewport, and he stroked his thin mustache with a long finger.

"Your surveyors did an excellent job in locating this asteroid, Baron Kran," Ondi said to the rotund being standing next to him. "This rock contains more ore than we could ever use. Well done."

Baron Kran—a Gran, with three protruding eyestalks and tan, leathery skin—said nothing in return to Ondi's praise. This was an unusual occurrence, as the Gran was typically an annoyingly-talkative being. Yet right now he just stood at Ondi's side with his muzzle clamped shut as his pointed ears twitching nervously.

Ondi turned once again to peer at his companion questioningly, and inspected him long and hard.

Unlike most Gran, Baron Kran had no neck; just multiple chins of layered fat. As usual, the Baron was dressed in obnoxious, bright robes woven from the most expensive and exotic of materials. He wore the robes loosely in an attempt to conceal his grossly overweight, pear-shaped form, but this only succeeded in making him appear even larger.

The Baron was one of the wealthiest beings in the outer rim territories and had both inherited and gained his wealth through his families expansive and powerful business empire—Kran Conglomerate Industries. The company was the largest in Vishovi space and employed billions of beings. It held monopolies in numerous goods and services; the most important of which were the higher technology and starship construction industries. It was because of the conglomerate's prolific activities in starship construction that Ondi had recruited the baron into his services. And judging by what he was seeing outside his viewport, he knew he had chosen wisely.

"They must have been good workers," Ondi continued, trying once again to illicit a response from Baron Kran. "It's a shame they died. Shuttle accident, wasn't it?" Ondi asked, though he knew better than anyone what had actually happened to the surveyors. Secrecy was essential to the success of this operation, so security was airtight. He couldn't have surveyors running around the outer rim blabbing their

mouths off about the huge ore supply they had discovered. So, he'd had them sent to the surface of the very rock they had discovered.

"A pity an accident should happen to a group of such gifted and dedicated workers," Ondi said with a shake of his head and mock sadness in his tone. "A real pity."

Once again his Gran companion said nothing in response to his comments.

Turning his attention away from the viewport, Ondi asked, "Why so quiet today, Baron? Are you not pleased to see everything going so well?"

Though successful in business, Kran was a rather jumpy and excitable character. And right now Ondi could see that he was trembling. His three eyes were wide with fear as they darted from place to place around the room, and his ears twitched in obvious panic. Wanting to appear calm, the baron clasped his hands across his large belly to steady their shaking, yet this only succeeded in causing his gut to jiggle along with the rest of his trembling form.



**Baron Kran - Art by Justin Thompson**

Admiral Ondi gave a tired sigh. "Baron, what's troubling you this time?" he asked. His patience was growing thin. He hated that he had to endure this fool's stupidity and wanted just to be rid of him, but knew that he needed the Baron. ...For now.

So, he bit back his temper and gave the Gran a thin smile.

The baron's triple eyestalks darted from Ondi, to the woman standing silent guard at the other side of the room, then quickly to the floor.

Raising a swollen hand to shield his mouth from the view of the woman, Kran whispered, "I...I cannot say. Not here. Not while *she* is around." He thumbed towards the woman.

Ondi turned to look at her, raising an eyebrow.

The woman wore a black, leather jumpsuit that accentuated her strong, yet feminine, figure. A blaster holster hung from her slim waist and sat well on the smooth curves of her hips. When it wasn't covered by a black veil, one could see that her thin face was rather beautiful, but the hard, unapproachable look in her sharp brown eyes said that she had no interest in appearing anything of the sort. Her long, dark brown hair was pulled back in a long braid, and her reflexes were as sharp as the two metal swords she wore strapped on her back.

"Sasha, wait outside," Ondi ordered.

Sasha peered first at Ondi, then to the baron with narrow eyes. Then she gave a curt nod and began to move. Her steps were light and graceful as she walked through the door leading out of the room; the steps of a predator.

Once the door was closed, Ondi turned back to Kran and said, "All right. Now, tell me, baron."

"It's her and her kind!" the baron said in his squeaky, high-pitched voice, pointing frantically at the door. "I don't trust them! The Sith are dangerous, Admiral, and if you don't understand that then you are...are...well, just plain mad!"

The baron took a handful of nervous steps away, then reeled back towards Ondi and continued. "I can't believe I let you talk me into this in the first place. I thought our partners were these warriors—these...these Mandalores! I agreed to build ships for them because they have honor, if nothing else. They are warriors and can be reasoned with and trusted. But you never mentioned the Sith being involved when I signed up! These Mandalores by themselves can be contained, but coupled with the Sith...who knows what might happen?" He buried his bulbous head into his hands and collapsed with a heavy THUD! into a nearby chair. Then, almost in a wail, he said, "I can't believe I could have been so stupid! The Sith will betray us the first chance they get!"

“Baron, baron,” Ondi soothed. “Do you really think I would put you or I in danger? Never! Stop worrying so much. Everything is going to be fine.”

“*‘Everything is going to be fine’*,” the baron mocked. “How can you say that when she is always lurking around?” he said, pointing towards the door. “Everything is not going to be fine, Ondi! You’ve allowed several of her kind into the Vishovi systems already, and who knows what they are up to!? I’m surprised she hasn’t killed us already! She’s a spy, I tell you. A spy!”

Ondi was hardly able to bite back his temper. If he didn’t need the baron so much, Ondi would have killed him long ago. He hated that he had to put up with this sniveling idiot, but it was a small cost for getting what he wanted so he did.

“I understand your apprehension, baron,” Ondi said. “Yet you must understand; the Sith are not what you think they are, and neither is Sasha and her companions.”

“What do you mean? Of course they are what I think they are! They are all murderous sorcerers—just—like—her!” Baron Kran said, jabbing a hand towards the door once again.

“No, baron,” Ondi said. “Her abilities are limited. She isn’t powerful enough in the Force to be a Sith. Too low of a midichlorian count. She, like the rest of the Marauders, is a faithful servant of the Sith—not a Sith herself. Sasha and her companions have been assigned to protect us and to ensure that matters within the Vishivi Coalition go as planned, so that is what they’ll do. We don’t have anything to fear from them.”

Baron Kran was still trembling and darting worried eyes at the door as he sat in the chair. He looked if he thought Sasha were going to walk in and dispose of him at any moment. But the completely frantic look was now out of his eyes. He seemed almost able to listen to reason now.

“And I don’t want to hear anything about you tripling your guard again because of all this Sith nonsense,” Ondi said. “All you do is make people suspicious.”

The baron didn’t seem to be listening as intently as he’d liked, so he walked over to stand over the seated baron. “You will not ruin all that I have set in place at this final hour! Is that clear?”

The baron cowered under his powerful gaze, and his trembling came back in full force.

He stood over him for some time, then returned to the viewport and gazed out at

the happenings there.

“Believe me, baron,” Ondi said, “I have spent quite a bit of time with the Sith. I can assure you they can be trusted. Why, if I thought they were so dangerous, do you think I would willingly give them so much power? Do you really think I would build an entire armada for them if I thought they couldn’t be controlled? I think not,” he said with a chuckle.

Then, Ondi paused, allowing the baron time to absorb this.



**Sasha - Art by FalconFan**

“Rest assured, baron,” he finally continued. “You are safe. The Sith are just a means to an end. A means to an end. If all goes as planned, you will soon have riches beyond your wildest imagination! Just think; when all of this is done Kran Conglomerate Industries will be the corporation of the galaxy. As I promised, you will have complete control over the markets and can charge whatever you wish for your goods and services. The Sith know how prolific you are in business and are eager to help you expand. Think of the limitless riches! Think of the power!”

Ondi watched with pleasure as the baron’s frightened expression slowly turned to



one of contemplation. The mention of money and riches always caught the baron's attention. As he usually did when he was deep in thought, Kran began rubbing a hand along his muzzle. He thought for some time, obviously weighing the pros and cons of the situation.

"The one downside is that all of this can only be accomplished with the help of the Sith. Why, who else do you think could defeat the Jedi and their powers? Only the Sith, baron. Only the Sith. We need them. And they need us. We are far too valuable for them to betray. They have honor as well, and they will reward those that serve them without fault. You will see."

In the end, greed got the best Baron Kran. "I suppose that since you seem to trust them so much, dealing with the Sith is an acceptable risk. Yes, yes—most acceptable," he said, rubbing his hands together greedily.

"I'm glad you think so," Ondi said, smiling to his reflection in the viewport.

A flurry of activity outside caught Ondi's attention as the shuttle came around to the light side of the planetoid. There before him, he beheld a sight most beautiful in his eyes; an immense ship construction yard.

Fleets of cargo shuttles and small workforce transports swarmed around the construction yard like insects around a massive hive. Several battlecruisers bristling with weaponry drifted nearby ominously; guarding their unfinished brethren. The battlecruisers were large and aggressive looking and carried deadly firepower.

Numerous clusters of crescent-shaped starfighters zipped around the battlecruisers and the outer perimeter of the huge construction site. Ondi watched as four of the starfighters approached his shuttle, then settled into an escort formation around it. He studied the space craft with great satisfaction. It was a beautiful, sleek, and deadly craft equipped with the best and latest technology in blaster cannons, shields and engines. The Mandalorian scientists were exceptional at developing such things and their work was unparalleled, impeccable.

Ondi's looked from the starfighters to the battlecruisers and other such capital ships floating in space around his shuttle with envy. He eagerly awaited the day when he would be able to command a fleet of these ships into battle, for he had been studying their capabilities for years now and saw their limitless potential in stratagem.

*Soon. Very soon...*, he thought with a thin smile.

The fighters guided the shuttle towards a narrow corridor in the middle of the construction yard, giving Ondi and the baron a spectacular view of the happenings there. Massive skeletal frames hundreds of meters long waited at the fringes of the shipyard for their chance to be completed, while further in were ships near total completion. Flashes of light sparked all across the surfaces of these ships, making them appear to have an electric charge surging over their hulls as enormous hull plates were being welded into place.

Further in were ships nearing completion. Their hulls were finished. Their engines were in. All that remained was the completion of their interiors, as well as some minor weapon systems. At this current rate of construction, it appeared that there would be another ten battle cruisers and two more of the slightly smaller Flash Attack cruisers completed in the next few weeks.

All was going well and was right on schedule.

Looming in the distance and towering above everything else was their destination; a giant space station. Its construction had started prior to any other construction and had taken over five years to build using every crewmember available. It was only after the station was well on its way to completion that work began on the other ships. The enormity of the space station became apparent the closer they got to it. Everything around it paled in comparison. Battleships orbiting nearby were shadowed by its towering height and width, and the tiny blue-white specks that were the engines of starfighters resembled Fire Gnats as they swarmed around the space station in parade formation.

Ondi's viewport was soon swallowed by the size of the station. Nothing could be seen out of it now except for an enormous patchwork of hull plating, laser turrets and shield generators. Numerous hanger bays lined the axis of the station and were growing larger by the second as the shuttle approached. These hangers differed greatly in size. Some were only big enough to house one or two shuttles the size of Ondi's, while others were large enough to house a *Flash Attack* battlecruiser.

Though he had seen the station numerous times before, Ondi still marveled at its greatness and contemplated with pleasure the fear and destruction it would deliver to those that dared oppose them. Such a sign of strength and power would demand respect and obedience to all throughout the galaxy.

The quartet of escorting fighters peeled off as the shuttle neared its designated hanger. A slight shutter lurched the ship as tractor beams took hold and began pulling it forward on invisible strings. Slowly, the shuttle entered the spacious hanger and began lowering onto its landing skids.

With the baron at his side, Ondi watched from the viewport as an honor guard of tan-uniformed Mandalore troops marched into the hanger. The troops split into two separate lines with the greatest of precision and came to attention near the shuttle's hatch. Ondi was impressed that they would do such a thing for him, but then the person the honor guard was intended for entered the hanger; a figure dressed in a black, hooded robe.

A Sith.

The honor guard snapped to attention as the robed figure walked by with aggressive strides, then stopped to wait near the hatch of the shuttle.

Ondi noticed with amusement as the baron began to tremble anew at the sight of the dark figure. "Come, baron," he said. "We mustn't keep our host waiting." He began moving towards the room's door.

After a slight hesitation, Kran fell into step behind him; gnawing at his fingernails in fear the whole way.

That fear was doubled when they met back up with Sasha at the ship's hatch. The Baron's trembling quickly increased into uncontrolled ripples at being forced into such close proximity with the Marauder, and his eyestalks constantly darted to keep the woman in his field of vision as they waited for the ramp to lower. Ondi worried that the overweight Gran might give himself a heart attack. He would enjoy being rid of the sniveling coward if such a thing happened, but not just yet. He still needed him.

Once the ramp finished lowering the three of them walked down through the fog of venting gas; Ondi in the lead. As they reached the bottom of the ramp Ondi peered at the hooded being just meters away with searching eyes. The dark figure exuded a potent sense of authority and menace, as if just the sight of him could force one to obey. Although the hood was drawn down too far to know for sure, he was quite certain he'd never met this Sith before. He was looking forward to it. Any chance to extend his ties within the Dark Order.

But the baron moved behind Ondi and followed him as closely as possible—seeking shelter from the being in black.

Ondi was surprised when Sasha suddenly walked out in front of him and hurried to the black-clad figure. She fell to her knees at the being's feet; bowing her head low and beginning to mumble something Ondi couldn't quite make out.

The robed figure stretched forth a gloved, spindly-fingered hand and touched

Sasha on the crown of her head. Sasha's mumbling quieted instantly. She flinched in fear at the touch.

Ondi and Baron Kran came to a stop a handful of steps away from Sasha and the Sith, and Ondi watched the spectacle taking place before him with puzzlement. No words were being spoken between Sasha and the Sith, but Ondi felt that, somehow, they were communicating all the same.

A twitch suddenly surged through Sasha's kneeling body. Admiral Ondi leaned slightly to the side to peer at Sasha's face and saw an expression of great pain there. He straightened, eyebrows arched in curiosity as he again inspected the black robed being. Sasha was a loyal servant of the Sith, but Ondi had never seen her so submissive to anyone before.

*Interesting...*, he thought, peering at the Sith before him.

The hooded being removed his hand from Sasha's head. She swayed from side to side on her knees; too exhausted to hold herself upright. She braced herself by leaning forward on outstretched arms, gasping quietly for breath.

Then, the Sith raised its hooded head to peer at Ondi, and Ondi's blood froze. He showed no outward emotion, but his mind was reeling at what he saw; two glowing, blood-red eyes peering at him from within complete and utter darkness.

Baron Kran let loose a scream of terror and ran back up the ramp of the shuttle as quickly as his over-sized body could move, waving his hands wildly in the air. Ondi turned to watch the coward disappear up into the ship's hatch, then returned his gaze to the Sith standing before him.

The hooded being's eyes narrowed and he inspected Ondi for several seconds. Then, finally, the Sith gave a slow, wordless nod. Ondi returned the nod with a slight bow, unable to remove his gaze from those eyes and the foreboding darkness surrounding them.

"You must forgive my Gran companion, Darth Shi'Dow," Ondi finally said. "He's amongst us for his wealth; not his courage. Nor intelligence. I doubt he has even heard of your species."

Darth Shi'Dow was a Darfel; a cousin species of the Delfel and even more rare. Both species evolved with the unique trait of having skin that absorbed all visible light, causing them to appear as shadows and gaining them the unflattering nickname of Wraiths. But somewhere over the course of time the Darfel and Delfel lines had split, with the Darfel obtaining their telltale, glowing, red eyes. Both

species were at one time quite numerous throughout the galaxy, but because of their frightful appearance they had been driven into the unknown regions, or simply hunted down and killed.

“It is a great pleasure to finally meet you,” Ondi said with another bow. “Lord Furia has often spoken of you in our meetings. He holds you in quite high regard.”

“Indeeeeeed, Aaaadmiraaaaaaal,” Darth Shi’Dow answered. His echo-whisper voice seeped forth from the darkness of his hood, enveloping and penetrating Ondi to his core.

The voice sent chills down Ondi’s spine.

“Shall we go greet Lord Furia?” Ondi suggested, shrugging off the strange effect of the voice.



**Darth Shi'Dow - Art by Stephen Duignan**

“He is not here,” Shi’Dow hissed. “He was needed elsewhere. But nothing has changed. Everything is on schedule, and is to proceed as planned.”

“Good,” Ondi replied, pleased that all was well. “Come, let us conduct our

business so that I may depart as soon as possible. I am most anxious to return home, for there is much that needs to be done in Vishovi space and time is growing short.”

“Perhaps you misunderstand. There is no discussion, Admiral,” Shi’Dow said. “All is in place for our next step. I will accompany you back to Qwoon City, and will see to it personally that all goes as planned. We will leave this instant, and I will answer any questions you might have on the way back.”

Ondi was surprised by this sudden turn of events. He hadn’t expected to be escorting a Sith home with him when he had come here today.

“Of course. Shall we?” he said, not batting an eye at the sudden turn of events. He stretched forth a hand in the direction of the shuttle’s lowered ramp.

Shi’Dow nodded and began for the shuttle—his steps heavy and filled with power.

Ondi was just about to turn and follow when he saw Sasha walking off in a different direction. “Might I inquire as to where Sasha is going?” he asked.

“She has been reassigned,” Shi’Dow said simply as he began up into the hatch.

Ondi waited for a further explanation, but none came. “I see,” he said, following Darth Shi’Dow up the ramp. He was upset to be losing Sasha. She had served him well and he had grown accustomed to her presence. But he knew that the Sith had their reasons, so he would not press the matter. The hatch closed behind him with a hiss of venting gas and hydraulics.

As Darth Shi’Dow followed him up to his personal chambers, Ondi thought about what Baron Kran’s reaction would be to having the Sith onboard with them. Perhaps he would have a heart attack after all, and Ondi would finally be rid of him. He knew that was probably too optimistic of an aspiration, but he could hope. Whatever his reaction would be, Ondi knew that the Gran would put on a good show.

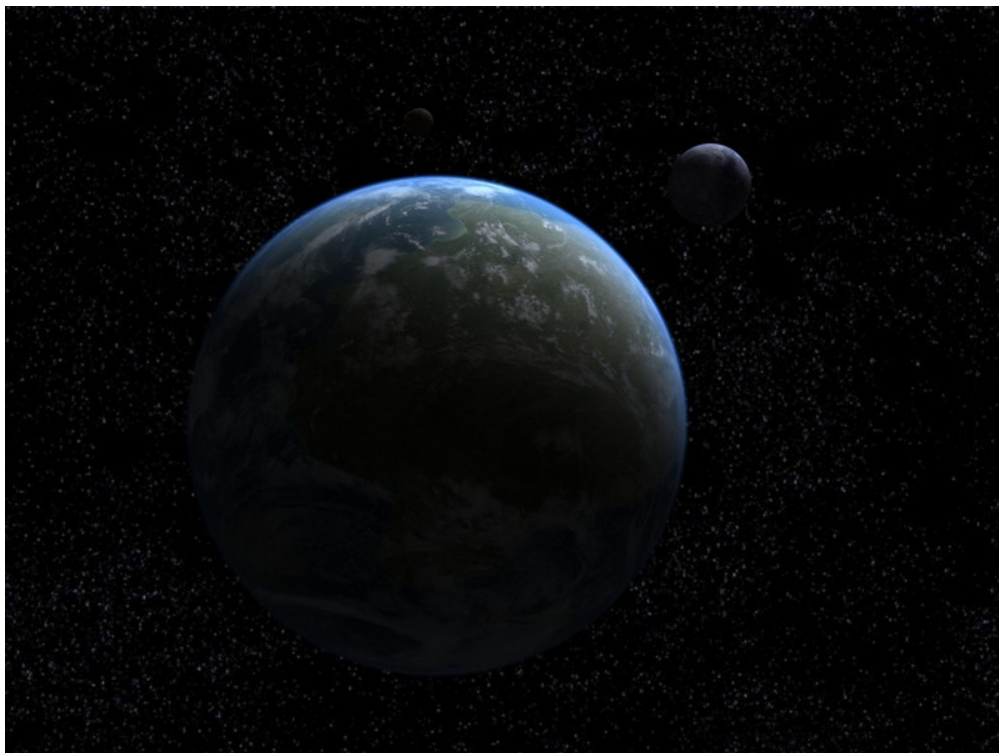
The baron’s fear was a useful tool in keeping him under control, but it was also a matter of concern for Ondi. Cowardly as he was, Kran could still be dangerous if pressed too hard or too far, and he seemed close to cracking. If he did, there was no telling what he might do. And now, with an actual Sith returning with them to the Vishovi Coalition’s capital, Qwoon City, matters would only get worse. He would have to watch the baron extremely closely over these next few days. He was not going to chance having a fool like him ruin all that he had worked so hard to put into motion.

Yet, as he sat behind the desk in his chambers and studied the foreboding, silent Darth Shi'Dow standing and peering out the viewport, Ondi couldn't help but wonder if the baron was right about the Sith. Were they such a threat to him? They were dangerous and couldn't be trusted any further than he could spit; he knew that. But were they plotting against him right now? Had they been from the very beginning? No. They needed him too much to betray him now, or any time soon. He was confident of that.

Still, Ondi continued to watch Darth Shi'Dow as the shuttle went into hyperspace, wondering if he were indeed inviting his own doom by allowing the Sith to be so close to him.

“Jardon Flight Control, this is the *Silver Shadow* requesting clearance for approach,” the pilot called into the comm., his hands dancing across the familiar console as he continued to power down systems used during his recent jump in hyperspace.

The *Silver Shadow*, with its long, swept-back wings and tail, seemed to glide as it sped towards the gleaming blue planet of Jardon—the center of the Jardon Kingdom. Several oblong-shaped battleships orbited the capital, with numerous cruisers and tear-shaped starfighters zipping throughout. The strong military presence was new and alarming to the beings of Jardon and gave the appearance that the planet were under siege. Yet in light of the aggressiveness of the Mandalores’ most recent push into Jardon Space the added security was more than necessary, as well as comforting to the citizens of the capital.



**Jardon - Art by diablo blanco17**



*“Silver Shadow, this is Flight Control,” a young man’s voice said over the comm.. “His Majesty has been expecting your return. All approaches have been cleared and an honorary fighter escort is en-route.”*

“No escort necessary, ensign. You can tell the fighters to stand down.” the pilot said.

*“Yes, sir. Then you are cleared to proceed and land at your discretion.”*

“Thank you, Flight Control,” the pilot said, then reached a hand up to click off the comm..

*“Sir Amaranth?”* the young ensign asked before he could.

“Yes, ensign?” the pilot said.

*“How were the front lines, sir? Did you see much action?”*

Logan Amaranth couldn’t help but notice the excited, adventurous tone of the ensign. He heard it often in the voices of young cadets anxious to do their part to defend The Kingdom against the Mandalores—to exact revenge on the invaders for all of the hardship they had caused The Kingdom’s people. Being young himself, Logan couldn’t blame the ensign for feeling such. Especially when he’d felt the same way just a handful of years prior.

But that all seemed so far away, now. After all that had happened.

In an even tone, Logan finally said, “The front lines were...difficult.”

*To say the least*, he thought, the ache in his right shoulder returning in full force. He’d sustained the injury from an explosion that had killed his entire squad earlier that day—just before he’d been forced to call for an all-out retreat of the moon they’d been protecting. Prakktor Three was just one of many recent losses to the Mandalores, and there seemed to be no end in sight.

He rolled the shoulder in an effort to stretch and relieve some of the pain doing his best to fight back the awful images of the carnage that accompanied it, but never succeeding. It frustrated him that with all of his years of training in The Ways of the Force he couldn’t keep the images from surfacing. Yet, in some small place in the back of his mind, he understood why he couldn’t allow himself to deny the thoughts—why he never really allowed himself to shut them out. He feared that in

doing so he would be doing a great disservice to the brave sacrifice of those that had fought and suffered beside him. That he would be dishonoring them by not remembering what they had done, what they had given up. What they had died for.

Though it brought him great pain, Logan knew that he needed to remember.

Someone had to.

*"Is it true we lost the Grendalore 1, sir?"* the ensign's voice invaded his thoughts.

"Yes. I'm afraid we did," Logan responded, a frown upon his face.

There was silence on the other end of the comm. for several seconds, then the young ensign said, *"It's good to have you back, Sir Amaranth, sir."*

"How old are you, ensign?" Logan asked.

*"...Sir?"*

"How old are you?" he repeated. "And what's your name?"

The ensign hesitated, wondering if he were in some sort of trouble. *"I...uh,"* he stammered. *"My name is Tovah, sir. I'll be twenty next month,"* the ensign answered.

"Then you're only a few years younger than me, Tovah," Logan said.

*"I...I'm not sure I understand what you mean, sir."*

"Please, Tovah, just call me Logan. No sir. It makes me feel old."

*"Understood, sir—I mean, Logan. Thank you,"* Tovah said, clearly honored to be able to call Logan by his first name. *"It's good to have you back."*

"Thanks again, Tovah," Logan said, then clicked off the comm. unit. *Its good to be back,* he thought as he steered towards the planet and kicked in the ship's thrusters.

He altered his course slightly so that he could do a fly-by of one of the *Delta-class* battleships on his way in. He scanned the ship with his sharp, blue eyes and cringed. Long, black scorch marks and deep scars potted the hull. Numerous repair shuttles swarmed about it fixing the damage as best as they could, but it looked to be a pointless gesture. This battleship had been decommissioned months earlier because of the extensive damage, but because battleships were becoming more and

more scarce in the fleet it was being brought back to full operational status. Or, at least, as close as they could get it to that.

The sight of the battered ship made Logan's heart sink. To him, this ship was yet another example of the dire situation that the Jardon Kingdom was in. It wasn't only that they was so desperate that they were now beginning to repair doomed ships, but also that this battleship, and all the others in the Kingdom's fleet, were ancient and obsolete compared to those of the Mandalores. This class of ship had enjoyed its prime nearly fifty years ago during the Great Galactic War. It had been a fine ship then. But now, it was severely outdated and outmatched.

Nearly all of the Jardon battleships had been refitted with new weapons and shielding technology since the beginning of the Mandalore invasion, but even the Kingdom's newest military technology paled in comparison to that of their attacker's. The Mandalores' war technology was significantly advanced. Their shielding was superb, their laser cannons were incredibly powerful and deadly accurate, and their engine technology made their ships incredibly fast.

It wasn't known where the Mandalores had obtained the scientific knowledge to make such bounds in these areas. Emerging from The Fringe, their technical knowledge was surprising. And the Kingdom had had little success in studying what little captured technology they'd obtained to unlock its secrets. Every piece of Mandalorian technology on every ship or vehicle was protected by safeguards that destroyed the component upon inspection. It was clear that the Mandalores wanted to keep their secrets, and with them their technical superiority. The Jardon scientists knew that there had to be a way to disable these safeguards, but no progress had been made thus far.



**Logan Amaranth - Art by FalconFan**

With a sad shake of his head, Logan turned his ship away from the battle cruiser and gunned for the planet below.

Emerging through the thin wisps of cloud blanketing the sky above the capital city, Logan took in the stunning view. The capital city, Vansol, and more specifically the grand palace of the same name, had been his home ever since he could remember, but it was still beautiful to him.

Set in a wide valley framed by towering, snow-caped peaks, the city of Vansol was a gem in the Outer Regions of the galaxy. The vast majority of the buildings of the city were made of stone and of an architectural design that complemented the ancient structures making up the heart of the kingdom's government; buildings wrought with tall, windowed domes, pyramids lined with steps that reached for the sky, tall spires, facades lined with rows of pillars, and long plazas filled with fountains and majestic statues heralding leaders of the past.

Logan gazed down at the wondrous city with a small smile on his young, strong face. The hardness brought on by war was softened, and for a brief moment his eyes shone with a youthful hope and wonder that had been too quickly lost. Memories of more simple times flooded his mind. Memories from his childhood. Memories with Sci. Memories of being with his Master.

*Master...gone. Dead. ...Lost.*

As usual, painful memories and sour emotions poured into his mind at thinking about that. He shook his head in an effort to clear these negative thoughts, but they remained. He tried again, but they clung on even more fiercely as images of last night's nightmare crept into the fray. The dream was the same every time he'd had it for the past year and a half, but crisper this time—more vivid.

Filled with images of children, scores of children!, in a deep, dark tunnel. Screaming and crying. Wailing in suffering and pain. Calling out his name over and over again. Pleading for him to help them!

Logan shook off the sour effects of such a thought and turned his attention back out of the viewport—to where his hands had instinctively guided the ship.

Located atop of the sole hill in the spacious valley and reaching for the heavens for all to see was the grand Palace of Vansol. As expansive as it was majestic, the palace covered the entire crest of the large hill and even spilled over onto the steep slopes. Filled with wide domes, arched walkways and glistening spires the palace was a breathtaking sight—a beacon of noble justice for the people of the kingdom. Of honor. Of peace.

“Silver Shadow, *this is Palace Security,*” a man's even voice said over the comm.. “*Your ship's landing pad is cleared and ready, Sir Amaranth, sir.*”

Logan shook his head, an amused smile on his face. Though he'd tried numerous times to get Palace Security to ease up on the formality it was no use. And he knew exactly who to blame for that.

“Thank you,” Logan said, then began easing back on the thrusters as he brought the ship in low over the palace, then set down on a landing pad jutting out over the cliffs of the hill. With quick flicks of his fingers across the console, he shut the engines down and opened the hatch. Standing, Logan grabbed the maroon, hooded robe draped over the copilot's chair and shrugged it on over his brown tunic and pants. Then, he picked up the gold lightsaber hilt laying on the chair and attached it to his utility belt on his way to the open hatch.

His steps were swift and sure as he walked down the ramp, filled with a confidence and strength of character rare for his age. A landing pad crew, dressed in royal blue jumpsuits, came towards him along the narrow walkway leading from the circular landing pad to the palace. One of the men stopped in front of Logan and gave him a quick bow, which Logan returned.

“Anything we can do for her?” the man asked, eyeing the beautiful, sleek ship

lustfully.

It was a look Logan often saw, and he turned to follow the man's gaze. The Silver Shadow was a one-of-a-kind ship with the very best of everything. Designed and built by a smuggler friend whom had given the ship to Logan in gratitude for saving his life, it was also filled with several...surprises that had come in handy on more than one occasion.

Logan wasn't one to dwell on material things, but he liked this ship. He liked her a lot. And he would take care of any repair or modifications himself.

"Just refuel her, please," Logan said.

The man's face drooped in disappointment, but he answered, "Yes, sir," all the same.

Logan turned and continued across the narrow walkway towards the palace, the afternoon sun shining down on his light-brown hair. The sunlight felt good on his face. He peered up at the sky, soaking it in. It had been the raining season on Prakktor Three, so he hadn't seen the sun in nearly three weeks.

The door leading into the palace hissed opened before Logan reached it, and he turned his eyes down to see why.

An elderly man with short, white hair and dressed in formal palace robes waited in the doorway. His posture perfect, chin held high, hands clasped behind his back, the man peered at Logan with a greeting smile.

A smirk tugged at the corner of Logan's lip at seeing the man. "Good to see you again, Niles," he said.

Niles gave a slow, theatrical nod of his head. "And you as well, Sir Amaranth."

Niles was rather small in stature, quiet, and easily overlooked, but the elderly man had a glint of wisdom and experience in his bright hazel eyes. He was personal assistant to the king and minder of all things proper in the palace. Yet, despite his stuffy appearance, Logan knew Niles more as a grandfatherly figure than etiquette expert. Having been raised in the palace and having grown up as the best friend of the one-time prince and now king, Sci Jardon, Logan had seen the larger, greater part of Niles; his loving, caring and kind side.

Niles had looked after Logan and Sci ever since that day long ago—ever since the day Sci's father and Logan's Master had left, never to return. Niles had shown

them how to overcome the pain and sudden loss and had helped them to become the young men they were now.

Niles straightened quickly, curtly, from the bow and allowed Logan by with another theatrical display—this time a showy wave of his hands.

“Still haven’t let up on Palace protocol, I see,” Logan said with an internal laugh, his maroon robe swaying behind him as he walked.

“Of course not,” Niles replied with a mischievous air, falling in step with Logan down the hall.

“Yeah, well, it’s good to see *some* things never change in the galaxy,” Logan said, his tone heavy.

Niles was silent for a beat. Then, his tone equally grave, he asked, “How bad was it?”

“Bad. Really bad,” Logan said. “We lost a whole division the first day—before we bunkered down.” Shaking his head, he said, “Those men fought their hearts out and the Mandalores still bowled over us like we were nothing!”

Nothing was said for some time. They just walked in silence.

Finally, Logan asked, “How’ve things been here? How’s Sci holding up?”

Niles let out a long, tired breath. “That’s why I came to greet you. They’re at it again.”

“Thorne?” Logan asked, an edge of frustration in his tone.

“Yes, and the others as well, this time,” Niles replied.

Logan’s jaw tightened. His eyes narrowed. “Then we’d better hurry,” he said, quickening his pace.

*“We lost another three cruisers and a battleship yesterday. I need more men and ships! Their attacks have become even more aggressive than before!”* Admiral

Sawdee's image on the display screen said. The screen was on the wall at the end of the large, white-marble table in the middle of the War Council Room.

The room was filled with aides and military personnel, and at the head of the table, in a high-backed throne, sat Sci Jardon, King of the Jardon Kingdom. On the wall next to Admiral Sawdee's were display screens showing the images of General Frag and Admiral Thorne. All three men were well into their sixties with gray, or mostly-gray, hair and eyes that showed their great displeasure and contempt.

*"Admiral Sawdee is right, Your Highness," General Frag's image said. "We must have more men and ships if we are to hold off the Mandalores' attacks!"*

Logan listened as he walked into the large War Council Room and through the crowd of aides and government officials, shaking his head in frustration. These military commanders had been saying the exact same things for the last few months—ever since the Mandalores had begun their ruthless attacks—and the answer had been the same every time: there simply were no other resources or ships.



**Niles - Art by FalconFan**

Logan met eyes with Sci as he made his way through the crowd of beings.

Sci acknowledged him with a quick nod, then turned his firm gaze back to the bank of display screens at the other end of the room.



Logan inspected his best friend as he made his way through the crowd—his only friend growing up, really. Even sitting down one could see that Sci was tall. He looked tired and more worn out than usual today. Logan could see the beginnings of worry lines across his friend's brow and around his mouth, and the dark circles under Sci's brown eyes told Logan that he was still not sleeping much. As usual, Sci's long, jet-black hair was pulled back in a ponytail, and he was draped in the formal, ceremonial robes of his position as king.

Logan came around with Niles to stand a short distance behind Sci's throne. Logan made sure to stand where he could be seen by those in the display screens across the room, folding his arms into the sleeves of his maroon robe and fixing the military men with an even stare. He was pleased to see the men's eyes dart to him, then settle back on Sci with a less hostile gaze, a more respectful light in their eyes. All except for Admiral Thorne. His gaze remained as hard as ever. At least he's consistent, Logan thought, shaking his head.

"Have the civilians been evacuated from the planet, Admiral Sawdee?" Sci asked in a tired voice.

"Yessss..." The Admiral said, question in his tone.

"Then pull back to the Reffsa system," Sci ordered.

Logan watched the images of the military men stiffen at his saying this.

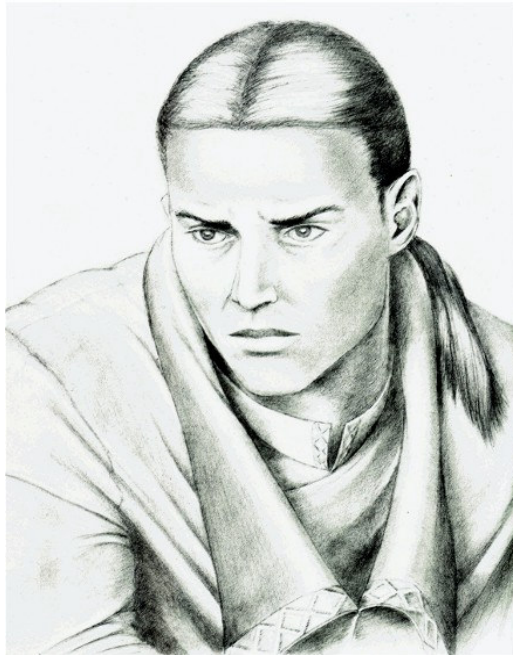
*"Your Highness...I don't think you understand,"* Admiral Sawdee said. *"If we pull back the Mandalores will take control of the system—their sixth this month, if I remember correctly."*

"Yes, you remember correctly, Admiral. And I do understand," Sci said, his jaw tight, an edge of anger in his tone as he poked a finger across the table at the display screen. "Never think I don't. But I see no reason to risk the loss of thousands of lives by defending a planet when there is no one on the planet. Do you?"

*"Your Highness—if we give in to them now, what's to stop them from taking over the rest of the Kingdom?"* The sharply featured, tall and thin, white haired, white mustached Admiral Thorne asked. His tone was even, but the underlying challenge in his eyes was unmistakable.

"We do *nothing* for our people by allowing men to die when it is less than necessary, Admiral Thorne," Sci said, trying to keep his frustration from bubbling

over. “Luckily, Alcorra is not a key system. It is only on our outer borders, so its loss will not mean the collapse of the kingdom. But the loss of the central systems would, so they need to be protected. As you all know, we have far fewer battleships than we need to defend ourselves. I have already ordered eight more *Delta*-class battleships to be brought back to operational status, but it will be weeks before they are ready for war. So, we will continue to evacuate our people and our military might until we are centralized enough to make a meaningful stand against these aggressors. They outnumber us too greatly to handle matters otherwise.”



**Sci Jardon - Art by FalconFan**

*“The Delta--lass ships are obsolete compared to the Mandalores’ cruisers,”* Admiral Sawdee scoffed. *“They’re relics from The Great War and are far past their prime. The Mandalores have been picking them apart with their advanced weaponry, and the Delta--class’ laser batteries hardly even penetrate their ships’ shielding!”*

“Yes, but they’re all we have, Admiral,” Sci said, again fighting back the urge to lose his temper. “We don’t have the time or the resources to build new ships, so the Delta Classes will have to do.”

*“It is obvious that more military personnel is what we need to defend ourselves,”* Thorne pressed. *“You could initiate the draft, your highness. There are more than enough beings in the Kingdom to facilitate our needs. If we had more troops, we could crush the Mandalores before they had the chance to get any further! No longer would they drive our people out of their own homes!”*

“I’ve had this discussion with you several times before, Admiral Thorne, and my answer is still the same. I will not force my people into battle unwillingly. Is that clear?”

Thorne had been pushing for the initiation of a draft for some time now and it had caused quite a bit of tension between the two of them.

*“But, your highness...”* Admiral Sawdee started to say.

“Admiral Sawdee—pull your forces back to the Reffsa System!” Sci cut him off in anger, ending all discussion.

There was a moment of stunned silence in the room. Then, finally, the images of all three men said, “Yes, your highness,” before their images disappeared and the screens went blank.

As soon as their images disappeared Sci got to his feet, causing all others in the room to stand or bow their heads in a sign of respect. Tall with a lean, fit build and handsome-faced, Sci moved with the assurance of a king. Logan waited patiently as Sci tried to make his way back to him, but several of the aides and government officials in the room stopped him along the way, asking him to sign documents or approve some project or legislation.

When he did finally reach him, Sci let out a long breath and stared at the floor for some time. Then, raising his brown eyes to look directly at Logan, he said, “Let’s get out of here.”

They walked out of the War Council Room in pensive, agitated silence and made their way down a hallway lined with pillars and arched windows. Grand murals of long dead Kings and Queens frozen in grandiose, god-like poses filled the vaulted ceiling and stared down at them. Palace security guards, dressed in their blue uniforms with gold buttons and clasps lined the hall, bowing as they passed. The two of them walked out onto a wide balcony overlooking the palace gardens and the city beyond. A handful more security guards stood at attention along the curve of the wide balcony, but they kept their eyes fixed on the grounds beyond.

Leaning on the balcony railing, Sci looked out over the far-reaching expanse of Vansol while Logan stood with hands folded in the sleeves of his robe. They peered out across the rolling foothills and the purple mountains in silence for some time, soaking in the calming scenery.

Sci let out a long, tired breath and hung his head. “What am I going to do, Logan?”

he asked. Turning from the balcony and peering at his friend, he said, “They’re going to keep pressing me and pressing me until I initiate the draft. You know that, don’t you?”

“You’re doing the right thing and you know it,” Logan said.

“*I* know I’m doing the right thing. *You* know I’m doing the right thing. But how do I make people like Admiral Thorne see that?” Sci asked. “I swear—he looks at me like I’m just some kid who doesn’t know what he’s doing! He’s just too old, proud, and set in his ways to accept someone of my age as a true leader of the people—especially in a time like this!”

“I know. But you can’t let his disapproval stop you from doing what you know is right,” Logan said.

“I know that,” the young king said with another sigh. “I just wonder how much longer it will be before he decides he’s had enough of me and takes matters into his own hands.”

“He would never do that,” Logan scoffed, brushing off the comment as absurd.

Sci looked at him with a small smirk. “You may have the Force, Logan, but that doesn’t mean that you can see everything. Remember—whether I like it or not, I come from a long line of political leaders. And I tell you—I can spot a man who’s had enough of following orders he doesn’t believe in. I used to look at my father the same way when we were kids. Remember?”

“Yes. I remember,” Logan said, conceding to Sci’s point, worry on his brow.

Sci turned back to leaning on the railing, shaking his head. “I can only imagine what they’ll say when the advisors from the Galactical Union arrive tomorrow. They’ll probably be furious that I’m going to outside help.”

“Maybe, maybe not,” Logan shrugged. “I think some will see the logic in it, and you’ll gain respect in their eyes. As you yourself have said time and time again; we need to get the Galactic Union involved if we’re going to win this war. So if they are willing to send advisors, that’s a step up from them just ignoring us. Next, they might even send supplies or ships. Then, the Force willing, troops. And then they’ll be fighting right along side us—as they should have been from the start.”

Sci paused for several seconds in thought, then turned and asked, “Are you sure you want to go through with this? Once those advisors arrive there will be no more hiding for you. Even though they’ll probably only be political or military

specialists, they're bound to notice that you've been trained in the Ways of the Force. I don't think anyone could miss that. They'll alert the Jedi Order of your existence as soon as they see you! Then, the Order will come here and test you, and demand you return with them to The Temple so they won't have a rogue Force-user on the loose in the galaxy to worry about."

Peering out across the valley, a tightness in his eyes, teeth clenched, Logan said, "I won't go with them. *Never.*"

"I know you won't. And that's the dilemma. What if they see you as a threat and take steps to ensure you won't be a problem? Are you really ready to take that risk? You're strong in the ways of the Force, Logan, but not that strong."

Logan let out a long sigh. "I really don't see that I have a choice in the matter anymore. The Force is telling me that brining in the advisors is the right thing to do. And you and I both know that we need the Union's help." A fire of mischief grew in his eyes, and a sly smirk broke across his lips. "Besides—do you really think that I would allow the Jedi to take me without a fight? They'd be sorely mistaken if they think they could."

Sci let out a small laugh, clasping a warm hand on Logan's shoulder. "They sure would," he said. Then, releasing the hand, worry back on his face, "I just hope The Admirals see the coming of these advisors the way we see it."

There was silence between them for a bit. Then, Sci said nodded and said, "Pride."

"What?"

"It's all about pride. Admiral Thorne is a smart man, one of the best and brightest military leaders that the kingdom has, but his pride is continually getting the best of him. He can't stand the fact that we're pulling our forces back and retreating from the Mandalores without a fight in most places. He thinks that it makes him, and the rest of us, look weak because we aren't taking a firm stand now and aren't fighting to the last man to prevent them from getting one system further."

Sci shook his head. "He can't stand the idea that they're taking anything that belongs to the kingdom. He's only worried about the way it all looks instead of being worried about the end result: the safety and survival of the beings of the kingdom. I just hope Thorne doesn't ruin it all for the rest of us."

"You know," Logan said, "pride can affect us all. It can even reach as high as a king."

Turning to peer at him, Sci asked, “What do you mean by *that*?”

Logan shrugged. “I know that what you are saying about Admiral Thorne is true, but, ...sometimes I think you let your own pride get the best of you, Sci. You take a lot offense to him treating you like you don’t know what you’re doing, and you see him as so proud that you never give him a chance to explain his ideas. You said it yourself—he is a bright man and you might be able to learn a thing or two from him. I think that you should remember that.”

“So...what—are you siding with *him* now?” Sci asked, offended.

“Don’t be stupid, Sci. I just thought that that was something you needed to hear. That’s all.”

“Sorry,” Sci apologized, deflating. “I haven’t been getting much sleep lately and I guess I’m a little touchy.”

“I know the feeling,” Logan said, frowning as he stepped forward and leaned on the railing himself.

Sci studied him for a handful of seconds, then said, “You had another dream about the children.” It was a statement, not a question.

Logan nodded slowly.

“Was it the same as all the others?” Sci asked.

“Yes. Except...they’re getting clearer. More in focus, and with more detail. Now I can actually see the faces of the children instead of just blank smudges.” A shiver ran down his spine as he thought about those faces—horrificed, confused, angry, but all innocent.

“What do you think it means?” Sci asked, perplexed.

“I’m not exactly sure, but I think it means something big is about to happen. Something...I don’t know.” He shook his head in frustration.

“Does it mean you’re getting close to finding out who’s taking them and why?” Sci asked.

For nearly three years now Logan had been tracking and investigating a mysterious epidemic of child kidnappings in the Outer Rim Territories. He had gathered a tremendous amount of information on the horrific crimes, but nowhere in the information could he find a motive...or a suspect.

Whoever was doing the kidnapping left nothing to chance. The parents, and all other living in the house--including other young children--had been murdered during the kidnappings, and no neighbors remembered or saw a thing. It was as if ghosts were stealing this children!

“Maybe. I think so. But...there’s something else as well. I get the feeling that something’s approaching. Something big. Something dark...” *something terrifying!* He finished in his mind. He didn’t want Sci to be any more worried than he already was.

His friend was quite taken back by this last statement, and he searched Logan’s face for more details. Logan knew that Sci could tell that he was holding something back, but, thankfully, Sci changed the subject. “I spoke with Dreb this morning. He said he has some new information for you. Said he’s waiting on Yollus.”

“Yollus...,” Logan thought aloud, brow furrowed as he slipped back into pensive silence and looked out across Vansol.

Sci eyed him suspiciously, and when he could no longer contain it, he asked, “What is it?”

Turning to look at him with a deadly-serious gaze, Logan said, “The planet Yollus was in my latest dream.”

Sci studied him for awhile, then asked, “What does it mean?”

Logan turned his eyes to the ground, deep in thought. Then, suddenly, he blurted, “I’ve got to go,” and turned and began walking away.

“Logan—wait!” Sci called out, hurrying after him. When he finally caught up with him they both stopped. “This prompting you mentioned? This dark...whatever in your dream? Should I be worried?” Sci asked.

Logan didn’t say anything for a few seconds. Finally, he shook his head and said, “I wouldn’t worry about it too much. It’s probably nothing. And maybe it’s not a prompting at all,” he said with a shrug. “Maybe I’m just getting nervous about the advisors coming and my letting the Jedi know that I exist. I’m probably just jumping at shadows,” he said, doing his best to sooth Sci’s nerves.

Sci eyed him hard. He could tell Logan was holding back. “If you say so,” he said. Then, with a tight-lipped grin, Sci put a hand on Logan’s shoulder. “May the Force

be with you.”

Logan returned the gesture. “May the Force be with you,” he said with a smile. Then, he turned and walked away.

Though it was quite warm out, Logan raised the hood of his maroon robe to conceal his worry-filled face and walked away with his arms tucked into the sleeves. He would have to stop off in his chambers to grab a few items first, but then he would be off for Yollus and his meeting with Dreb.

He cringed as he went, hoping that, somehow, he would finally find some answers to the problems plaguing his mind.



Logan watched through the view port of the *Silver Shadow* as the planet Yollus grew larger by the second. Approaching on the night side of the planet, he could see the small points of light in the southern hemisphere that marked the location of the planet's largest spaceport and city, Anodurra. A handful of small cruisers hobbled together from spare parts and sections of numerous different ships, beat up shuttles and single-seated craft zipped to and from the surface of the planet. Located just beyond the borders of the Jardon Kingdom, Yollus was one of the main pit stops along the Outer Rim for spacers, smugglers, pirates and all sorts of scum. These frequent visitors made the planet a rather dangerous place to be if you didn't know your way around such types.

Just four decades prior Yollus had been a bustling, nearly-respectable planet. But like so many other "Boom Systems" its importance, and its decency, had vanished right along with the last remnants of the precious ore mined from its crust. Now, all that remained was a small community of prospectors hoping to find undisturbed treasures in the vast, abandoned mines, and a mostly rundown central city filled with cantinas and brothels.

The vast majority of the visitors to the planet were headed for this famed Cantina District of Anodurra to either have some fun, cause some trouble, or, in most cases, both. This is where Logan was to meet Drebb; their contact from a freelance smuggling and information brokering organization. He understood why Drebb wanted to meet him away from Jardon. The Kingdom's strong anti-smuggler policies made for a rather dangerous place for such a meeting. But Yollus seemed quite out of the way and dangerously close to the front lines of the Mandalore invasion forces. Still, Logan knew that there was something important about him being here. The Force would not have prompted him in such a way were it not.

The spaceport of Yollus was a far cry from organized with such things as traffic control or birthing logs. In fact, since the planet lacked any type of formal government, the spaceport wasn't regulated at all. Logan didn't have to call in to a landing station to receive an approach vector or be assigned a landing grid. He could land wherever he saw fit.

As he came through the clouds and Yollus' scattered lights came into view he decided to land on the outskirts of the city to avoid drawing any unwanted attention to himself, or the *Silver Shadow*. A ship like her landing in the Yollus

spaceport would be a dream come true for ship thieves. Not that they could ever penetrate the ship's security measures, but he'd rather not tempt any into trying.

Setting her tri-landing skids down in the tall grasses of the outskirts of the city, Logan powered down the deep purring of the engines with a flick of switches and left the cockpit for the aft hatch. Clamped to the floor and facing the closed hatch was a hover bike. He mounted the simple bike with a swish of his maroon robe, then turned it on. The bike's low, rumbling, repulsor engine filled the compartment. Using the Force, Logan pressed a button on the far wall. The cool, night breeze seeped in as the hatch hissed open. He raised his hood, then, leaning forward, he gave a hard twist of his right hand. The speeder bike dropped down to the ground and shot towards the silhouettes of the darkened buildings making up the outer limits of Andorra as the hatch slid shut behind.

Though most of the city was either abandoned, crumbling buildings left over from the mining boom or bustling cantinas and brothels, there was still a small area that was a business district of sorts. Food supplies and other such necessities the cantinas and brothels couldn't supply could be bought there. These businesses were run by the small community of prospectors that searched the abandoned mines for lost or hidden veins of ore. They used the money gained from the business to fund their continuing expeditions.

Hardened by years of abuse and theft at the hands of their clientele, the owners of these businesses had formed the closest thing to an organized government on the planet—a strong security force consisting of prospectors. The blocks where the shops were located were guarded by armed beings. And right next to this jealously-guarded business area was the residential district where the prospectors lived with their families. The community was well kept and well guarded. Just like their businesses, the prospectors guarded their possessions closely, and their families even closer.

As he sped through the abandoned, rubble-strewn streets of the outer perimeter of the city Logan watched the bustle of ships landing and taking off further away near the Cantina District. He was surprised by the number of visitors. He'd thought that business and visitors would be down because of the recent aggressions of the Mandalores in the nearby areas, but such was not the case on Yollus. The skies were as busy as ever.

He was forced to slow considerably as he navigated through a particularly rough looking section of the rundown city. Rubble from collapsed buildings and burnt out speeders made a virtual obstacle course of the streets. A lot of the positioning of the rubble seemed deliberate, as if someone wanted to slow those that strayed into this section of the city, so Logan kept his senses on high alert for any sign of

trouble.

He sensed beings lurking in the darkened doorways and alleys of the rotting buildings. He could feel them eyeing him with malicious hunger, stalking him as if he were prey. Closing his eyes to slits as he slowly weaved his way by, Logan used the Force to distract their minds from him. Being weak-minded, most of the beings forgot they'd ever seen him. Others had a momentary lapse in what they'd been planning to do, and by the time they'd remembered Logan was far gone.

Yet, despite his efforts, Logan noticed that group of three beings continued to watch him intently even after he tried several times to distract their minds. They were watching and following him from the rooftops of the buildings lining the street, and though he tried he could not distract them. Not wanting and not having time for trouble, he accelerated as much as he could to try to lose them.

They sped up and continued to follow.

He accelerated further, calling upon his piloting skills and the Force to guide him through the piles of rubble.

They tried to catch up, but began falling behind.

Logan made his way through the maze as quickly as possible, trying to put even more distance between himself and his pursuers. He turned a corner and saw a relatively wide-open street ahead of him in the darkness. Relieved, he was just about to bring the bike back up to full throttle when he noticed the silhouettes of three, mountainous beings standing directly in his path a short distance ahead.

All three were well over two meters tall and looked to be made of pure muscle. Bald, ball-shaped heads with long, pointed ears sat atop of trunk-like necks and boulder-sized shoulders. The two on the outside wore unbuttoned vests that did nothing to hide their bulging arms and chests and black pants cut off at the knees. The one in the middle, the biggest of the three, wore no shirt at all. Black, swirling tattoos could be seen all across his chest, stomach and down the full length of his green-skinned, bulging arms.

Logan slowed the bike to a stop as the trio approached on legs as thick as—and judging by the thudding they made—as heavy as durasteel beams.

“You’ve made a mistake. You don’t want to bother me,” Logan stated calmly with the wave of a hand, putting as much Force Influence as he could behind the words.

The three giants showed no signs of slowing their approach.

“Oh, but I think we do,” the tattooed giant said in a deep, booming voice, a malicious, fang-filled grin spreading across his face as he continued forward.

“I don’t want any trouble,” Logan said, raising his hands up in front of him.

Suddenly, Logan’s danger senses flared and he dove off of the side of the speeder bike just as a blaster bolt zipped by his head from above and behind. He continued the roll as several more blast bolts splashed on the ground around him, sending stinging showers of permacrete into his face as the sniper continued to fire. Coming out of the roll, he sprang into a crouching position and activated his gold-hilted lightsaber with a *snap-hiss*.

Crouched on one knee, Logan moved the blade from side to side, blocking every bolt shot at him by the sniper perched atop of the nearby building with deft precision. Then, with a quick jerk of his left hand, Logan grabbed the being with the Force and yanked him off of the side of the building. The being gave a startled cry as he fell, then went silent when he struck a pile of rubble and was knocked unconscious.

Silver-black blade illuminating the dark street with an eerie glow, Logan stood and turned to face the trio of giant, muscular beings with the blade raised in front of him defensively.

“A Jedi!” one of the two vested thugs exclaimed, lowering the blaster pistol clutched in his meaty hand.

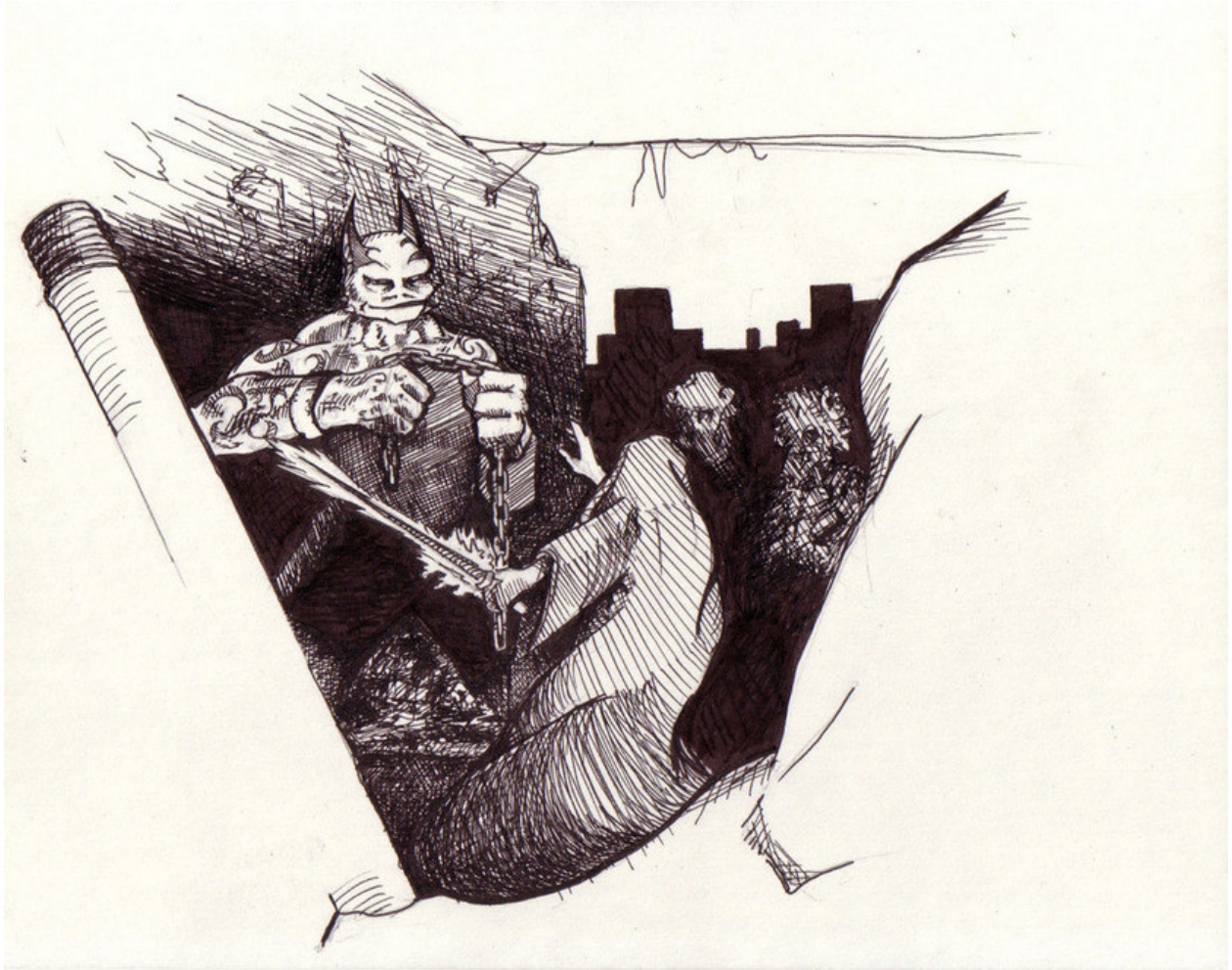
Logan eyed them hard, hoping that the revelation that he was trained in the Jedi Arts would deter them from violence. Yet, as he watched their round faces morph from startled to enraged, he knew this would not be the case.

Knowing that their blasters would only be used against them, the giant beings holstered them, then produced crude weapons of varying types; a thick length of chain, a whip, a slim piece of durasteel piping. Several other members of the gang of varying species and sizes slunk forward from the shadows—each bearing a make-shift weapon of their own.

The group fanned out until they had Logan completely surrounded. Standing with lightsaber held up in front of him, Logan did a quick assessment of the odds: it was nine to one.

“Please—you’re all making a big mistake,” Logan said, peering from face to face. Their haggard, scarred and sneering faces were horrid in the shadows cast by his

lightsaber. “I told you I don’t want any trouble,” he added, shaking his head.



Art by Scott Bowlus

“Well, want it or not, you’ve found some, *Jedi!*” the tattooed giant spat in disgust as the group continued to circle Logan. Turning his attention to the weapon in Logan’s hand, the being pointed a thick finger and said, “That’s a nice lightsaber. I’m sure we could fetch a pretty price for that.”

“If it’s money you want,” Logan said calmly, reaching into his hip pouch to produce several gold credit pieces. “Here. You can have all this.” He threw the money on the ground at the feet of their leader. “But please—I don’t want trouble.”

The leader peered down at the handful of credits, then up at Logan. With an evil grin, he said, “Don’t worry. We’ll take your money. But first...we want your blood!!”

They all charged at once from every direction. Right before they reached him, Logan jumped high into the air to flip over them. Someone in the group had anticipated the move, because he felt something hard smack against the thigh of his left leg. He stumbled as he landed on the outside of the group and felt a surge of pain from the wound. His hand shot to his thigh, checking to see how bad the wound was. A small trickle of blood ran through his fingers and down the tear in his pants, but the cut wasn't deep.

The gang wheeled to face him, and Logan noticed it was the leader with the chain.

The tattooed giant saw him clutching his thigh and gave a wide smile. "First blood," he seethed with pride.

Straightening and gripping his lightsaber with both hands, Logan closed his eyes to slits. Using the Force, he washed away the pain and slowed the flow of blood from the wound until it had stopped completely. Reopening his eyes, Logan crouched into a defensive position with lightsaber held out in front of him. He gazed fixedly at the group. He didn't wish to harm these beings, but he would defend himself. He had to.

"GET HIM!" the leader roared, and they charged forward again.

At one with the Force, Logan was prepared for battle. He thrust his left out at the charging group, hitting them with a booming Force Push. Three of the smaller members took the blast full on and were flung several meters backwards and crashing through a wall. Logan took a large, sliding, side-step as the rest of the group neared. Moving with blinding speed, he sliced his blade in an upward arch, cutting straight through the thigh of an unsuspecting being near the middle of the group. The being was sent to the ground howling in pain, clutching the severed limb.

Continuing his long, sliding, side-step until he was at the outer edge of the group, Logan swung his left arm in a backwards windmill motion. His silver-black blade severed the outstretched arms of two more of the gang. Then, he pulled in his arms and gracefully spun out to the side. He spun away from the group to come to a stop with his back less than a meter from a wall of one of the buildings lining the street.

The giant with the whip snapped it at his legs in an attempt to trip him, but Logan merely jumped into the air and flipped over the entire group as the whip whooshed by harmlessly underneath him. The leader of the group once again anticipated Logan's move and swung the thick chain up to strike him, but this time Logan was ready for it.

He sensed the chain coming as he flipped through the air. Using the Force to protect his hand from the impact, Logan grabbed the chain, then twisted his wrist to wrap it around his forearm. As soon as he landed on the other side of the group, Logan ground his teeth and twisted his upper body while he yanked the chain with all the power the Force could afford him. The tattooed leader's eyes went wide as he was suddenly, and violently, jerked off of his feet and sent flying through the air straight towards Logan's back. Logan ducked, then watched as the enormous being flew by right over him to make a giant hole in the wall of a building on the far side of the street.

Logan stood and allowed the chain to fall from his hand. He felt the vest-wearing monstrosity with the whip charging him from behind and leapt into the air in another back flip. As he came around in the flip he kicked the being going under him right in the back of the head, sending the being diving into the ground face first. Logan landed in a crouch on the middle of the back of the huge being, then struck him in the back of the head with the hilt of his lightsaber, knocking the giant unconscious.

He stepped off of the large being and turned to face the two left from the group—a Rodian and a thin human. Both were shaking and uncertain of what to do.

Holding his shimmering blade out in front of him and staring straight in the eyes of the beings, Logan said, "No one else has to get hurt. Just let me pass in peace."

The Rodian and the man exchanged looks, then threw down their weapons and turned and ran off down the street.

Alone in the darkness of the dank street, Logan lowered his lightsaber and heaved a sigh of relief glad he hadn't been forced to hurt those last two. But then, the sound of tumbling rubble spun him around, and he saw the tattooed leader emerging from the hole in the wall with fire in his black eyes, his chest heaving with rage. The monster had a big piece of rubble clutched in his meaty hand, and he threw it straight at Logan's head.

Logan shot his left hand up, catching the duracrete block in midair with the Force. Then, with a shove of that upraised hand, he sent the chunk racing right back at the tattooed being.

The gang leader shot thick arms up across his face to protect himself, and the hunk of rubble exploded in a shower of bits and dust across his arms. He then lowered his arms and stared death at Logan.

“Stop this now, or you *will* face the consequences of your actions,” Logan said, pointing the tip of his blade at the being.

The gang leader scowled, then cupped his hands around his wide mouth and let out a long, thundering howl.

Logan thought it to be some kind of war cry, or challenge, so he lowered into a crouching, defensive stance and waited for the giant to make a move.

...But the being remained exactly where he was, peering at Logan with narrowed eyes.

Then, all around him in the dark, Logan began hearing the sound of footsteps running through the wrecked interiors of the surrounding buildings. He heard numerous beings shouting and giving out strange calls similar to the giant’s as they came. He turned in a circle, amazed by the number of beings he heard approaching. He turned back around to peer up at the gang leader. The being wore a triumphant sneer.

Logan knew that reinforcements were coming, and from the sound of it, there were a lot of them.

“You’re gonna get it now, *Jedi!*” the gang leader scoffed as the first of the reinforcements began to emerge from buildings back down the street and ran towards them. More and more spilled out behind those, and soon a mob was coming towards him from back down the darkened street.

Not wanting to draw any more blood, Logan turned and ran for his speeder bike. He jumped on and kicked the engines back on-line. With a ground-splitting roar, the leader charged after him with the thick length of chain back in his hands, swirling it above his head. The speeder bike whined loudly as Logan opened it to full throttle. He ducked down low, hugging the frame of the bike as the chain whipped by right over his head, and sped off down the dark street, leaving the leader behind.

As Logan raced down the street several more beings charged out of the buildings he passed. They began chasing him—shouting, throwing objects, and opening fire with blaster pistols as they did. Several blazing streaks zipped by dangerously close to Logan’s head, and one even glanced off of the back of the bike. He swerved out of the way of most of the blaster bolts, but soon there were too many and his swerving was only slowing him down.

He chanced a glance back and found that the street was now filled with over fifty



shouting, pursuing beings. Not wanting to get shot in the back and knowing that swerving would only slow him down, he reached into his robes and produced his money pouch. He opened the pouch and held it out upside down. He heard the clinking of the heavy gold pieces tumbling across the ground as he continued to race away. The intensity of the blaster fire lessened, then stopped completely.

Logan glanced over his shoulder to see the mob diving onto the ground and jumping onto each other trying to get to the credits. Greed overtook the mobs lust for blood and they began fighting ferociously over the gold. Shouting and the sound of blaster fire erupted once more, but this time none of it was directed at Logan as he sped off down the dark, ruined streets.

After some time Logan slowed to a stop and shut off the bike to listen for any sign of pursuit from the mob. He still heard blaster fire and distant shouting, but it wasn't getting any closer. Apparently, the battle for the gold was still going on. He had lost the gang.

But, looking around, he realized that now he was lost.

He searched for any kind of recognizable landmark, but there was nothing but dark, deserted streets filled with broken down buildings. It looked identical to every other street in this part of the city.

"Great," he murmured, his shoulders slumping.

Letting loose a heavy sigh, he turned his eyes up in search of a building tall enough, and sturdy enough, for him to climb and take a look around to reacquire his bearings. He looked all around him, but none of the buildings looked to be in any condition to be climbed. Every one of them looked as if it might collapse at the smallest gust of wind.

Dejected, he turned his attention back down to the controls of the bike and was just about to start it back up when something registered in his mind. He turned his gaze back up above the buildings to his left. Narrowing his eyes, he saw what had been tugging at the back of his mind—the faint haze of lights reflecting into the air.

He thought the matter over. The lights weren't The Cantina District. He knew that. Even with as far as he had already gone, he knew he was still too far out from the center of the city for the lights to be that. But whatever it was, it would be

someplace recognizable and better than being stuck here. And he knew it was probably be his best bet at regaining his bearings and finding his way back towards the Cantina District.

His mind made up, he started his bike back up and headed off towards the haze of light.

Once he neared the source of the light and the haze grew thicker, more noticeable, he noticed that the condition of the buildings lining the streets here were considerably different. They were still rather crumbled, but all of the doors and windows had been covered up by someone. The rubble in the streets from collapsed buildings had been heaped up into piles on the sides of the road, clearing a path wide enough for a speeder.

The haze of lights was close now. Just a few streets off. Rounding a corner, Logan brought his bike to a halt and peered at the tall, white wall at the far end of the street silhouetted by the glow of the lights. Seeing the wall, he now knew exactly where he was—the residential area of the city's prospectors.

The prospectors had built the ten meter high wall to protect them and their families from the scum of the Cantina District and the gangs of the rundown areas. Logan had never been here before, but he'd heard stories, mostly from Dreb, about the hardships the residents endured. The wall was high and kept the wanderers out, but it did nothing to stop those determined enough to get in and commit one horrible crime or another.

Dreb had told him of the security force the residents had organized since no real local authority or law existed in the city. Most of the prospectors doubled as merchants and owned shops to keep their mining operations funded, so security detail wasn't exactly their specialty. But Logan heard they'd learned pretty fast. In a place like this, he could see how and why.

He pulled up parallel to the wall. He knew if he followed it, it would eventually lead him right down to the part of the city where the prospectors had their shops. And that area was just a short ways away from the Cantina District.

He kept the throttle on the bike low. There were guard posts at gates along the wall, and he didn't want to stumble across one of those patrols and frighten them into aggressive actions. They were probably jumpy enough already as it was. He didn't want to make matters any worse for them or himself. He was already late in meeting Dreb, and he didn't need any more delays.

He noticed a bright patch of glowlamps up ahead and knew that he was approaching one of these guarded, laser-gated entrances. He took a deep breath to calm himself and cleared his mind as he neared the cluster of lights. The alert,

frightened presences of the guards came to him through the Force. They knew he was approaching.

Logan slowed the speeder bike to a crawl as he passed in front of the gate, letting the guards within get a close look at him so they could see he was no threat. The purr of his bike and the hum of the laser gate were drowned out by the thick tension in the air. He turned his head ever so slightly to look at the gate and saw a row of blaster rifle muzzles poking through it and pointed right at his head. Slowly, calmly, he turned his eyes back forward, but kept his senses alert for any signs of danger as he slowly sped away from the lights and the gate.

He was surprised to see that there had been so many guards standing watch. He hadn't taken the time to actually count, but he had felt the presences of at least ten beings back there. He couldn't imagine that being the normal number for guarding a gate. There weren't enough residents to keep up a guard like that all the time. Something terrible must have happened recently for them to increase the security so much. Probably a gang raid.

He thought about turning around and asking the guards at the gate, but decided it would probably be a bad idea. They looked to be on edge enough, and a strange person riding around the rundown parts of the city in the middle of the night asking questions might set off some itchy trigger fingers. He'd ask Dreb later if he knew anything about it.

As he continued down the quiet, dimly lit alley running along the side of the wall he felt a faint disturbance in the Force. Surprised, he brought the bike to an abrupt halt and stretched out with his feelings.

The disturbance was coming from somewhere on the other side of the wall—inside the residential area. It felt like a presence of some kind—almost familiar, but at the same time alien. ...Elusive. It felt inviting, and at the same time repulsive. It was odd. Logan could think of only one place he had ever felt a sensation like it before—a place he didn't like to go, but went to every night; his dreams. Yet, this was the first time he had sensed a presence like this outside of those dreams.

A faint prompting in the Force tugged at the back of his mind, telling him this was important.

*Is this why Yollus was in my dreams? Or was it because I was supposed to meet Dreb?* he wondered, trying to decide which path to take.

He was already late for his meeting with Dreb and he didn't want to keep his friend waiting. The danger he sensed was probably nothing more than a gang making

another raid. That was all. The residents seemed to have more than enough security to handle it without his help. And besides—who's to say that they would even thank him for his help if he offered it? He knew he was more than likely to get a blaster bolt in the back than a word of thanks from anyone around here. It wasn't his fight. He'd just stay out of it.

...But as he pulled back on the throttle the prompting in the Force intensified. He stopped again and searched the feeling for a clue of what he should do. Like a heartbeat, faint but distinct, the prompting in the Force pulsed inside of him. He thought about riding on to the Cantina District and his meeting with Dreb and the pulsing faded almost completely. He thought about finding a way into the residential sector and discovering the source of that strange disturbance and the pulsing doubled, then redoubled.

The Force had spoken.

He knew what he must do.

He pulled the speeder bike into the shadows of one of the buildings along the street and shut it off. He dismounted and looked around to see if anyone was nearby, pulling the hood of his maroon robe further down over his brow. Seeing and sensing no one nearby, he walked to the wall and jumped into the air.

He landed gently, silently, on top of the wall in a crouch, peering down at the rows of pre-fab houses lined up and down the grid-like streets. Each house was identical. There was nothing that set one street apart from any of the others. No signs. No markers. Nothing. He couldn't understand how the residents knew which house was their own.

The crescent moon peaking through the scattered clouds above, affording additional light, Logan searched along the top of the wall and between the nearby houses below for any guards. Straining his eyes and using the Force, he could barely make out the silhouette of two figures standing on top of the wall a hundred or so meters to his left. The beings appeared to be standing near the laser-gate Logan had passed earlier, and gave no indication that they saw him.

Looking out across the blocks of houses, he saw speeders patrolling the otherwise deserted streets. There were several of them. Once again Logan was surprised by the amount of security. There were only about a thousand residents, so he knew that having this much security at night must be hard on the prospectors' schedules.

The whine of the engines of a speeder approaching caught his attention, and he turned to look. The speeder was approaching from the right on the narrow road

running along the bottom of the wall. He could see several beings piled into the speeder, all armed with blaster rifles. A being manned a spotlight affixed to the back of the speeder and was searching the top of the wall Logan was crouched on, and the light was heading straight towards him.

He jumped into the air, landed beside a house on the other side of the street and ran around to the front it for cover. Pressed against the house, he listened as the whine of the speeder grew louder, then steadily became more distant as it continued down the street.

He waited just a few moments longer to be sure no other patrols were coming. Then, closing his eyes and reaching out through the Force, he searched for which direction he should go. Eyes still closed, he slowly turned to face in different directions until one felt right. Opening his eyes, he saw which way he was supposed to go. He ran diagonally across the street and behind the houses on the other side, following the directions of the prompting in the Force.

He continued traveling across street after street in this way, keeping his senses alert for patrols or anyone that might be watching from a window of a house. He had to stay unseen. He knew the locals wouldn't take too kindly to any stranger—even one with good intentions—sneaking around their streets at night. Several streets later Logan had to duck behind a house as another speeder slowly went by on patrol. This one had two lights affixed to its back facing in opposite directions as they searched the gaps between the rows of houses. Once again the speeder had several eager-looking, armed beings piled into its back.

*What's goin on here!?* he wondered, more curious than ever what the prompting in the Force was.

After the speeder passed Logan emerged and continued. He knew he was getting close. He reached out with the Force. He could feel exactly where the strange presence was coming now. It was only a few streets over. He hurried towards it in a flat-out run, hoping for no more delays because his danger senses increased as his awareness of the presence increased.

A couple of streets later he felt a sudden surge of...something through the Force. It felt as if a chill, clammy hand had reached out to touch his presence. He'd felt the sensation before, in his dreams. It made him cold right down to his very bones.

**“NOOOOOOOOO!!!!”** a man's scream split the night, followed immediately by the sound of three rapid blaster shots.

Logan reached into his robes and produced his lightsaber. He dashed between two houses and sprinted down the middle of the street towards where the disturbance was located. Several houses down he saw the outline of a dark-clad figure standing in front of a house. Light reflected from the metal sword held in one hand of the dark figure, with a small bundle cradled in the other as it stood over a man lying on the ground.

Suddenly, a woman ran out of the front door of the house screaming hysterically. “HELP!! Someone help!” The woman saw the dark-clad being standing over the fallen figure. She stopped dead in her tracks. “**NOOOOOOOO!!!!**” she yelled in a blood-curling scream.

The dark figure bounded towards the woman with incredible speed, raising the sword to strike. Still thirty meters away, there was little Logan could do. But he knew he must do something! He thrust out his left hand and hit the dark figure in the back with a Force Push.



**Art by Scott Bowlus**

Yet, because he was so far away, he wasn't able to aim the Force Push as well as he'd wanted. It struck both the dark-clad figure and the woman, sending both crashing into the side of the house.

The woman slumped to the ground after the impact, but the slim, dark figure got up quickly and spun to peer at Logan.

Logan activated his lightsaber with a snap-hiss as he continued to run towards them.

The black-clad being looked from Logan, to the woman lying on the ground, then back at Logan, trying to decide what to do. Then, the being stabbed down into the collapsed form of the woman and turned and raced into the darkness around the side of the house.

Logan sprinted after the being, rounding the side of the house just mere seconds after the black-clad figure. But when he came around the corner, he saw nothing. The being had vanished. Disappeared. There was no sign of it in the darkness between the houses. He stopped and reached out with the Force, trying to sense where the being had gone. He couldn't sense any trace of the mysterious being. Nothing. The strange presence in the Force was completely gone.

Logan stood in the darkness between the houses for several seconds, puzzled.

*What in the Force...*, he thought.

He deactivated his lightsaber and hurried back around to the front of the house. Kneeling next to the woman, he inspected the wound in her side. It looked deep, and a lot of blood was seeping out of it. Carefully, he turned her over onto her back. Barely conscious, she moaned groggily as he moved her. Cradling her head in his lap he found blood was trickling from where she had struck the side of the house. He winced at seeing what he had done, but knew that by doing so he'd probably saved her life.

With barely opened eyes, the woman gazed up at him. She whispered, "My baby.... My child.... They...took...my child...."

Then, her eyes slid closed and her body went limp in Logan's arms as unconsciousness took her.

“Your child!?” Logan asked, a chill of surprise and disbelief running through him. “What do you mean? Who? Who took your child!?” he demanded frantically.

It took him some time to even realize he was shaking her as he desperately tried to force her to answer. Her head rolled with every shake. Cringing, he stopped and gently laid her back down on the ground. He laid a soft hand on her throat, checking for a pulse.

*She can't be! Oh, please don't let her be!*

A giant wave of relief washed over him as he finally felt a heart beat. It was very weak, but it was there all the same.

*Took her child...?* Logan thought, peering down at her still form, his head reeling with what this could mean. Could it be? Had he finally gotten the break he'd been searching for these past three years? Did this woman hold the answers he needed?

A hope he hadn't felt in years filled him. He finally began to see a small glimmer of light at the end of the long, dark tunnel he was in. He knew the road to solving this mystery was still long, but at least now he was making some real progress in the matter. So seldom did hope like this come along for him. He knew he should cherish it. And he did.

The high pitched whine of a fast approaching speeder brought his attention up the road. A patrol vehicles filled with armed beings was racing down the street towards them. Quickly, he scooped the woman up in his arms and stood. He stared at the approaching speeder with a furrowed brow, uncertain as to what he should do.

The woman needed medical attention if she were going to live. And Logan desperately needed her to live to glean information from her. Yet he was hesitant. He feared that if he turned her over to these people he would never see her again. They seemed far too untrusting. He doubted they'd believe him when he told them some one else was responsible for the death of the man and the attack on this woman—especially since no sign of that dark-clad being could be found. He was torn.



The spotlight affixed to the back of the speeder suddenly illuminated him. He squinted, turning his face to the side to shield his eyes from the bright light.

“Look! There!” he heard someone shout from the speeder, followed by a flurry of blaster bolts that exploded all around him.

Logan knew he had no choice. He needed any information this woman might have. Holding the woman in his arms, he turned and began running for the side of the house. He rounded the corner and sprinted through the darkness of the narrow alley between the houses for the next street over.

Suddenly, the alley was awash with light as the speeder’s spotlight shone down it. Logan heard the occupants of the speeder spilling out, shouting curses after him as they gave chase. He ducked as several blaster bolts zipped past his head.

“Here we go again,” he said under his breath, weaving back and forth out of the path of the blast bolts.

He ran around to the front of the house at the end of the alley, then across the street and between the houses on the other side as fast as he could. With the Force as his ally the weight of the woman didn’t hamper his speed in the least. Power surged through him from the energy field, and he bolted through the narrow walkway between the houses.

The group of beings chasing him fired more and more rapidly the further away he got. They could see their quarry slipping away and would not give up easily. The bolts zipped by all around Logan, illuminating the alley with red light as he dodged and ducked, striking the walls and filling the walkway with smoke and the smell of ozone.

He darted to the right just in time to avoid being struck in the middle of the back by a blaster bolt and entered the small area between the back of two houses. Out of sight of his pursuers, he used the Force to jump high into the air. He landed softly on the roof of the house. From there, he had a good vantage of his surroundings, and searched for the closest section of the perimeter wall.

“Where’d he go!?”

“He was right here just a second ago!!” the group of beings shouted as they searched the ally Logan had disappeared into.

Standing silent atop of the house, the unconscious woman cradled in his arms, Logan continued scanning the area for the closest section of wall. He spotted two

speeders racing down nearby streets towards his location, and saw the lights of several others off in the distance heading his way. Apparently, all attention was now focused on catching, or killing, him.

He chanced a glance down over the side of the roof and saw the group of men searching frantically through the alley below. Glowlamps affixed to the barrels of their blaster rifles, they checked every possible hiding place, every nook.

The irony of the situation was not lost on Logan as he watched them search. He knew this was how the dark-clad being had evaded him. It was obvious now, and he berated himself for not having thought of it sooner. Yet, he'd needed the aid of the Force to leap the five meters to the top of the house. He wondered how the dark-clad being had done it. He knew there were numerous humanoid species with the ability to make such a leap unaided, but...something didn't feel right about that solution. It didn't fit. Something in the back of his mind told him there was much more to this situation than it seemed.

Coming out of his thoughts, he turned his eyes back up and continued searching for a close section of the wall and a way out of this place. Squinting, he was pretty sure he saw the faint outline of the long, white barrier jutting up above a row of houses several blocks over to his right, but wasn't certain. He needed his micro-binoculars to be sure. He didn't want to be wrong and end up going further away from the wall.

The woman in his arms stirred as a spasm coursed through her body, and a loud, long moan escaped her lips.

The light of five barrel-mounted glowlamps suddenly illuminated Logan's surprised face.

"Look! There he is!" one of the men shouted.

"How'd he get up there!?" another asked, baffled.

"Blast him!!" yet another yelled.

Logan sprang into action immediately, bolting off to the right across the rooftop in the direction of what he hoped was the wall as blast bolts zipped up and past his head.

"Radio the speeders!" he heard a man yell as they raced after him below. "We'll have them cut him off at the end of the street!"

Hearing this, Logan did all he could to redouble his speed. As worry took hold and his concentration on the Force waned he became more fatigued. Sweat began running down his face. He could feel the woman's weight now, and she was growing more and more heavy. His breathing was getting heavy, labored.

Once again he found himself awash in bright light, and he peered to his right to see one of the speeders racing down the street parallel to him. Through the blinding light he could just make out the silhouette of a figure standing on the back of the speeder. Despite the bright light shining in his face, Logan's eyes went wide when he saw that the man was manning a mounted blaster cannon, and he had it pointed right at him!

The report of the blaster cannon split the night as the man opened fire, and the thick, deadly bolt zipped past right behind Logan. Another was loosed, and this time he stooped his head just in time to avoid having it blown off. Another and another was fired. One exploded on the lip of the roof, sending a stinging shower of sparks into his face. He cringed at the pain, but shrugged it off as best as he could. He kept his eyes forward, training them on the end of the row of houses so as to keep his limited concentration. He needed to stay focused.

He reached the roof of the last house just before the speeder reached the end of the street. He jumped back down to the ground and ran for the shelter of the alley between the next block of houses as the speeder turned the corner and once again bathed him in light. The man with the mounted cannon fired as fast as the gun would allow, tracing Logan's mad dash across the street. The bolts zipped past and exploded on the ground all around him. Tightening his grip on the woman, he jumped and tucked into a forward flip to avoid a blast bolt that would have severed his legs from the waist down. He landed without losing stride, then ducked under a spray of sparks as he finally made it to the safety between the next row of houses across the street.

He heard shouting and the high-pitched whine of the speeder's engines as it turned around, then began racing down the street parallel to the alley Logan was running through. His fatigue grew worse as he dashed through the dark alley, but his resolve kept him going. He had to get the woman some much-needed medical attention. He had to keep her alive! There was one place nearby—near the merchant district—where he knew he could go for such a thing. He just hoped that he could make it there without being killed.

Emerging from the end of the alley, he spotted the tall perimeter wall directly in front of him at the end of the next street. Wanting to reach it as fast as possible, he ran out into the middle of the road and straight for it.

The whine of the speeder reached his ears. Looking over his shoulder, he saw it racing after him down the street. It was gaining, but all he could do was keep running and try and make it to the wall before they caught up with him. His hair and tunic were damp with sweat. The muscles in his arms burned from carrying the woman, and his legs were numb. His breathing was heavy, and his lungs ached.

The speeder's engines were loud at full throttle, but he could still hear the angry shouts of men inside it; cursing after him and promising vicious, unspeakable things when they finally caught him. Logan peered over his shoulder to see how close they were, fear on his face. They were well within blaster range, but weren't using them. He wondered why.

Then he found out.

The sound of another speeder's engines snapped his head back around forward and he watched as first one, then a second speeder came to a stop at the end of the road right in front of the wall—directly in his path.

Both speeders were piled to the brim with men, and each and every man had a blaster rifle raised and pointed at his head.

Logan's eyes went wide, but he could do nothing but continue to run straight at them.

"Stop!" one of the men shouted, an angry scowl on his face. "Stop, or we will shoot!"

The perimeter wall loomed high just beyond the speeders. Logan gathered the Force within him. He could feel the men tensing as he continued forward, could sense their trigger fingers tightening. He could feel the presences of the men in the speeder behind him, and their blasters pointed at his back. He could feel that his time was just about to run out.

"STOP!!" the man shouted.

Logan didn't want to die. There was so much he needed to do! He couldn't leave Sci and the Jardon people to face the Mandalores alone. He couldn't have his fight stopped just yet. Evil needed to be defeated! The mystery surrounding the kidnapping of these children needed to be resolved!

Staring down those blaster barrels, sensing the fire about to come, anger invaded Logan's thoughts.

*No!!* he growled within, a scowl spreading across his face.

Power surging through him from the Force, he tossed the woman over his shoulder like a cargo sack and thrust his left hand out in front of him. The sound of thunder split the air as the front sides of the two speeders tipped, then suddenly flipped as if struck by a giant shockwave. The men within were sent tumbling to sprawl on the street; stunned and dazed, bruised and battered as the speeders tumbled a handful of times more, then settled back down onto their repulsor lifts.

The men in the speeder chasing from behind gawked at what they saw. Before they could gather their wits about them and attack Logan jumped high into the air. Just after he did, the men snapped out of it and opened fire, but the red lances passed by right below him. The men tried to follow him with their wild shots, but he soon disappeared over the ten-meter tall wall.

Landing lightly in the middle of the street on the other side of the wall—his chest heaving with anger, his body surging with power—Logan ran to the shadows of a nearby building and stopped to catch his breath. Gently, tenderly, he lowered the woman from his shoulder to lay her on the ground, then he stretched his aching arms and back.

“He...he went over the wall!” he heard a voice exclaim from the other side of the tall barrier.

“How?”

“I don’t know! I saw the same thing you did!”

“That was impossible!”

“Did you see that?” the men said to each other in astonished voices.

“Get back into the speeders, men! We need to get to the closest exit and see if we can track him!”

“How’re we going to track someone that can do what he just did?”

“I’m not going out there into The District! That’s suicide this time of night!”

“We’ve got to do something! He killed a man and kidnapped a woman! What if that was your wife?”

“Look—what we just saw...what that man did...that’s...that’s just not normal!”

“It’s too bad he took that woman, but what can we really do about it now? How are we going to find him out there in The District? And even if we do, what are we supposed to do then?”

“Yeah!” yet another man chimed in. “If he can jump like that who knows what else he can do!”

“What about *our* wives and *our* children? Are we supposed to risk everything to go on some crazy rescue that will get us all killed?”

“I didn’t volunteer for that!”

“Me neither!”

Calming himself and regaining his strength, Logan listened as the men continued to argue the matter over for some time more. Finally, and much to Logan’s relief, they agreed not to chase after him and agreed to go home.

His breath restored, his temper reined, Logan scooped the injured, unconscious woman back into his arms and started running down the dark street. He knew where he was heading.

The streets were much busier where he was now. He was at the edges of the Cantina District, and there were functioning, though shady in purpose, establishments lining the street instead of just empty ruins. Beings wobbled here and there throughout the streets in pursuit of their next drink or fix of Glitterstrum. Speeders zipped past, as did the more-than-occasional swoop bike gang. Groups of pirates, smugglers and other types prowled by on their way to the next brothel.

Nearly every being watched intently as he passed. Not because he walked with the limp form of a woman in his arms. No. The people in this area could care less about his business. But because he appeared vulnerable carrying the woman, and they were searching to see if he had anything of value on him. Two beings started towards him as if to start trouble, but Logan used the Force to distract their minds and sent them on their way. Luckily, things weren’t as rough here as in the outer areas.

Dodging a swoopbike gang, Logan walked across the street and straight for the most well-kept building on the block. At least, it was well-kept for this city. Far less rubble was piled in front of it. The foundation and walls looked sturdy with patches of duracrete, and all the windows were covered with large sheets of metal

plates. He walked up the small flight of stairs to the thick, durasteel door and kicked three times. The toe of his boot clanged on the metal, echoing within the entry.

Almost a full minute went by with no answer.

Logan peered over his shoulder at the Rodian inspecting him from the bottom of the stairs. He gave the being a harsh, narrow-eyed look. The Rodian continued inspecting him for a handful of seconds longer before finally shrugging and walking away.

“Ambu! I know you’re in there!” Logan shouted, giving the door another series of kicks. “I can sense you, you idiot! Remember? Open the door!” he finished with a final, booming kick.

Several seconds later there was a series of clicks and clanks as the multiple locks on the door disengaged, and then it slowly swung open to reveal the meter and a half tall, slim frame of Ambu.

Dressed in a bright green jumpsuit, Ambu stood in the doorway twiddling his stubby thumbs. “Why, Logan Amaranth! It’s you! What’re you doing here? He, he!” Ambu asked laughing nervously, his brown, shifty eyes darting from spot to spot on the ground.

Ambu was a Snivvian and had the oversized head to prove it. He had a wide snout and an even wider mouth filled with large, flat teeth. His eyes were small and droopy and his head had only patches of brown hair remaining. Being almost a full half-meter taller, Logan could easily see his friend’s sad attempt at a comb-over. It was hard not to stare.

“Why didn’t you open the door?” Logan asked, pushing past Ambu and into the small, dimly lit foyer beyond. He was about to continue into the next room, but Ambu ran in front of him to block the way. Logan brow wrinkled at the strange, sultry music coming from the next room. “And what’s the deal with the music?” he asked, perplexed. Nothing about Ambu’s behavior was making sense.

“Dropping by for a visit?” Ambu asked, trying to appear as nonchalant as possible with his arms stretched across the hallway to block Logan. “Well, perhaps you wouldn’t mind coming back a little later? I’m—sort—of—bu—sy—at—the—mo—ment,” he said, accentuating every syllable with a nod over his shoulder towards the next room.

Logan got the hint and peeked around Ambu. Sitting on the sofa in the next room

was a female Snivvian wearing a yellow dress and far too much make-up. She noticed his stare and gave a shy, blue lipsticked smile while twiddling her long, bleach-blond hair.

“Oh. Sorry, but I need your help,” Logan said quietly, urgently, to Ambu. He indicated to the woman in his arms with a nod and held her out. “She’s hurt, bad, and will probably die if she doesn’t get medical attention soon.”

Ambu stared at the woman in Logan’s arms as if noticing her for the first time. Instantly he transformed from hormone-crazed to concerned. “Yes. Of course. What has happened to her?” he asked as he inspected the woman’s blood-stained shirt and the side of her head.

“She hit her head pretty bad and was stabbed in the side.”

Ambu was all business now. He nodded as he listened to Logan and began feeling for the woman’s pulse. He winced when he discovered how weak it was.

“Follow me. We must hurry,” Ambu said, turning and heading down a hall deeper into the building. His female guest was forgotten as he walked to a door with a small key pad next to it. He punched in a code and the door slid open to reveal a set of well-lit, descending stairs.

“Come. Down the stairs,” Ambu said indicating with an outstretched arm for Logan to go first.

Logan began past Ambu when he heard the sound of someone clearing their throat. Both he and Ambu turned to see Ambu’s female guest standing in the middle of the hall with her hands on her hips, tapping her foot irritably.

“Oh!” Ambu exclaimed. Hand shooting to his hair to make certain it was in place, he began towards her.

“Ahhh...I’m sorry, my dear, but we’ll have to do this another night. I’m sure you understand,” he said, taking her by the arm and leading her towards the front door.

The woman brushed his hand away irritably and stormed out of the front door, slamming it shut behind her.

Logan watched as Ambu’s shoulders slumped and head lowered. “Sorry about that,” Logan said as the echo of the slammed door faded away.

“It’s all right,” Ambu said, turning and walking back towards him. “It wasn’t going anywhere, anyway.”



“The date or the relationship?”

“Take your pick. Now let’s hurry,” Ambu said, and they began down the steps together.

At the bottom of the stairs was another door, and Ambu had to walk around Logan to enter another code into a panel to open it. This was a new security measure to Logan, so as the thick, heavy door slowly began swinging open, he asked, “Been having problems lately?”

“Yeah. We’ve had people trying to break out of the clinic. Glitterstrum withdrawal has some very nasty, and most times violent, effects.”

“I know. I’ve seen it before first hand,” Logan responded.

“For which I am forever in your debt,” Ambu replied, reaching up and placing a hand on Logan’s arm as they shared a knowing look.

Ambu had been a Glitterstrum addict when Logan had first met him. Ambu had once been a fine doctor filled with promise and a bright future, but had fallen into the dark underworld of spice addiction shortly after medical droids had come onto the scene and taken away his job. He’d ended up here in The District and had tried to rob Logan for money one dark night several years ago. Sensing Ambu was really a gentle, caring being at heart, Logan had talked him out of trying to rob him and had helped him get straight. Now, Ambu ran a highly successful clinic for Glitterstrum users wanting to quit.

“It seems like so long ago. But, unfortunately, I still remember most of it. I guess it’s something I’ll end up carrying with me ‘til the day I die,” Ambu said with a shrug as they walked through the now opened door and down a short hallway to yet another door—this one with a window and guarded by two very large beings armed with stunbatons.

Ambu wrapped on the thick transparasteel, and one guard turned to look at them while the other kept an eye on the occupants of the room. The door was opened, and Logan and Ambu walked in.

Several corridors branched off from this main room, which resembled a lounge of sorts. There were several chairs and sofas spread throughout, with tables for games and other activities. Corridors branched off from the room, leading deeper into the underground portion of the building. These corridors each had windowed doors of their own, and were also flanked by a pair of stunbaton-wielding guards. Every one

of them gave Logan and Ambu a quick glance before continuing their watch over the handful of patients spread throughout the lounge.

Logan winced at seeing the patients. He'd forgotten how devastatingly destructive the side-effects of Glitterstrum addiction could be. Every patient was dangerously thin and shallow-faced. Little hair remained on their heads and their skin was a pasty, pale-yellow. Some looked up at them with hate-filled, black-circled eyes, while others peered up at them with soulless, defeated gazes. It was the latter that shook Logan the most. At least those with hate in their eyes still held expression and emotion. The soulless ones looked like the walking dead. It gave him the chills.

A human female with short, blonde hair and dressed in white emerged from a corridor off to the right and looked at the two of them curiously.

"Madame Zara—get one of the other assistants and meet me in operating room two," Ambu said.

Madame Zara gazed at the woman in Logan's arms, then nodded and hurried off.

"Bring her down here," Ambu said to Logan, leading the way to a room filled with medical machines, white cabinets, and an operating table. "Set her down," he ordered as he grabbed a white coat and slipped into it.

Logan did as he was told, peering at the woman's pale face under the bright lights of the operating table. Ambu came up to the other side of the table and began gently inspecting the woman's head, then her side. "She's lost a lot of blood," he said gravely.

Logan looked up into Ambu's face. "Listen—you have to save her. She's very, very important! Do whatever it takes. Do you understand?"

Ambu stared back at him just as seriously and said, "I'll do everything within my power to make sure she lives, my friend, but I cannot perform miracles."

"Just do what you can."

Madame Zara entered the room accompanied by another female. "Prepare a Bacta patch," Ambu said to the women.

The other woman got to work, but Madame Zara turned towards Logan. "We'll handle this," she said, taking him by the arm and leading him towards the door. "You'll have to wait outside."

“I’d like to stay,” he said, hoping Ambu would hear and tell her to leave him be. But Ambu was too busy now to pay any attention, so he let the woman lead him out the door. “Come get me the moment she comes to,” Logan said.

“I highly doubt she will any time soon. But, if she does, I’ll come get you,” the nurse said. “Be sure to stay in this hall. You’ll be safe here.”

“As soon as she comes to,” Logan urged.

“Yes, yes, of course,” Madame Zara said with a nod as she pushed the button to close the door in Logan’s face.

Moving to a small observation window next to the door, Logan watched as Ambu began work on stopping the flow of blood from the stab wound in the woman’s side. A transfusion was already going. The Bacta patch was already in place on the side of her head and Madame Zur was inspecting the med-readouts on a display screen on the wall. All Logan could do was watch, pace and wait.

Several minutes went by.

He was already more than an hour late in meeting Dreb and wondered if he should even try to go anymore. This woman was important—one of the most important breaks he’d received in a long time!—and he didn’t want to run the risk of losing her. He’d come too far and suffered too much to risk that. He wanted to be here in case anything happened. But Dreb had claimed the information he had was about the Mandalores and of the utmost importance to the Jardon Kingdom. He had demanded Logan meet him as soon as possible. Dreb never demanded anything, so Logan knew it must be important, whatever it was.

He sighed in frustration. He was so close to the answers he had been looking for for so long, yet there were still other things to do, other beings to worry about. He wanted to find out who was stealing these infants and why more than anything. He had to! Maybe then the dreams would finally stop and his peace of mind would be restored. No more would he wake up in the middle of the night screaming right along with the wails of those lost, suffering children. He could bring them peace, bring them home and end the nightmare.

Yet he knew that there were millions of beings in the Kingdom living out nightmares of their own as the Mandalores attacked their home worlds, taking prisoners and destroying everything those people loved. He could feel their suffering through the Force as well. It wasn’t as pronounced as what he felt for the children, but it was there all the same, driving a knife into his heart. He couldn’t

abandon his responsibilities for the people of The Kingdom to pursue his own desires—no matter how good his intentions were.

He knew what he had to do. He had a duty higher than to just himself. The beings of the Kingdom were counting on their leaders for the answers to their problems, so that is what he would find. The Force had led him to this woman, so he would trust in the Force to give him the answers he was looking for when the time was right. He only hoped the time would be right very soon, because something told him time was running out.

He tried the button to open the door, but it had been locked from the inside. Frustrated, he considered using the Force to deactivate the lock, but decided against it. Searching the face of the panel next to the door, he found a small intercom. He pushed the button and asked, “Ambu, how’s she doing?”

Ambu didn’t look up from what he was doing as he said, “She’s doing better, now. The wound in her side wasn’t a problem, but her head is another thing. She suffered some serious internal trauma from that blow and has a blood clot. I’m afraid I’m going to have to operate.”

Logan’s heart sank at hearing this. “I’ll be right back,” he said into the intercom. “I have someone I need to meet. It shouldn’t be long.”

Ambu didn’t look up, but nodded that he’d heard.

Logan stared at the injured woman for a handful of seconds, then turned to leave. He went back into the entry room of the underground facility, past the large guards, back up the stairs into Ambu’s apartment and out the front door.

He knew it wouldn’t take long to get to the cantina where he was supposed to meet Dreb from here. He just hoped Dreb was still waiting after so long.

The Cantina District was unlike any other part of the city Anodurra. Flashing signs were everywhere. Each and every cantina, no matter how big or small, had a sign. The bigger the cantina, the more annoying the sign. The streets didn't benefit much from the signs, though. They were still rather dark. But everything had a washed-out look to it because of the signs, and the shadows in the darkened alleys were even deeper, darker for those there to lurk in.

Music spilled out from every cantina's doorway. The partying was not contained only to the insides of the cantinas. Beings were everywhere in the streets partying in thick throngs. They swayed through the crowds on their way to the next cantina, or on their way to one of the many brothels, or into a darkened alley together to do unspeakable things, or just to party where there was room if the cantinas were too full. Venders daring enough, or with enough security, braved the crowds by selling drinks right on the street.

Traffic was virtually non-existent. No speeder could make it through such a crowd. The occasional swoop bike gang would come zipping through the streets just to cause a panic and a stir, but it didn't last long. The partiers would be right back at it as if nothing had happened as soon as the gangs had passed.

Though Logan had been to the Cantina District a handful of times before he had to stop and gawk at the unruly, unbridled atmosphere of the place. An animalistic feeling hung thick in the air. Uncivilized. Immoral. Scantily-clad females, and males, walked throughout the crowd just waiting for someone—anyone—to scoop them up for a good time. They would have their fun, and then the nearly-naked being would continue on to the next person. Fights broke out often over who was next. These were, most times, settled with a quick couple of shots from the blaster pistol of the quicker draw, and then the partying went on.

*Always on.*

It made Logan sad.

Logan made his way through the throngs, kindly turning down drinks and blushing at the advances of several females as he did. Finally, he made it to the street of his destination. The Plierros stood about half way down the street, which was only a little less crowded than the others he had passed through. The cantina looked no different from numerous others except for the pitiful holo-sign above the door

flashing its name a bit slower than it was supposed to.

He pushed through the raucous crowd to the building and the four large, heavily armed bouncers barring the door. Reaching into his hip pouch for a gold credit he filled himself with the Force, alert for any sign of trouble. He'd never had problems before, but he'd heard stories of bouncers that would shake people down for the change in their pockets. Placing the gold credit in the outstretched hand of one of the men Logan called upon the Force and gave a wave of his hand. The four glassy-eyed beings stiffened, then parted at Logan's suggestion. He walked right on by and through the door into a different world.

Though similar in appearance on the outside to the drab, broken down buildings that lined the streets of The District, the inside of the Plierros was in stark contrast. It was actually quite exquisite. Lavishly decorated with black marble floors veined with gold, gold pillars and long drapes of crimson it looked more like a smuggler king's palace than a cantina. The bar, made from shimmering Chiae wood, was filled with characters of all types and lined the entire left side of the place. The wall behind the bar was filled with hundreds of bottles of all different kinds. The stock needed to be extensive because of the many differing tastes of their patrons.

The lights of the large, smoky room were kept low along the walls on the right and in the back to give the beings in the booths discretion. Yet it was illuminated well enough near the bar and dancing area so that beings could see each other clearly—though not too clearly. Clarity wasn't exactly good for the looks of this crowd.

The clientele was as diverse as ever with nearly every major species of the outer rim represented. A six-piece band played an upbeat tune on a small stage right next to the packed dance floor. The tables surrounding the dance floor were filled with beings having fun drinking, chatting, or waiting for a particular song to be played before joining the others dancing.

Logan moved to his right and began making his way through the masses towards a small flight of stairs. The stair led up to the slightly-raised level filled with booths lining the right wall and wrapping around all the way to the back of the cantina. From those booths, patrons could sit back and watch those on the dance floor or at the bar. It was the most well protected and concealed area of the cantina, and made for the perfect place for a quiet meeting.

He could see the booth where he'd met Dreb several times before, but couldn't tell who, if anyone, was in it from so far away. It was too dark still. As he neared the booth he could see that someone was, indeed, sitting there and his hopes rose. He thought that perhaps Dreb had waited for him after all. But as he got close enough to see through the dark and the smoke he saw that the man in the booth was not

Dreb, and that two other beings—a Bith and a Quarren—were sitting directly across from him.

Logan stopped his approach a handful of meters short of the booth. Shoulders slumped; he let out a long sigh. He'd missed him.

He moved to a small pace at the railing overlooking the tables, the dance floor and the bar and leaned his arms on it. The band began a new song, and by the looks of it it was a crowd favorite, because applause and cheering broke out throughout the bar. Several of the excited patrons jostled into Logan, but he paid them no mind. He merely gazed down at the rabble-rouser crowd in contemplation, wondering what to do.

He decided there really was nothing to be done. Dreb was probably far away from the Plierros and, probably, Yollus by now. Trying to contact him now was most likely useless. People in Dreb's line of work could seldom be contacted or found unless they wanted to be. Yet Logan knew Dreb would make contact again and arrange a new meet if the information was important. He hoped.

He turned away from the railing and gave the booth where the meet was supposed to take place one last look. He was surprised to see the man sitting in the booth staring right at him. Logan froze, returning the gaze. Keeping his eyes on Logan, the man said something to the other two sitting with him. Logan watched as the head of the Bith popped around the side of the high-backed booth to look at him. Then, all three began sliding out of the booth.

Logan tensed as the trio stood side by side just outside of the booth peering at him with harsh eyes. Each wore a blaster pistol holstered at the hip, and each hovered a hand over the weapon as if ready to draw it at any second. Squaring his shoulder to face them, Logan slowly began moving a hand towards his lightsaber, his senses alert for the first sign of trouble.

*What now?* he thought heaving a tired sigh.

He wondered if, perhaps, this whole thing was some sort of misunderstanding. Ego was a big deal to rough types in places such as this. Perhaps these three were just trying to show off. Or perhaps they were just itching to cause trouble. No matter what the circumstance, Logan felt he'd already spilled more than his share of blood for one day. There was no reason for him to give any sign of aggression and further escalate the situation.

Slowly, he moved the hand away from his lightsaber and raised both up in front of him to show he didn't want trouble. The man smirked at Logan, then gave a nod in

the direction of the booth. The trio turned and began walking away into the crowd of beings standing along the railing.

Logan watched them go, brow furrowed as he tried to figure out what that was all about. They seemed to have recognized him, and the man had gestured at the booth before they'd turned and walked away. He wondered if they'd been sent by Dreb, and if they'd left something in the booth for him. It wouldn't be the first time Dreb had used a dead drop.

He moved to the booth and looked in.

Empty.

Puzzled, he looked back up and searched for the trio, taking a few steps away from the booth to see over the crowd. They were nowhere in sight. They'd disappeared in the crowd.

"Yer already late enough as it is," a gruff voice suddenly said from behind him. "Ya gonna sit down, er not?"

Logan's shoulders slumped. He hung his head for having been duped so easily and turned to look back in the booth. There he saw a skinny, balding man with a leathery, scruff covered face. Dreb smirked, raising the mug of whatever type of ale he was drinking to Logan.

"I really hate it when you do things like that," Logan said, shaking his head and smiling as he took a seat across from Dreb in the darkened booth.

"Yeah. Well, can't be too careful nowadays," Dreb said with a shrug. "'sides—ya didn' 'spect me ta wait fer ya out in da open all this time, did ya? I was beginnin' ta wonder if you was gonna make it."

"Sorry. Something important came up and I got delayed," Logan said.

"Dat's quite all right," Dreb said with a frown. He looked down at his mug and said in a quiet voice, "I've had plenty ta keep me occupied while I waited."

In a solemn voice, Logan said, "I heard about *The Gelja*. I'm really sorry, Dreb."

Looking up again and trying to sound casual, Dreb shrugged and said, "Hey. It's all part of da job."

Logan could hear the lump in his throat.

Peering into his mug, Dreb said, "She was a good ship. Best I'd ever had." Then, with a blaze in his eyes, he looked up and pointed at Logan. "You betta believe



those damn Mandalores are gonna pay for it, though. Dat's for sure!"

Logan didn't know what to say, so he merely nodded and waited for the old smuggler to have his moment.

Shaking his head and waving a hand as if batting away the bad memories, Drebb said, "Anyways, let's get down ta business. I've a shipment needs deliverin' 'fore I leave tonight."

Reaching into the breast pocket of his brown jumpsuit, Drebb produced two small, rectangular data cards. Setting one down on the table, he said, "Here's the data dumps from da list of systems ya gave us. Wasn't easy gettin' these. Most those systems are under Mandalore control now. So you'll understand if the askin' price is a lil' bit more than usual."

Usually, Logan would have given him his best 'do I look stupid' look at the demand for more money and would have argued the issue, but didn't this time. He knew Drebb wasn't trying to scam him this time. He knew of the troubles they'd run into. He nodded, stretching his hand out across the table to take the data card. Drebb placed the card in his hand, but didn't let go. Logan looked up at him to see Drebb's brown eyes inspecting him closely.

"What's dis all 'bout, anyway?" Drebb asked. "What're ya needin' these birth and family records fer?"

Logan pulled the card from Drebb's grasp and sat back. "Haven't you ever heard of genealogy, Drebb? I have some long lost cousins I'm trying to find."

"Ha! My foot, ya are!" Drebb said, laughing and slapping a hand on the table top in amusement. Then, more seriously, eyeing Logan, he said, "Dis wouldn't have anythin' ta do with them so-called "Specters of Death" now, would it?"

"Specters of Death?" Logan asked, perplexed.

"Yeah. At least—dat's the name been floatin' around the outskirts of da Outer Rim 'bout them. Beings dressed in black, swingin' strange swords and doin' unspeakable things; stealin' children and all," Drebb finished, taking a gulp from his mug and then wiping his lips off with his sleeve. He noticed Logan's wide eyes and leaned in, continuing the tale in a hushed voice. "S'posidly, they come in like da wind, kill the parents and anyone else in da house so as not ta leave any witnesses, take the child and then," he snapped his fingers, "disappear into thin air like ghosts."

Logan gawked, stunned. Eventually, his gaze drifted to the table as he thought the matter over.

Dreb leaned back and took another swig of his ale. “Bunch a tall tales and stories ta scare children, if ya ask me. I mean—if they leave no witnesses how’d people know they wear black and all?”

Logan couldn’t believe his ears. He was getting closer, now. He could feel it!

“What’s the matter?” Dreb asked. “Yer not buyin’ into this stuff are ya?”

Logan stared him right in the eye. “I am.”

“But...why?”

“Because I just saw one of them less than an hour ago.”

Dreb eyed him for some time, then nodded and said, “I guess dat’s a good ‘nough reason.”

“Have you heard anything more about these “Specters of Death?”” Logan asked.

Dreb thought it over. “Hmmm.... Well....” He shook his head. “It’s just crazy talk. Ya know—people bein’ paranoid.”

“Dreb, please. I need to know,” Logan urged.

“Well, there’s talk da Mandalores are somehow involved. Seems they’ve taken a fancy to spiritin’ off certain children from their parents in the occupied sectors, and some of the attacks by these “Specters” have happened right after Mandalore probing attacks. But that’s just talk, ya hear?”

Logan nodded, but his mind was racing. He’d long felt the Mandalores were somehow involved with the disappearance of these children, but never had anything but his feelings to back the theory up. Until now. He knew he’d have to go back through the mountain of information he’d collected to check this out, but at least he felt he was getting somewhere now. That was better than nothing.

Dreb held up the other card and began to wave it, a very serious look on his face. He looked at the card as if it were dangerous. “And this—this is tha reason I asked ya ta come here.”

Logan eyed the card, wondering what could possibly be more important than what they’d just discussed. “What is it?”

“We found somethin’ we wasn’t supposed ta. Just stumbled upon it, really, and into a world of hurt,” he finished under his breath. He paused, giving the card another look as if it might attack him at any moment. “This has da location, and vid, of a secret shipyard. Turns out da Mandalores’ve been buildin’ a whole nuther fleet.”

“What!?” Logan gawked. If the Mandalores were building a whole other fleet they would outnumber the kingdom at least four-to-one in ships. It was unfathomable!

“There’s more,” Dreb said, his tone and expression somber. “They’ve also built a space station there. A big one. And I mean **BIG!**”

Logan cupped his head in his hands, elbows resting on the top of the table. “This can’t be happening,” he said under his breath. But then, a thought entered his mind and his head shot up. “Wait a minute—where’re they going to get the soldiers for a whole other fleet? They hardly have enough for their existing forces as it is.”

Dreb nodded his agreement. “And dat brings up da really bad news. Turns out da Mandalores are chumming up with some big-shot in the Vishovi military. We don’t know who exactly, but we know he exists. We think they’re making some sorta treaty, and dat’s who’ll be manning the new fleet.”

Logan sat, dazed, wondering what they would do. Despair filled him. If what Dreb said was true—and he believed it was—he was hearing the end of the Jardon Kingdom. The Vishovi had a longstanding dislike for the Jardon—current “good” relations aside. Logan had no doubt they would jump at the opportunity to join the Mandalores in destroying The Kingdom. And with the added soldiers of the Vishovi Coalition the Mandalores could take control of the entire Outer Rim Territories.

Logan’s despair soon changed into anger. He pounded his fist on the table, exclaiming, “This isn’t fair! This isn’t right! We get slaughtered while the rest of the galaxy stand by and watches!?”

“Whoa! Calm down there, pal,” Dreb soothed. “Calm down. Poundin’ the table ain’t gonna make matters better.” Something down by the bar caught Dreb’s attention, and his gaze shifted there.

Shaking his head, jaw clenched tight to hold back a yell, Logan tried to compose himself.

“Besides,” Dreb said, “I think I found ya a much better target.” Logan looked at the middle-aged spacer in confusion.

Dreb gestured with a hand towards the entrance. “See them two there—the men in da blue and da white jumpsuits?” Dreb said with narrow eyes.

Logan turned to look at the pair he was indicating to. They were both ruff looking individuals, but something about their stature told Logan that they didn’t belong here. There was distain in their eyes. They looked down upon everyone around them as animals. Both moved to the bar and got a drink. Then, they turned their backs to the bar and began looking around the cantina as if searching for someone.

“Yes. I see them,” Logan answered.

“Thems is *Mandalores*,” Dreb said, disgust in his voice at saying the name.

Logan spun to look at him. “Are you sure? How do you know? And what are they doing here?”

“Searching for me,” Dreb said nonchalantly. A smile spread across his face at Logan’s confused expression.

“They’ve been tryin’ ta take out members of da crew ever since we stumbled onto ‘em a few weeks back and found out what they was doin’. These two tracked me here,” Dreb finished with a shrug and a swig of his ale.

Anger rushed into Logan. These two men represented everything that was destroying the Jardon Kingdom! And now, after what he’d learned about their alliance with the Vishovi, it was too much. He wanted—no, needed!—to do something to stop them! He needed to get justice for the people of the kingdom!

Hands clenched into fists, staring hate filled eyes at the two men, Logan sprang to his feet.

“Where you goin’?” Dreb asked.

“To pick a fight,” Logan said, not taking his eyes from the two men.

“Like hell you are!” Dreb said.

Logan turned to stare at him, anger in his eyes.

Dreb returned a stern look. “Great,” he murmured. “Got you all rowled up, didn’ I? Well sit down and stow it!”

Logan didn’t budge.

“Look, Logan—keep yer wits about ya, will ya?” He looked around at all of the beings staring at them. “Yer embarrassin’ me.” Looking back at Logan, he said, “If you go attackin’ these two what will it get ya? What good will that do your people—just two less Mandalores in the galaxy?”

Logan’s eyes softened as Drebb’s words began to make sense.

“Why not wait and track ‘em for a while? Maybe they’ll lead ya somewheres important. And then you can really stick it to ‘em!”

Logan stilled his anger. Lowering his head in shame, he sat back down in the booth. “You’re right,” he said. “That would be the smarter thing to do.”

Drebb inspected him for some time, then chuckled and said, “And besides—there’s four more of ‘em out there you haven’t even spotted yet. They woulda creamed ya!”

Logan looked up at him with a serious gaze. “Trust me—they wouldn’t have.”

“Hmmm.... Maybe so,” Drebb said, inspecting Logan. He could see that Logan had grown into a fine young man, and knew that his skills in the Jedi Arts were commendable. With a Master like his, Drebb couldn’t see how he couldn’t. “Ha! Maybe so, indeed!” he exclaimed, slapping Logan on the arm boisterously, then taking another huge gulp of his drink.

Peering at the two disguised Mandalores at the bar and running a finger along the side of the two data cards, Logan said, “Drebb—I need you to do something for me. Something important.” He turned to look at the aged spacer.

“Why do I get da feelin’ thi is gonna cost me money?” Drebb said.

“You’ll be greatly compensated. I promise,” Logan soothed. “Please. It’s very important.

“All right. What is it?” Drebb asked, giving in.

Logan slid the data card with the information about the secret shipyard back across the table to Drebb. “I need you to see that this gets back to Sci. I can’t risk taking it with me if I’m going to do this. Also—I need you to swing by Ambu’s and pick someone up to take back to Jardon with you.”

“Now wait a minute,” Drebb said, throwing his hands up. “I’m not takin’ no Spice junkie in my ship with me. No way!”

“She’s not a Glitterstrum addict. She’s a woman. One of those...” Specters of Death” or whatever stole her baby and tried to kill her. She’s important, and I can’t let anything happen to her. You may have to wait a bit for Ambu to finish operating on her, but, like I said, I’ll make it more than worth your time.”

Dreb eyed him for several seconds. He could see how serious Logan was about all of this—how much it meant to him. “All right, Logan. I’ll do it,” he finally said.

“Thank you,” Logan said with a quick nod.

Dreb slammed back the last of his ale and banged the empty mug down on the table. Wiping his chin with his sleeve once more, he said, “Well! Like I says earlier, I gots me a delivery ta make. And if I’m gonna be doin’ this other stuff fer ya, I best be goin’. Have fun, my boy! Give ‘em some hell fer me!” he said as he began sliding out of the booth.

“Do you need any help getting past them?” Logan asked. “What if they see you?”

“Oh, I wouldn’t worry ‘bout that,” Dreb said with a smile and a wink.

As soon as he did there was a loud crash from the other side of the cantina—where the two Mandalores were standing. Logan stood and looked over the railing to see two Barbles wrestling and crashing into everything they could. The Mandalores had to jump out of the way to avoid being knocked over by the large, struggling aliens as one threw the other over the bar, then dove over after him. Then, another fight, and another fight broke out in two other places around the cantina. It seemed as if the entire place had suddenly gone mad.

As the fights died down Logan turned back to Dreb...but he was gone! He stood, perplexed, and earched for any trace of hi friend for a short time, but didn’t see him anywhere. He had vanished.

“Dreb, you sneaky ol’ space slug!” he said under his breath.

With a smile he sat back in the shadows of the booth and watched the two men at the bar. He would wait for them to leave and would follow.

He would follow them, and hope they led him somewhere where he could make a real difference in this war.

...Somewhere where revenge could be exacted.

Hood raised, shadows across his face, Logan had trailed the group of pirates from the cantina and through the streets to a landing pad. The Mandalores were well disciplined, professional, and they had continually taken turns checking behind them to see if they were being followed. With the Force on his side, Logan had been able to sense when they were turning and had made certain he was out of sight. Now, crouched behind a stack of cargo crates at the edge of the landing pad, Logan watched the four men load and prep the battered ship—no doubt stolen from a group of real pirates—for takeoff.

Peering down at his wrist comm., Logan punched a series of small buttons to bring his ship, waiting on the outskirts of town, fully online. Once all systems were ready he had the Silver Shadow's computer lift the craft into the air and head straight for the homing signal he was broadcasting. A short time later he pushed another series of buttons on the comm. to halt the ship's advance and keep it hovering a safe, unnoticeable distance away.

Glancing back around the side of the crates, Logan watched one of the men detach a fueling hose from the bottom of the ship. The ship was nearly ready for take-off. It was time.

Reaching into his hip pouch he took out a small, oval device. He thumbed the button on top to activate it, then closed his eyes to slits. The roar of nearby ships taking off and landing filled his ears as his senses were expanded by the power of the Force. Taking a deep, calming breath he cleared his mind of all distractions and concentrated on a cargo crate piled atop of several others on the far side of the landing pad. He did not knock the crate over. That would have been too obvious for this crew. Instead, he merely shifted the crate, making a slight screeching sound.

The four men spun in the direction of the sound with blasters drawn in a flash, dropping into defensive crouches or taking cover behind the ship's ramp. Opening his eyes, Logan was amazed to see how quickly they'd reacted to the noise. They were better than he'd thought. He'd have to be careful and act fast.

Emerging from cover once no eminent threat was detected one of the Mandalores, dressed in a blue jumpsuit, stalked towards the pile of crates cautiously with blaster raised and ready. Meanwhile, the other three remained back, blasters trained on the area the sound had come from.

Keeping his watchful eyes on the backs of the men, Logan reached out his hand and sent the small, oval object in his hand floating around the corner of the crates he was hiding behind and through the air. Guiding it with the Force, he sent it straight towards the open hatch of the ship. Strain spread across his face. It was difficult moving the object with such precision and speed, but especially difficult while splitting his attention between that task and keeping an eye on the men.

The Mandalore in the blue jumpsuit reached the row of crates and sprang around behind them with blaster leveled. Logan watched the other three tense as if they might spring into action at any moment themselves, taking better aim with their blasters. They eased at a raised hand from their blue-clad companion on the other side of the crates; signifying the area was clear.

The oval object Logan controlled with the Force was nearly to the hatch, now. Only a few meters more....

The man in blue continued searching around the crates on the far side just to be sure. The other three emerged from their cover and stood, lowering their blaster but senses still on-edge.

Logan sent the oval object through the hatch and straight up, towards the ceiling. Closing his eyes, he concentrated on his connection with the metal object. He continued moving it up until he felt it stop. Opening his eyes he gazed at the hatch and, slowly, released his hold on the object. He held his breath as he watched to see if the object fell from the ceiling...but nothing happened.

He let the breath go. The homing device was secure.

“Warm the engines,” the man in blue said to the others as he walked back from inspecting the crates, blaster still in hand. “I want off of this rock as soon as possible.”

“Yes, sir,” one of the other men said with a curt nod, then turned and started for the hatch.

The other two men waited for the man in blue, blasters held ready, eyes shifting from shadow to shadow around the perimeter of the landing pad. The man in blue eyed the perimeter even harder, as if he knew something wasn't right. The low hum of the engines starting up filled the air, and soon grew to a high-pitched roar. The man in blue waved the other two up the ramp. Backing towards the hatch the man in blue gave the crates scattered around the edge of the landing pad one last, suspicious look, then turned and walked up.



Logan waited until the ship had lifted off and was several hundred meters into the night sky before emerging from behind the crates. Following the blue-white contrail of the ship's engines with his eyes, Logan raised his wrist comm. and pressed a button. A soft, pulsing ping emanated from the comm.. The tracking device was active and working properly.

"Gotcha," Logan said, a smile creasing his lips as he watched the fleeing ship get smaller and smaller. Then, pushing a handful more buttons on the wrist comm., he called the Silver Shadow over. The aft hatch slid open as the ship roared above the tops of nearby buildings and came to a stop ten meters directly over the landing pad. Logan ran out under the ship. Using the Force, he jumped high into the air to land right in the aft hatch. Wasting no time, he closed the hatch and hurried to the cockpit.

Jumping into the pilot's seat, he kicked the engines into full throttle and raced through the atmosphere into open space. Following the homing beacon's signal, he sped off after the Mandalore's ship.

Vishovia had once been a vibrant planet teeming with life. The one-time cultural and governmental center of the Vishovi Coalition had been the envy of the outer rim governments and the pride and joy of Vishovi space. Now, it was nothing more than a festering pool of pollution—the byproduct of overzealous and careless industry. The home planet had long since been abandoned and, wanting to keep the center of the coalition where it had always been, most of its inhabitants had settled on its single celestial satellite, Qwoon.

The moon was fair-sized, but was a lifeless, bleak satellite without atmosphere. Pitted by craters, scared by caverns and canyons all across its pale, rocky surface it was less than inviting. Yet a vast majority of Vishovia's inhabitants had migrated there turning the small settlements already potting the surface into enormous, dome-covered cities. The cities filled the largest of the craters on the moon, and were connected by vast stretches of subterranean cities that went on for miles and miles.

The location of the living quarters for the differing classes amongst the inhabitants of Qwoon City was directly reflective of the society itself. The poor and the weak, which was the majority of the population of the megalopolis, lived in the underground sections, while only the wealthiest and most prominent lived in the upper levels of the skyscrapers within the transparasteel-domed craters. The rich were given a view of the stars above and could watch the yellowish-orange sphere of Vishovia rise and fall with each day. But those living under the surface saw no such things.

Dark, dank and dreary was their world. The Underground, as it had aptly been named, was illuminated by a lighting system that tried to simulate the brightness of day, but it wasn't nearly the same. Overcrowded, it gave no inspiration to its inhabitants, which was precisely what those living high up in the skyscrapers wanted. As long as those beings in the caverns remained without ambition they wouldn't challenge those higher up. The Caverndwellers, or Undergrounders as they were often called, worked in the factories and did most of the menial labor, keeping the rich on their lofty perches.

Yet even more impressive, and far rarer, than the lofty apartments topping the skyscrapers were the handful of dome-covered estates located outside of Qwoon City's giant dome. Only the elite of the elite could afford these. The estates were made to be as opulent, as extravagant as possible. Massive mansions with

enormous gardens and lawns, small forests and artificially-made lakes; the estates were tiny paradises on an otherwise bleak, ashen place. Mirages in a sea of gray caped with white.

Tucked into a series of wide cliffs in a chain of towering mountains more than twenty kilometers away from Qwoon City sat Admiral Ondi's sprawling, personal estate. The estate was admired and coveted even by the richest of Qwoon City.

Rows of quivering servants wearing artificial smiles rimmed one of the many landing pads of the estate, waiting for the hatch of Admiral Ondi's shuttle to open. When it finally did the crowd flinched under the hard, sweeping gazes of two lithe, stunning women that appeared in the doorway. The servants held their breath under the women's watch, their false smiles faltering.

Confident the area was secure the two women began down the ramp with fluid steps. Their nimble movements and dangerous gazes appeared out of place in the elaborate, off-the-shoulder dresses they wore, yet their fit, feminine frames filled them out perfectly. Petticoats swishing, hands clasped daintily in front of them at their waists they appeared ideal examples of Vishovia high-society mistresses as they stopped and waited at the bottom of the ramp. Yet their narrow, darting eyes betrayed them to be much more. Much more. They wore masks of carefree, shallow socialites in public, but it was not needed here. Here, everyone knew who they really were and gave the Marauders wide berth.

A newly-acquired gold medal dangling from his neck, Ondi exited the shuttle. The two women fell into step behind him once he reached the bottom of the ramp. Ignoring the servants completely, he kept his cold, hard eyes forward and nose upturned. The servants feigned great pleasure at his return, giving unacknowledged greetings and welcome-backs. Ondi removed the medal from around his neck and, without even a glance, shoved it into the hands of a servant he passed as if disgusted by the trinket.

Once inside the lavish, main building Ondi was greeted with sharp salutes from military security personnel as he made his way without pause through the vaulted foyers, the vast maze of hallways. He ignored these men as well, continuing on while the Marauders behind him scowled at them with disdain. The soldiers flinched under such gazes, but always turned suspicious eyes upon the Marauders once they passed.

At the heed of Darth Shi'Dow, Ondi had replaced his personal military guard with the servants of the Sith at the highest levels—much to the displeasure of his men. There had been discussion of disbanding his estate's Vishovi security forces altogether in order to avoid the possibility of spies or disruption to their plan, but

Ondi had refused to so. Shi'Dow had pressed the matter, but Ondi wouldn't budge. He had handpicked these men himself and knew them to be completely loyal to him, and only him. They would not betray him. And he would not be left without guard against the Sith.

Another pair of Marauders, dressed in the form-fitting, black leather jumpsuits typical of their kind, stood guard at the entrance to Ondi's private quarters. They bowed their heads in respect at his approach. The two Marauders behind him in their gaudy dresses peeled off down a side hall. Ondi continued on, walking through the parted doors of his private chambers and into darkness.

He stopped just within the doors, inspecting this strange occurrence. The shaft of light spilling through the doorway behind him cast long, spindly shadows across the floor. Then, by its own admission, the doors hissed shut behind him. Ondi gave them a curious glance over his shoulder, wondering how such a thing had happened. He was still standing well within the range of the sensors for the doors. They should not have closed with him there. It was as if the darkness crawling throughout the room were trying to save itself from the harmful, horrid light. The black had a Will of its own.

A chill ran down Ondi's spine at the thought and he finally understood. Eyes slowly adjusting, showing the outlines of chairs and a desk across the way, he began scanning the room. He didn't see it on his first pass, so faint was its glow, but he found him as he passed his eyes across the deepest, darkest corner of the room. There, he saw the outline of Darth Shi'Dow—darker than dark—sitting cross-legged on the floor. Tiny slivers of blood-red fire emanated from within the cowl as he meditated; radiating slowly, heaving. Pulsing with power.

Eyes fully adjusted to the darkness, Ondi moved to his desk and pushed a button on a panel set flush into its metal surface. There was a whir of mechanics as a small display screen slid up from the top of the desk. He pushed another button and turned to face the wall behind him as the display screen came on and the sound of a woman's voice interrupted the black. The click of the durasteel shutter covering the wide, curved window was louder than usual in the darkness as it slid up out of the way. Light reflecting off of the enormous, yellow-orange sphere of the planet Vishovi as it crested the horizon poured in through the window. Ondi was forced to shield his eyes from the bright glow, and could have sworn he heard a squeal of fear as the darkness filling the room retreated from the light. Lowering his hand, he listened to the female reporter on the display screen as he peered out through the window and across the pitted, ashen surface of Qwoon.

The woman droned on about the honors ceremony of that afternoon and played several clips. A smile spread across Ondi's lips as the woman lauded the success of

Ondi's V.U.C.I.A. program—Vishovi Underground Crime Investigative Authority—and the unity of the coalition's leadership, the closeness of the "Brother Leaders." Great pride was in her voice as she took time to remind her viewers of the progress the leadership had made these past few years in rebuilding the reputation of the Vishovi Coalition, and their part in unifying and reenergizing the peoples' faith in their government.

Ondi gazed down greedily from the lofty perch of his mountain-cliff estate at the handful of domes covering the skyscrapers of the city. The light from the rising planet shimmered off the tops of the domes and endless lines of traffic heading to and from the city. It was all so close to being in his grasp. He could feel it.

The sound of his half-brother's voice coming from the news-reel caught his ear.

*"It is with great pleasure that we gather here today to honor the deeds of a man that has done more to battle the corruption and the duplicity of organized crime in our great coalition than anyone before him. A man of courage. A man of honor. Chief Commandant of our military forces, and my brother—Admiral Ondi!"*

Ondi closed his eyes to slits and sucked in a long breath at the sound of the thunderous applause that followed his half-brother's introduction of him. He smiled at the blind devotion of the people, dreaming of what wonderful, and terrible, things he could do with it.

A soft beeping from his desk interrupted his revelry.

Ondi knew who it would be. He had been expecting it—counting on it. He turned away from the window, giving Darth Shi'Dow a passing glance on his way to the desk. The Wraith was stirring in the corner now. Those terrifying eyes had opened to fiery slits and the shadowy being was standing.

Ondi returned to his desk to push the flashing, beeping button. While waiting for the comm. display to flip up out of the top of the desk he turned his attention back to the continuing news coverage. He watched footage of a good looking, middle-aged man with light brown hair and broad shoulders embrace him on the ceremony stage of that afternoon. Both smiled as they traded kisses on one another's cheeks.

Standing behind the desk, Ondi turned to the comm. display to see the face of the very man he had just embraced on the news scowling up at him.

*"You left the ceremony far too soon," the man accused, "leaving me to make excuses for you. **Again!**"*

Peering down at the man's image with a haughty smirk, Ondi said, "Nice to see you too, *brother*."

His half-brother's smoldering eyes narrowed. Then, seeing no explanation was coming, he said, "*Well? What do you have to say for yourself?*"

Ondi peered down his nose at him with an impassive gaze for some time, inspecting his half-brother's angry face. Finally, he turned his eyes away and back to watching the display showing the news footage. "You really shouldn't allow yourself to get so upset, Powell. It isn't good for your health. And we wouldn't want anything to endanger your health, now, would we?"

***"Is that a threat!?"*** Powell's voice boomed through the comm., laced with venom.

Ondi gave him a sideways look. Powell's face nearly filled the screen he was leaning in so close, nostrils flaring. Ondi was about to give a retort, but thought better of it. Instead, he turned his attention back to the other display and the news footage there. He watched as both he and Powell turned to the cheering crowd, waving. A smirk crossed his lips as he watched himself grab his brother's hand and raise it into the air above their heads. The cheering became deafening, maddened. Ondi and Powell smiled, continuing to wave to the masses.

"A fine addition—the triumphant, united raising of our hands," Ondi commented. Turning back to Powell's image on the comm., he said, "Wouldn't you agree?"

*"I grow tired of your theatrics, Ondi,"* Powell sneered. *"They only serve to bolster your popularity with the people."*

"It is not *I* who has benefited so much, but *you*, dear brother. Are you not more popular now than ever? Do you not hold greater sway over the Parliament now than before? Do the people not love you? Cherish you? That is my only goal—to make you sacred in their eyes."

Powell's eyes narrowed. "*Yes, and to what end, I wonder?*"

Ondi said nothing. The two locked eyes for some time.

*"I just received your most recent intelligence report,"* Powell said with a frown, waving a datacard.

"What of it?"

*“Do you really expect me to believe the Jardon Kingdom is a threat to us?”*

“You’ve read the report,” Ondi said. “We’ve captured three Jardon intelligence operatives right here on Qwoon in the last month. **Three**—when we haven’t had a problem with them in over a hundred years. If that’s not a sign something’s amiss, I don’t know what is.”

*“But it doesn’t make sense! They have their hands full with the Mandalores. How could they possibly think to do anything against us?”*

“I didn’t say it made sense. I only reported what we found,” Ondi replied.

Powell eyed him suspiciously. *“I don’t like this. Something doesn’t fit. I’ve met with the king of Jardon numerous times. He’s a trustworthy man. Young and foolhardy, perhaps, but trustworthy. It is **you** I don’t trust, brother.”* His eyes wondered away from the screen, deep in thought. Finally, when he made up his mind, he said, *“I want these **“so-called”** Jardon Operatives turned over to my interrogators immediately.”*

“Out of the question,” Ondi said with a shake of his head. “To hand them over now, just as we are beginning to break them and extract information, would set the efforts back considerably. I believe time is of the essence here.”

Powell’s eyes narrowed. *“That was not a request. It’s a direct order. Turn them over to me. **Now!**”*

Ondi said nothing for some time. He stared at his brother, not yeilding. Finally, he gave a dismissive wave. “Very well. They are yours.”

Powell gave a smug smile. *“Good. Now we’ll see what you’re really up to here.”*

“I grow tired of your skepticism,” Ondi said with a sigh and shake of his head.

*“You’re not as clever as you think, brother. I know you’re up to something,”* Powell said, jabbing a finger at the screen. *“And it’s only a matter of time before I find out what.”*

“I have little time for your paranoid delusions, Powell. I have matters to attend to,” Ondi said, reaching out to deactivate the comm..

*“**This game of yours has gone on long enough, Ondi! I know you too well. You’re up to something. I can feel it!**”*

Ondi leaned in close to the display screen and stared Powell directly in the eye. “Prove it,” he said, then pushed the button to deactivate the comm..

“I—,” Powell began, but was cut off.

Ondi straightened and saw that Darth Shi’Dow was approaching from across the room—those red eyes burning through the shadows of his cowl.

“He took the bait. As expected,” Shi’Dow seethed, his eerie voice echoing in Ondi’s ears.

Ondi peered at him for some time, then said, “Are you certain of these men of yours? Vishovi interrogation methods can be rather...persuasive. If Powell so much as senses their lying and not actually Jardon spies it could mean a great deal of trouble for us.”

Shi’Dow’s eyes narrowed. He folded his arms into the sleeves of his robe. “I selected them from the best of the Mandalore Elite Forces myself. They will do their duty, admiral.”

Ondi eyed him, then nodded. “Very well.” He turned again towards the large window, clasping his hands behind his back and resuming his inspection of the shimmering domes. Shi’Dow came to the window as well, standing a little ways away with arms folded into the sleeves of his robes.



**Ondi and Darth Shi'Dow overlook Qwoon City – Art by wicktone**

“I spoke with Baron Kran earlier today,” Ondi said. “The powerful influence of his greed seems to be waning since his discovery of the Sith. He appears on the very



edge of mental collapse. If he succumbs to his fears and takes action...well," he spread his hands out.

He peered sidelong at Darth Shi'Dow, waiting for a reply. When no answer came after several moments, Ondi said, "Very well. I trust your judgment and know you'll take care of the matter should the need arise. Just be certain you don't make a mistake and allow him to slip through your grasp."

Shi'Dow stirred ever so slightly. His head raised and his chest swelled as if taking a deep, long breath. "I do not make mistakes, Ondi," he finally said in a low voice. "What my master and I want to happen, happens." He turned and poked a black-gloved finger at Ondi. "Remember that."

Ondi knew it was a threat; that the Sith was telling him not to challenge his abilities. He smiled inside. Pride was a dangerous trait, and often led to the ruin of whomever it ensnared—if another knew how best to manipulate the being consumed by it. He would have to remember this.

Nodding, Ondi said, "Of course. I did not mean to offend." Then, "Is everything in place for our next move?"

Shi'Dow eyed him with those burning eyes for a time, then finally nodded.

"Good. Then I will contact *The Big Six* and set up the meeting. Be certain that—."

Shi'Dow's wrist comm. began beeping, cutting Ondi off. The Sith raised his arm and looked at the small display screen set into the gauntlet. "I will leave you now," he said, then turned with a swishing of his robe and walked out of the room.

Ondi watched him go, contemplating what he had just learned about his shadowy companion. A smirk spread across his face as he turned his eyes back out the window.

Shi'Dow walked out of Ondi's private office and into his own, sparse, unlit chambers. The room was cold—as cold as the strangling grip of the dark side of the Force. There was a wide window in this room as well, but Shi'Dow kept the shutter closed at all times. He had no need for comforts, so a silver, ornately carved tripod with a thick disk set atop of it was all there was in the room. A yellow light flashed on the side of the disk, indicating an incoming message.

Shi'Dow walked to the holo-transmitter and flipped it on. Waves of blue-white light shimmered in the air above the transmitting disk, then formed into the quarter-sized image of a woman dressed in tight, black leather. As soon as the image became clear the Marauder dropped to one knee and bowed her head in deep respect.

“What is it, Marauder Sasha?” Shi'Dow asked, knowing that it must be urgent for her to have contacted him unscheduled.

*“Thank you for receiving me, Lord Shi'Dow,”* Sasha said, keeping her head bowed. There was a slight pause of apprehension, then, *“We may have a problem.”*

Anger rippled through Shi'Dow. **“Explaaaaaaiiiiiinnnnn,”** he demanded, the word seeping out and bouncing around the room.

Sasha bowed her head until it was practically touching the floor. *“I do not know how, My Lord, but the Rogue Jedi from Jardon discovered me while I was on Yollus.”*

Another surge of anger flashed through Darth Shi'Dow. For a long time he had been aware of this Rogue Jedi and his prying into their affairs. But, judging by the reports from the front lines, the boy was nothing more than a novice, a glorified Padawan with only minimal skill and training. Yet now, somehow, this Jedi had been able to discover one of their Marauders. Either it was no more than a chance happening, or this Jedi was more than he seemed. He would have to keep that in mind.

“What did this Jedi see?” Shi'Dow finally asked.

*“He saw me leaving with the target. From a distance,”* Sasha added, as if to lessen the severity of the situation.

“Did he see you use any of your abilities?”

*“No, my lord,”* she said. *“I shielded my presence as best as I could as soon as I*

*knew he'd found me. I made certain not to use any of my abilities in his presence."*

"Is this all? Is this...pathetic Jedi seeing you the problem you spoke of?" Shi'Dow asked.

*"No, my lord," she answered, bowing her head yet again. "The parents of the target awoke while I was in their house, so I was forced to use my abilities to escape. I killed the father and attempted to kill the mother, but because of the sudden appearance of the Jedi I was unable to finish her off. The Jedi has her with him now, and I believe he means to take her back to Jardon. She is mortally wounded and will most likely die, but I fear what they may learn from her should she live. She could tell them about the child."* She stretched out both arms in front of her on the floor, and said, *"I have failed you, my lord, and am at your mercy."*

Shi'Dow peered down at her small holo-image for several seconds. He'd dealt with Sasha on several occasions and considered her one of the most cunning, gifted, and powerful amongst the ranks of the Marauders—which was why he'd chosen her for the mission to Yollus in the first place. It had been an assignment of increased risk of discovery because of the other two recent mission they'd executed there, but he'd had faith that Sasha could pull it off. And he knew she would have if not for the unexpected appearance of this Jedi.

Shi'Dow knew Sasha was proud. He knew she would want to right her wrong to stay in the good favor of her Masters. "What would you do to right this wrong of yours, Marauder, so that I might spare your life?"

*"My lord," she answered eagerly, bowing her head, "I ask permission to go to Jardon to make certain the woman can never tell them what she knows."*

Shi'Dow pondered the request. "This is a great risk you ask of me."

*"I know, My Lord," she answered. "But I feel it necessary to ensure this Rogue Jedi not discover our secret."*

Darth Shi'Dow eyed her shimmering image. "You have already worked out a way to accomplish such a mission?"

*"I have, My Lord, but would not dream of pursuing it further without your permission."*

"Go on...."

*"The Jedi will most likely take the woman to the Palace of Vansol on Jardon to*

*keep her safe. I will infiltrate the palace and see to it she dies before she's able to speak. I'm confident I could do this with relative ease. Furthermore, while in the palace I could be of great use in collecting information that would be most helpful to our cause."*

Shi'Dow knew having her inside would indeed make conquering the Jardon Kingdom easier, and that he could gain great glory from his master for having done so. The prospect was wonderful. Intoxicating.

He knew he should consult his master on this matter before telling Sasha to proceed, but there was a chance Lord Furia would not allow such a mission. He wanted to obey his master, but he did not wish to chance missing an opportunity of such glory. If Sasha failed there would be no need for his master to know he had sent her to Jardon in the first place. Yet should she succeed...the favor he would gain would be well worth the risk.

"You must be extremely cautious, Marauder. If you fail, and somehow survive, you will have me to answer to," he said with narrowed eyes.

*"I understand, My Lord,"* she said, groveling once more.

"Very well. Do this, and keep me informed of what you learn."

*"Yes, My Lord. Thank you, My Lord,"* she said.

Shi'Dow reached out with the Force and shut off the transmitter. He stood there in the darkness for some time after her image disappeared, contemplating this Jedi. Perhaps he posed a greater threat to their plans than he'd thought. Perhaps. Only the dark side knew.

With that, Shi'Dow moved to a corner in the room and sat with legs crossed. He would search the dark side for answers, and see where the fate of this Jedi led.

Sci quickly made his way through the weaving paths of the lush gardens of the Palace of Vansol. He paid the vibrantly colored flowers and plants little mind as he walked. His eyes were directed towards the ground, deep in thought as he mulled over the days most recent developments in the war. The Mandalores had taken another system that morning, and were threatening to take another by dawn of the next day. He let out a long, tired breath. He just couldn't do enough. He couldn't stop them. His heart ached for his people.

Coming around a row of tall hedges Sci spotted the landing pad he was heading for down below. It was at the edge of the gardens on the next level down, jutting out from one of the many cliffs of the hill the palace sat upon. Niles waited there with a female servant and twelve palace guards dressed in full parade uniform.

"Great," he murmured, then hurried to the stairs leading down to the landing pad. Shaking his head and smiling as he made his way across the walkway connecting the pad to the cliff, Sci said, "Niles, why am I not surprised to see you here?"

"Good evening, Your Highness!" Niles beamed brightly. "You seemed to have forgotten the honor guard for the arrival of the advisors this evening, so I took it upon myself to make sure they were here."

Smiling at the aged man, Sci said, "Niles, you know I didn't forget. I just didn't want them here. It seemed a little too...formal."

"Ah, yes! Formal! Thank you for reminding me," Niles said, indicating with the wave of the hand to the woman beside him. The woman stepped forward with a robe draped over her arm. "Here is your formal, diplomatic robe," Niles said. "I thought you might have forgotten it, too, so I brought it along."

Sci hung his head in defeat, then allowed the woman to help him slip the robe on.

With a smile and a curt nod Niles dismissed the woman back into the palace; no doubt, Sci suspected, to prepare some other formality Niles had deemed necessary for the advisors' visit.

Sometimes Sci wondered if Niles were a mind reader, because no matter how hard he tried to slip past formalities such as these, Niles was always waiting for him with whatever was "appropriate." Niles seemed more like an uncle than an aide to Sci, so it pained him when Niles waited on him. But Niles wouldn't have it any other way, no matter how hard Sci tried.

"I don't know why you insist on making my life miserable," Sci chided with a half smile, scratching his neck where the robe itched.

"Because it's my job, Your Highness," Niles answered plainly.

"Yeah, well, I'm beginning to think you enjoy your job far too much," Sci said, scanning the sky for any sign of the Galactic Union shuttle and swallowing a lump in his throat. He couldn't help but wonder if he were making a mistake by allowing the advisors to come. Admiral Thorne and the other military leaders wouldn't like it. It could be their breaking point.

"I do it because I know your father would have wanted you to be the best king you could be," Niles said into Sci's thoughts. Then, turning with a smile, he said, "...And I think you've been doing wonderfully so far."

Hearing Niles say this put Sci's mind greatly at ease. Turning to the aged man, he said, "Thank you, Niles. That means a lot to me."

"Of course, Your Highness," Niles answered with a nod, then turned to peer up at the sky himself. "You have a strong heart and the best interest of the kingdom in mind. With a combination like that, you can't go wrong."

Sci continued to peer at Niles—grateful for his kindness, amazed at his patience and wisdom—until he heard the sound of the approaching shuttle. Sci looked up into the dusk sky to see a boxy shuttle head in out of the east. On the side of the ship was the Galactic Union crest in the telltale, diplomatic color of green. The ship swooped in above the pad and slowly began descending on repulsor-lifts. A warm air swirled around the landing pad kicking up the sweet, soothing fragrance of nearby Dollfee flowers. The ship lowered onto landing skids and the whine of the engines quickly died down.

Niles took a step back, allowing Sci to be front and center at the end of the two rows of honor guards. Squaring his shoulders, raising his chin, Sci did his best to appear regal.

The hatch opened with a hiss of decompression. First one, then a second hooded figure dressed in a long, brown robe walked through the mist of exhaust fumes and gas coolant and down the ramp. The Honor Guard snapped to attention.

Sci stared in surprise as the two figures approached, walking with arms folded into the sleeves of their robes, heads bowed and faces hidden behind the shadows of their low hoods. The taller of the pair led the way with purposeful strides—exuding strength and assurance. The other was shorter and walked with equal confidence, yet moved with a grace the other lacked.

“They sent Jedi?” Sci whispered, perplexed, to Niles.

“It would appear so, Your Highness. Though, I must say I’m not surprised.”

Sci shot a questioning look over his shoulder at his aide, but received no explanation. Niles merely straightened and gave a nod in the direction of the approaching Jedi, indicating for him to turn around. Sci did, finding the Jedi nearly upon them.

Coming to a stop and unfolding their arms, the two Jedi pulled back their hoods to reveal their faces. The taller had long, salt and pepper hair and a matching, well-trimmed beard. His strong, broad shoulders and fit build would have appeared unusual for someone of his advanced age were he not a Jedi. But even by Jedi standards the man’s physique was rather exceptional. His hazel eyes were kind, fatherly, and held a sparkle of inner peace—speaking volumes of his wisdom and mastery of the Force.

The far younger, female Jedi was striking. She appeared nearly Sci’s own age, yet held a confidence beyond her years—a confidence, Sci knew, for he saw it in Logan, that could only be gained through the rigors of Jedi training. Her brown hair of tight curls reached well past her shoulders, framing her kind face perfectly. The mild breeze blew stray strands across her face, causing her to reach up and tuck them behind her ears as she returned Sci’s gaze with eyes the likes of which he had never seen. As bright and blue as a cloudless summer sky dancing with tiny, shimmering flecks of yellow and encircled by a thin ring of twilight. They were piercing, yet overflowed with a kindness that drew one in. They were hypnotic.

Sci couldn't help but stare. Not only because of her beauty, but because of a sneaking suspicion in the back of his mind that he'd met her before. He knew he hadn't. He was certain he would have remembered. And yet...he couldn't shake the feeling as he continued to inspect her, trying to recall.

“**Ahem!**” Niles cleared his throat, snapping Sci out of his thoughts.

With a start, Sci finally spoke, saying, “Welcome, ambassadors, to the Jardon Kingdom. We are greatly pleased that you accepted our invitation. I am Sci Jardon, king of the Jardon Kingdom.”

Both Jedi bowed in unison. Then, the male Jedi stepped forward and extended his hand. “Thank you for your gracious invitation, Your Highness. We look forward to doing whatever we can to aide your people in this time of great need.”

Sci shook his hand. As he did the Master Jedi leaned in to peer at him intently with his hazel eyes, searching his face from side to side. Now it was Sci's turn to feel uncomfortable under such scrutiny.

“He's the spitting image of his father, isn't he, Niles?” the Jedi finally said.

“He is indeed, Jun-Tahn,” Niles replied, a smile in his voice.

Sci looked between the Jedi and Niles, confused by their seeming familiarity. The Jedi released Sci's hand and walked to Niles. Smiling and laughing, the two aged men hugged. Sci watched on, amazed. He'd never seen Niles be so informal, so relaxed, nor so happy.

The men pulled apart after their brief, yet warm, hug and clasped one another by the forearms.

“It's been far too long, old friend,” beamed the Jedi. “Far too long.”

“Indeed, it has,” said Niles, his smile wide, his face bright with memory as he shook the Jedi's arms with excitement. Seeing Sci's perplexed expression, Niles released his grip upon the Jedi's forearms and, with a gentle, guiding hand, turned the man back around. “Sci, I'd like you to meet Jedi Master Jun-Tahn Orradiin.”

Sci's jaw fell open. “Jun-Tahn Orradiin? ***The*** Jun-Tahn Orradiin!?” he gawked.





**Jun-Tahn Orradiin – Art by FalconFan**

Niles gave a small chuckle.

“One in the same,” Jun-Tahn said with an amused smile and a bow.

Sci peered at the Jedi Master in awe. All his life he’d heard stories of Jedi Jun-Tahn Orradiin—of his incredible heroics in *‘The Great Galactic War’* and his cunning in the fight against the dreaded *Knight Stalkers*. He’d drunk them up in his studies as a child, dreaming of one day doing such feats, of being so brave. He’d shared his dreams with Logan, and together they’d reenacted the tales in the hallways and gardens of the palace.

...Until the rainy day of the funeral and Logan’s heart wrenching discovery.

Like a bolt of light in the night, an alarming realization shot through Sci’s mind.

His stunned expression morphed to one of deep concern. He turned to peer at Niles. “But...Niles...what about—?”

“And is this...?” Niles said, purposefully cutting Sci off before he could say any more and walking forward to the youthful, female Jedi with a shining grin on his face.

Stepping forward to stand next to the young woman, Master Jun-Tahn announced, “This is my granddaughter, Colissa.”



**Colissa Orradiin – Art by FalconFan**

Smiling, Colissa stretched forth an elegant hand to Niles. “It is a great pleasure to finally meet you. My grandfather’s told me so much about you.”

Niles took her hand and with the utmost delicacy, with a reverence Sci had never seen in the man before, he bent to kiss it. Standing up straight, Niles wrapped his other hand around hers warmly. “It is an honor,” he said.

Master Jun-Tahn smiled at the scene, nodding in agreement to something left unsaid by Niles.

Sci stepped forward, extending his own hand to Colissa. “Thank you for coming, Jedi Orradiin.”

“Please—call me Colissa, Your Highness,” she said, taking his hand.

“And call me Sci,” he replied, once more allowing his eyes to linger on her face longer than normal as he tried, again, to piece together where he knew her from.

Another uncomfortable smile creased Colissa’s lips as he continued to pump her hand absently. “We...ah...look forward to offering...um...whatever help we can...,” she said.

“And we are most grateful,” Niles finally said, stepping forward and prying Sci’s hand away from hers.

Finally, Sci snapped out of it. “I’m sorry,” he said, embarrassed, peering at the ground sheepishly. “I don’t mean to stare. It’s just...,” he looked up, “you remind me of someone. I’m wracking my brain trying to place it, but I can’t seem to—” And then, all at once, he knew. Shocked, Sci spared Colissa further unease by turning his baffled gaze out across the valley and the city it held. He couldn’t believe it! How can this be possible? he thought.

Niles, Jun-Tahn and Colissa watched on, confused.

“Well,” Niles finally said, “if you’ll please follow me I’ll show you to your staterooms. I’m sure you’d both like to freshen up before dinner. We have much to discuss.” He indicated with an outstretched arm towards the palace. “Isn’t that right, Your Highness?”

“Hmm? Oh, yes. Yes,” Sci said.

“Thank you. It was a rather long trip,” Jun-Tahn said. Then, with uncertainty, “Now, Niles...should we dress formally for this dinner, or...?”

Sci couldn’t help but smile. Apparently Jun-Tahn was also familiar with Niles’ particularity.

“It is only a casual dinner,” Niles said.

“Good. We didn’t exactly bring any formal clothing.”

With that they set off towards the palace with the honor guard bringing up the rear. Sci hung back ever so slightly while Niles filled them in on the different species of plants in the vast gardens along the way. From their expressions Sci could tell that neither of the Jedi were greatly intrigued by what he was saying, but did a good job at feigning interest.

Sci paid very little attention to the conversation as he walked. His mind was preoccupied with this strange occurrence concerning Colissa...and with when Logan would be returning. He had quite a few burning questions for Logan—paramount of which was how he could have possibly described a woman he'd never met before—a woman half way across the galaxy—in such stunning, vivid detail.

It had taken quite some time for Sci and Jun-Tahn to convince Niles to stop serving and join them for dinner. With polite smiles and words of protest, Niles had gone about his business of making sure everything was as it should for the meal. But after Jun-Tahn had threatened not to eat anymore if he didn't join them, Niles finally gave in and took a seat at the table.

Sci usually hated diplomatic dinners at the palace. They were always so stuffy, so pointless, so superficial, so boring. But with Master Jun-Tahn at the table, it was far from boring. Jun-Tahn was one of the liveliest, happiest beings he'd ever met. The food was forgotten as they talked. The elderly Jedi's face was bright with life as he spoke of various adventures that he, Niles, and Sci's grandfather had shared in their youth. Sci listened to the stories with great pleasure. He'd heard most of the stories concerning his grandfather before, but not with such detail and life—and never with any mention of Niles' involvement in the battles.

“You should be very proud of your grandfather, Sci,” Jun-Tahn said with a warm smile. “He was one of the best fighter pilots we had during *The War*. Though not as good as Niles, I would say,” he added with a curt nod to the elderly servant.

“Niles? A pilot?” Sci asked in surprise. He looked over at the man and could see that he was clearly uncomfortable. “Niles, why didn't you ever tell me? I never

knew you flew in *The War*!”

“*Flew* in them?” Jun-Tahn said with a robust laugh. “He did far more than just fly in them, Your Highness! He was also a ground forces warrior, an invaluable reconnaissance agent, and a general!”

Sci couldn’t believe his ears. He’d never pictured soft-spoken, protocol-obsessed Niles as a warrior of any kind. This was all quite a shock. Although, Niles’ attention to detail and by-the-book attitude all of a sudden made much more sense.

“A general,” Sci said, smiling, regarding the embarrassed man with renewed respect and wonder. What else had Niles—a man he thought he’d known—not told him about his past?

Obviously wanting to change the subject, Niles turned to Colissa and said, “Tell me, my dear, are you as talented with a lightsaber as your grandfather? He was quite gifted in his youth, if I remember correctly.”

“And still am,” Jun-Tahn added with a smile, puffing out his chest proudly. Then, peering at his granddaughter, he said, “She’s the best swordfighter of her age, and then some. I foresee her even surpassing me in a few short years.”

“Grandfather, please...”

He continued, not paying attention to her protests. “I’d like to take credit, having trained her myself, but she’s a lot like her mother—hardly needed any instruction at all. It just came to her like it did her mother. Just natural talent and the blessing of the Force.”

“Jun-Tahn, you’re far too modest,” Niles said. “If anything, the girl’s inherited those skills from you.”

“Yes. Come now, Master Orradiin,” Sci encouraged. “Everyone’s heard the tales of your great abilities. You and our very own Master Styvan’s roles in *The War* are legendary!”

At the mention of Master Styvan, Logan’s Master in the Ways of the Force, Jun-Tahn’s bright expression melted to one of pain and memory. “It was not I, but Styvan who did deeds worthy of legend during *The War*,” Jun-Tahn breathed, a far-off look on his face.

Immediately Sci recognized his mistake. He should have known better than to mention Styvan—especially to Jun-Tahn. “I...I’m sorry...” he apologized. “I

shouldn't have...."

Looking over at Niles, Sci saw that he, too, wore an expression of deep contemplation on his face.

Colissa peered at her grandfather in confusion.

"Grandfather...?" she asked.

Jun-Tahn suddenly got to his feet, dabbing the corners of his mouth with his napkin. "Please excuse me. I must contact the Jedi Council to let them know we've arrived."

"Of course," Niles said as he, too, got to his feet.

Sci jumped to his feet. "Master Orradiin, please! I didn't mean to. I—"

"Do not apologize, Your Highness," Jun-Tahn said with a raised hand and a smile. "You said nothing wrong. It is *I* who am sorry for having ruined such a fine dinner with the laments of a tired, old man." Then, almost as an after thought, he said, "And please, call me Jun-Tahn," before walking out of the room.

Still confused, Sci lowered himself back into his chair.

"I'm terribly sorry, Your Highness," Colissa said. "I don't know what happened. I've never seen my grandfather act like that."

"Peoples' pasts can have a great impact on them when they get older," Niles said, his eyes still in a far-off place. Then, brightly, he turned to Colissa and asked, "My dear, would you like a tour of the palace?"

"Thank you, but I think I should go and check on my grandfather. If you would please excuse me," she said as she stood. "Thank you for such a lovely meal. When would you like to hold the advisory council?"

"Tomorrow, I should think," said Niles, looking to Sci.

"Yes, tomorrow. There are some things I'd like to discuss with you and your grandfather before we meet with the rest of the War Council. If that's alright?" Sci asked.

"Of course," Colissa said with a bow.

"Come, let me escort you back to your chamber room," Niles said and led Colissa

from the room.

Sci tried to eat a bit more, but had lost his appetite. He couldn't believe he'd been so stupid—upsetting Master Jun-Tahn like that. Trying to take his mind off the matter, he went to the War Room to monitor the latest developments. He knew that there he'd be able to forget his mistake, and only hoped he wasn't making a bigger one by allowing Jun-Tahn to remain.

*What will Logan do when he gets back and find Jun-Tahn Orradiin here? Sci wondered. ...And what will his reaction be when he sees Colissa?*

He'd thought that bringing in the advisors from the Galactic Union would help matters. Now, he saw just how wrong he'd been.

In the course of just a few short hours matters had become much more complicated.

Much more complicated.

It took Logan some time to finally land on the planet. After tracking the Mandalores to the system he'd been forced to remain back behind a small moon for a short while—making certain the Mandalores didn't know they'd been followed. While he waited, a stealth scan of the planet had revealed it was heavily guarded by battle cruisers in orbit, so he'd been forced to wait even longer before attempting to approach.

Finally, after nearly an hour, a transport ship came out of hyperspace a short distance away and headed for the planet. Seeing this as his best chance, Logan had hidden in the shadow of the enormous ship and followed it down through the atmosphere before breaking away to land in a small valley far away from any military presence.

Once again it was nighttime outside. A stiff wind rippled the tall grass of the valley, making it look like a churning sea of green and tan. As he exited the hatch with his utility sack slung over his shoulder he could see the haze of lights crowning the hills to the east. With a fire in his belly and determination in his eyes he started off in that direction. Once over the top of the hill he found himself in another valley about a kilometer wide, bordered by a row of even taller hills on the far side with the source of the light beyond them. As he walked, the sky buzzed with the sound of crescent-shaped fighters zipping past towards the light. He gave the sky a weary look; trying to stay as hidden as possible in the waist high grass, his senses alert for any sign of trouble as he started up the next row of hills.



**Mandalorian Fighter – Art by DCJosh / symbol by J.W.Titus**



Nothing could have prepared him for the sight at the top of that next hill. Stunned, he dropped the utility sack to the ground and stared, ignoring the fighters shooting by several hundred meters overhead.



**Logan overlooks the Mandalore Staging Base – Art by wicktone**

Below, the enormous Mandalore base stretched on for kilometers and kilometers until disappearing into the horizon. Though it was the middle of the night, he could see areas off in the distance where the base was still a bustle of activity. Hover tanks and armored land speeders patrolled right alongside the traffic of hovercars between the rows of squat buildings.

Nearer by, at the edge of the base just at the bottom of the long, sloping hill he stood upon, was row upon row of warehouses. Off to his left, on a giant landing pad in front of a large section of the warehouses with lights on and activity inside, were more than fifty boxy cargo ships being loaded with crates, armored speeders, and mean-looking hover tanks of a model Logan had never seen before. He reached into his belt pouch to retrieve his micro-binoculars. He wanted to see these tanks more closely.

They were beastly. Bodies of dark gray made up of sharp angles, their front resembled a giant wedge for plowing over rubble or dead bodies. The wide, blackened viewport looked like the narrowed eyes of an angry monster. Covered with weaponry and the biggest main gun Logan had ever seen on a tank, they moved slowly, threateningly, with a hungry, guttural growl up into the holds of the ships.

He lowered the micro-binoculars, his mouth hanging open in horror as he took in the sheer number of these tanks being loaded up. Crews bustled to get them loaded as fast as they could, and once the ships were full they sealed up and took off into the night sky. He followed the long train of engine lights of the cargo ships that had already taken off. They appeared to be moving enough material here to resupply their front lines against the Jardon Kingdom three times over—and that wasn't even including any fully-loaded battle cruisers that might have already left the system.

A feeling of great foreboding came over Logan as he stood there on top of that hill, the wind tugging at his robe. Dreb had been right; something was about to happen. Something big.

The roar of another group of fighters tearing past overhead finally snapped him back to the situation at hand, and he crouched back down into the tall grass. He needed to get down to one of those warehouses to see what was in those crates. He needed to learn as much as he could about what the Mandalores were planning next before he exacted his revenge.

With that thought in mind, he picked up his utility sack and began down the hill towards a group of darkened, abandoned warehouses off to the right—as far away from the bustle of the cargo ships being loaded as possible.

Near the base of the hill the tall grass ended abruptly. Logan halted at the edge, crouching and inspecting the fifty or so meters of short grass between him and the road that made up the perimeter of the base. He wanted to make certain the area was clear before he went out into the open. He spotted a small train of vehicles approaching down the road off to the right, so remained put until they had passed. The lead and rear vehicles were the new design of hover tanks, while the middle vehicle was a normal, topless speeder. Curious as to why this speeder would need such security, he reached for his micro-binoculars again and scanned the speeder.

Two Mandalore soldiers in dull-silver suits of armor with T-visored helmets sat in front. He'd never seen Mandalores in armor before. The suits looked quite advanced. Zooming in, he could see a small blaster barrel, a dart shooter, and something else with several hoses on the gauntlets of the driver's arms.

The armored soldier sitting in the front passenger seat continuously scanned his head back and forth across the road and facades of the buildings ahead, a blaster rifle clutched in his arms.

A glint of light from the back seat caught Logan's eye. He turned the micro-binoculars there, and nearly gasped at what he saw; a woman dressed in a black, leather jumpsuit, her long, blond hair pulled back and tucked under a tight, black

cap. Save for the blond hair and the metal-shafted spear with its long, gleaming blade she held upright in one hand, the woman looked just like the being he'd run into on Yollus.

Logan's heart raced with anticipation and hope as he zoomed in on something the woman held in her other arm, wrapped in a blanket. A pleased grin slowly spread across his face at the sight of a Rodian infant's face sticking out of the blanket.

Silently, Logan thanked the Force for guiding him here, for bringing him one step closer to discovering the mystery behind these missing children and these so-called "Specters of Death."

For months the Force had been telling him that the Mandalores were somehow involved with the issue. He hadn't wanted to believe it at first—and Sci, nor anyone else for that matter, still didn't to this day—but finally Logan gave in to the promptings after they became too strong to ignore. Now he had proof with which to back up his feelings. Now he could get answers not only on this issue, but on what the Mandalores' next move would be!

"Stay with me. Stay with me...", he quietly urged the Force.

He continued inspecting the woman. A permanent scowl seemed to be upon her face. A long, thick scar was traced across her left cheek, seeming to deepen her sour expression. The child began to stir; its tiny arms shooting up out of the folds of the blanket as it began to thrash and wail. With a snarl of annoyance, the woman leaned the spear against the seat, then waved that free hand across the infant's face. Logan watched, amazed, as the baby's throes suddenly ceased and it drifted back into a deep sleep.

He lowered the micro-binoculars and stared. The woman had just used the Force on the child. He knew it! It couldn't have been anything else.

He watched as the group of vehicles turned a corner between a row of warehouses, then continued down the road. Logan followed them with his micro-binoculars to see where they went. After they finally stopped and unloaded a kilometer or so up the road he put the micro-binoculars back into his pouch. He gave the clearing and the roadway at the edge of the base one last look, then bolted out from the concealment of the grass.



**Streets of the Mandalore Staging Base – Art by wicktone**

Moving through the rows of warehouses was no fast feat. He'd had to make absolutely certain no one was around the next corner, had to remain undetected. More than once one of those huge tanks came grumbling down the street, forcing him to duck into the shadows of doorways or behind stacks of crates. But, finally, he saw the two tanks and the speeder parked on the side of the darkened road up ahead. He quickened his pace as much as he dared and soon reached the shadows next to the building they had gone into.

Built of onyx-colored stone with jagged spires and unpleasing, even disturbing, angles, the building seemed to be a small temple of some kind with stairs that led down into the entrance instead of up. Statues of cowed beings flanking that darkened maw of an entrance added to the feeling. He could feel that something was terribly wrong with the place—that it was, somehow, unnatural. Just being near it and looking at it sent unholy chills up and down his spine. The sensation was familiar, and instantly he knew where he had felt it before—in the deepest, darkest recesses of his dreams, calling to him.

He knew what he had to do. Taking a deep breath to steel his nerves against the darkness pressing against his mind, he ran out from the shadows and down the flights of stairs into the building.

The winding stair was longer than Logan had thought it would be. Lighted by torches along the walls, down and down it spiraled as if reaching for the very heart of the planet. A low moan emanated from the dimness ahead and a cold breeze from below brushed his face. The walls were damp and trickling with water. But the cool, wet air was nothing compared to the chilling aura the building gave off in the Force. The sensation was much stronger than Logan had ever felt it in those haunting dreams of his. More potent. Though the unnatural feel of it turned his stomach he could not deny a strange allure to it, a desire to tap into its power. Yet he knew he shouldn't. He didn't know exactly what the sensation was or what was causing it, but he knew it was of darkness. He did not wish to go there—even though he felt compelled to.

After several long minutes of winding with no change the stair began to widen. He had no idea how far underground he had traveled, but it felt like a long ways. Half a kilometer, perhaps. Maybe more. Strange beasts of stone, forever snarling and clawing at all that walked by, flanked the stairs every handful of meters. The sculpted monsters were kept at bay by thick chains clasped in the hands of robed, low-hooded statues standing in the curved recesses set into the walls. He couldn't help but feel that these beastmasters were staring at him from within those dark hoods. His steps became careful, slow, lest he disturb them and incur their wrath.

He came to an abrupt halt. He could have sworn he'd heard something from down below. It had been faint, just a wafted glimpse on the cold, damp air, but he was certain he'd heard it. His heart pounded in his ears and his hand shot to the golden hilt dangling from his belt. The smothering darkness emanating from the building served to heighten his apprehensions, amplify his fears. For this reason he began to doubt if he'd really heard anything at all. Several seconds had gone by and he'd heard nothing more. Ears perked, searching the Force for any signs of approaching life, he began walking once more with stealthy steps.

And then he heard it once more, and he knew it wasn't his imagination. It was the sound of footsteps. They were close, and getting closer.

Forgetting any reservations he might have held towards the cowed beings lining the walls, he dashed into the small recess behind one just in time to avoid being spotted by two pairs of armored and helmeted troopers marching up towards him.

Holding his breath in the shadows, he watched the T-visored helmets of the soldiers as they marched towards him, hoping none of them would turn his way.

They did not. They merely passed by without hesitation, blaster rifles held across their chests, steps in uniform with each other. The sound of their footfalls on the stone steps faded away. Once he was certain they were gone, he emerged from behind the statue and continued down the torch-lit stairs.

Up ahead the stair ceased its winding and he finally saw its end. The walls and ceiling stopped abruptly as the stair opened into an immense cavern. He halted, taking in the enormity of the cave. The staircase widened even further on its way down to the floor of the cavern. Intricately carved banisters of white rock curved along the remainder of the stair, each ending with a pair of large basins filled with flames.

He looked up. He couldn't see the ceiling. Darkness swallowed his sight long before it could reach that height. From what little light there was he could just make out that the cave was circular and at least a hundred meters wide. But what sent chills down his spine and stole the breath was the eerie façade of the temple on the far side.

Nearly thirty meters tall, its face had been carved right out of the far wall. It looked alive. The high windows near the top were piercing, angry eyes and glowed with an unnatural, green light. Covered by sculptures of writhing forms and sharp, deadly angles, the temple looked to be something straight out of his most terrifying nightmares. The towering doors, flanked on either side by ten meter tall statues of hooded, robed beings and etched in the green light that seemed to fill the inside of the building, looked like a giant mouth ready to swallow any that wandered too close. The thick fog that hung around the base of the closed doors could have been the building's chilled breath.

The sound of a crying baby filled the cavern, echoing off the walls. Peeling his eyes away from the temple, Logan saw the woman in black standing in the center of a large circle of the burning basins in the middle of the cavern floor. Quickly, he ran to the banister on the right and leapt over. As soon as he landed he raised his hood and ran for the deep shadows along the perimeter of the cave wall, hoping he hadn't been spotted.

As he pressed his back against the wall, heaving heavy breaths with a hand on the hilt of his lightsaber, he inspected the woman intently from under his hood. She gave no indication she'd heard him. She still held her spear in one hand and the child in the other as she stood transfixed; staring at the temple while the Rodian infant wailed and writhed uncontrollably.

He mulled over what he should do next. He needed answers. He needed to know what this strange place was and why these “Specters of Death” were stealing infants. This woman could provide those answers. Whether she wanted to or not. *I’ll find ways to persuade her...*, Logan thought, his hands clenching into fists, his mind and heart filled with hate and a desire to cause pain.

Without even thinking about it, he took a bold step away from the shadows and towards her, his eyes alight with the fires of hatred. He didn’t care if she saw him. Didn’t care what tricks she might have up her sleeve. He wanted to cause her suffering! He ached to use the power he felt seeping into him from all around the cave to harm the woman. He needed to! It was the only way to satisfy this voracious, dark appetite.

Another round of wails from the Rodian infant erupted, and the sound broke through his dark thoughts. Shaking his head as if coming out of a dream, he realized what it was he had been about to do and quickly, quietly, pressed himself back up against the wall and back into the shadows.

He shivered at the menacing power he had unwillingly consumed. Taking a deep breath, he calmed himself and pushed the darkness away. It clung on desperately like a parasite to its host, but he was finally able to repel it and regain his clarity of mind. He needed to get closer to the woman before he tried anything, and he needed to get that child away from her first, lest something happen to it.

Several large boulders that had broken free from the ceiling and fallen to smash into the ground were scattered across the floor of the cave. A handful sat between him and the circle of fiery basins the woman in black stood within. He dashed for the closest boulder, then cautiously peered around it to make certain he hadn’t been heard or seen. The woman stood unmoving, continuing to stare at the temple in her strange trance. He dashed for the next boulder, then the next, and the next until he was at the very edge of the ring of fire and less than ten meters from the woman in black.

He peered around the rock at her, planning it all out in his mind. Her right arm was holding the thrashing infant rather tightly to keep it from falling. That might make it difficult for him to safely wrench the child from it using the Force. He could harm it if her grip was tighter than he thought. He definitely didn’t want to do that, but knew he had to get the child away from her before he attacked. He would just have to risk it and hope for the best.

Closing his eyes to slits, he took a step out from behind the boulder and stretched out his left hand towards the woman. Just before he was about to grab the child

with the Force a loud thud from the direction of the temple made him flinch and yank his hand back. He stepped back and ducked down behind the boulder. Hugging the rock he looked at the giant doors of the temple to see them creaking open, their low moan echoing throughout the cavern. The eerie, green light from within spilled out through the doors, creating a long pillar of light that reached all the way to the ring of fire.

From within that light Logan could see the silhouette of someone, or something, approaching with a slow, stiff gait. Nearly two meters tall and dangerously thin, the being had two long, onyx-colored horns sticking straight up from the top of a bald scalp. Its neck and half of the back of its head was framed by the high collar of a long, black and purple cape that draped all the way down around its lanky body. The thick fog at the base of the doors retreated as if in fear from the being as it walked forward and towards the ring of fire.

Hiding behind the boulder, Logan watched the frightful being as it walked into the circle of fiery basins. The yellow light illuminated the woman's frightful, white face. She was of a species Logan had never encountered before. With blood-red lips, sharp cheek bones and shallow cheeks, with deep, black pools for eyes, she was a chilling sight.

The child's crying became wilder with every step of the horned woman's approach. It seemed as if the child knew this woman was dangerous—as if it could sense it. A chill ran down Logan's spine for he, too, could tell this woman was not one to be trifled with.

The woman in black dropped to one knee and bowed her head at her approach. She laid her spear down on the ground and held the screaming infant up in front of her with both arms as if the child were an offering to the gods.

Logan's blood froze. He wondered if these stolen children were being offered up as sacrifices in some twisted, religious ritual. The horned woman did look like a member of some dark clergy, and she had emerged from a temple.

His lightsaber was suddenly in his hand, just itching to be ignited at the thought. He peered around the boulder at the two women with narrow eyes, ready to pounce.

The horned woman stopped just in front of the other, peering down at the Rodian infant with a fanged smile and hunger in her eyes. Spindly, ashen fingers tipped with long, black claws rose up. Her hands moved back and forth, twisting and turning above the offered child but never touching it. As she did the child's screaming ceased and it fell into a deep sleep—just as Logan had seen the other



woman do before. She closed her eyes and sucked in a long breath between those fangs as her hands continued to dance above the child.

Logan's mind raced, trying to piece together all that he was seeing. These women were using the dark side of the Force. He could feel it. They weren't terribly strong in the mystical energy field, but what abilities they had were well-honed. They were not Sith. He knew that without question. Sith would be much more powerful than these women. Much more powerful. And besides, the Sith Order had been wiped out decades ago. His Master had seen to that.

He knew that these women must belong to some cult that worshipped the Dark Arts—just as he'd feared. He'd heard of such groups before, but had never encountered them, and never would have thought the Mandalorians would be involved with such people. He feared that time was short, and that the child would meet its doom as a sacrifice if he didn't act soon.

Carefully, he peered back around the boulder to assess the situation. The woman in black had laid down her weapon, and the tall, horned being appeared to be unarmed. He could take them by surprise. It would be over with quickly. He could rescue the child and end this before it went any further. He had to do it! He couldn't allow the child to suffer such a fate.

The horned woman lowered her hands and looked down at the bowing woman. "You have done well, Marauder. The child is gifted in the Force. Not as much as our Masters had hoped, but it will make a promising Marauder."

Logan froze at her words, halting his decision to act. *Gifted in the Force?* He wondered, perplexed. *Marauder? Our Masters?*

"Thank you, Priestess," the kneeling woman—the Marauder—said. "I humbly obey our Masters and offer up this child into their service. May the Force be bent so that Their Will might be done."

The Priestess scooped the child up into her arms. "Now go, Marauder, and continue your work!"

The Marauder bowed down on all fours. "Yes, Priestess." Picking up her spear, the Marauder stood and turned with her head still bowed in reverence. She walked out of the circle of fire basins and for the long staircase leading back up to the surface. The Priestess stood unmoving, watching her until she disappeared up those stairs. Then, she turned and began back towards the open doors of the temple with that stiff gate.

Logan rose up from behind the boulder, watching the Priestess walk away. *So the child isn't a sacrifice, but was stolen to be raised and trained to become one of these...these Marauders?* He thought. *Is that what they've been doing with these children all along?*

The Priestess walked through the thick fog, which parted before her once more, and toward the green light shining within the temple. As soon as she crossed the threshold the giant doors began creaking closed.

More troubled and confused now than ever before, Logan dashed out from behind the rock and for the closing doors, slipping between them just before they boomed shut.

His back hugging the wall just within those doors as he walked, bathed in the unworldly, green light coming from up ahead, he prayed the priestess wouldn't turn around. She would see him plain as day if she did. His stomach turned at the sensations bombarding him in the Force in this dark place. The temple was a place of great evil. There was no denying that. Hatred, suffering, fear and anger oozed from every crevice. It was concentrated; amplified in some strange way.

It was awful, yet he couldn't deny the allure in its power.

The priestess continued down the long hall, becoming swallowed in the source of that green light. Nearly a meter in length, the light source was difficult to look at directly; pulsing with an alien energy, its beams radiated throughout the temple.

A hand raised in front of his face to shield his eyes, Logan watched as the priestess' silhouette began to grow shorter and shorter. Her legs, then her midsection, followed by her upper body steadily disappeared until the last tiny bit of her horns were gone. Logan rushed forward, shielding his eyes from the light. As he approached where he'd seen the priestess melt away he came to the end of the hall and a flight of stairs leading down into a grand, circular room.

The source of the light was suspended in the middle of the room. Equal distances separated it from the walls, the floor and the ceiling. He could see no means by which it was held there. It appeared to float right in midair. Squinting, he could see that tall, arched, tunnels were carved into the rock all around the top half of the circular wall so that the light might be spread all throughout the temple.

The priestess had just reached the bottom of the staircase, and was beginning across the stone floor. Inlaid in the floor, shimmering black and green in the light and spanning the floor's entire width and length, was a strange emblem; a hollow

circle in the center shooting forth eight shafts, each of which was tipped with a different shape, or design, of its own.

The priestess stopped in the center of that hollow circle. Swaying gently from side to side she stood with eyes closed, chanting strange cantations until a hidden doorway opened in the far wall. Ceasing her mumblings, she walked across the giant seal and through that passage, which promptly closed behind her.

Cautiously, Logan walked down the stairs and began across the great seal. He peered up at the floating source of the light as he walked below it, and for the first time saw that it was actually a giant, emerald crystal. He stopped and peered at it for a short time, trying to piece together what it was meant for. Closing his eyes to slits, he probed it with the Force. He was amazed to discover that this crystal was the focal point of the great and terrible emotions he was sensing. Somehow, this large crystal was projecting that darkness throughout the temple.

He peeled his eyes away from the crystal and continued across the floor to the place in the wall where the priestess had gone through. He inspected the dull, gray rock for any signs of the door, but found none. Not even the smallest crease existed of the door. It looked like solid rock. He pushed against the wall. It did not budge. He pushed harder, and harder. Nothing. He rammed his shoulder into the wall. The only result was him chastising himself and rubbing the sore shoulder.

Frustrated, he backed up and searched the curved wall for any other way through. He saw nothing. He looked up and something caught his eye; the tunnels carved into the rock halfway up the wall. Perhaps he could jump up to one of those and crawl through it. There was no way of knowing for sure where they led, but he had to try. He needed to know where she was taking that child. Gathering the Force within himself, he jumped into the air and landed in a crouch at the mouth of the tunnel.

His body blocked most of the green light from getting into the tunnel, but enough got through that he could still see clearly what lay ahead. The gray rock of the tunnel went on for quite a few meters. The walls had not been carved as smoothly here as they had been in most other places in the temple. Several fist-sized knots of rock stuck out of the walls and up out of the floor, making crawling through it hard on his knees and head.

He saw the end of the tunnel fast approaching. A voice caught his ears, forcing him to slow his crawl to avoid unwanted noise.

He inched to the edge of the tunnel and looked down into the room below. The room was quite large, more than fifty meters wide, circular, and the bottom third of the tall walls were lined with pillars all the way around. The green light and the

light fog that spilled out of the tunnels cascaded down all around the room like a misty rain. Crystals no bigger than a hand and clasped within the teeth of black, metal rods sticking up out of the ground stood at hip level throughout the room. Each glowed with the same eerie, green light as the giant one, though far more subdued. Eight rectangular boxes of varying sizes and carved from the same gray rock as the temple surrounded every one of these small crystals. Like spokes on a wheel, or points on a star, the small tombs radiated out from these crystals.

Though the green light rained down into the room and the small crystals glowed the room was quite dim. It was because of this that Logan didn't immediately realize what those small, coffin-like boxes actually were, and what was in them. It wasn't until he caught sight of something stirring within one that he took notice. Straining his eyes, he inspected the box more closely to see what was inside it. His eyes went wide with horror and he gazed around the room at all of the boxes once more.

"Cribs!" he whispered to himself, unbelieving. "They're all cribs!"

Now that he knew what he was looking at, he could make out that nearly all of the cribs had a baby or a young child in them. The children were of all different species and were all sleeping in what looked to be an unnatural, fitful slumber. Their faces were scrunched up in displeasure, their legs and arms gave occasional flails as the green light and the light fog washed over them.

Movement over on the other side of the room caught his eye and he ducked down onto his belly to avoid being seen. The priestess, with her stiff, shuffling gait, walked through the clusters of cribs with the Rodian infant still in her arms. She walked to an empty one and leaned over to lay the child inside. Standing over the child, she raised her arms into the air and chanted something Logan couldn't understand. A thumb-sized, black stone set into the necklace hanging around the priestess' neck began to throb with a dim, purple light at her words.

Logan watched, puzzled. A coldness came over him, and his stomach turned at the potent, unnatural power of it. The air around the priestess began to stir. The fog, and the green light raining down, began to swirl above the stone cradle holding the Rodian child as if it were the focal point of some torrent. The chanting grew in intensity. The swirling fog and light and the speed of the throbbing of the crystal around her neck grew right along within it.

Then, quite suddenly, the priestess halted her chanting and lowered her arms. The throbbing of the crystal around her neck slowed, then ceased entirely until and it faded back to black. She stood there swaying for a short while as if drained from the exertion of what she had just done. Then, she started off for a doorway on the

far side of the room in her usual, slow gate.

When the priestess was nearly to the door Logan got back up onto all fours at the mouth of the tunnel, readying himself to drop down into the room as soon as she was gone. As he did, his hand brushed a small stone over the edge. Eyes wide, mouth gaping open, he thrust his hand out to try to catch the falling stone, but to no avail.

The thud of the stone hitting the floor was not terribly loud, but it might as well have been a thunderclap to Logan.

The priestess' stiff steps stopped. Her head cocked to the side as she listened.

Immediately Logan dropped back down onto his belly in the tunnel, pressing his face to the rock as he prayed to himself that he would not be found. As he laid there he sensed a cold, searching eye in the Force approaching from the other side of the room. The priestess was using the Force to probe the darkness for the cause of the noise.

Logan closed his eyes and did his best to recall his Master's teachings. He stilled his mind and drew his thoughts, and his presence in the Force, inward as much as he could. It had been years since he had done such a thing and he found it difficult. He strained to seal himself off as he felt the chilled whisper of the priestess' probe in the Force approaching slowly from off to his right.

He grimaced, pulling his presence deeper within himself as the shadowy searchlight came upon where he was. It washed over him like spindly, ghostly fingers. As it did, he was able to discern the nature of the presence. It was not terribly powerful, but held a great deal of malice and hate. Fear was in there, too—as was a great desire to control all around it. He was relieved to feel that the probe was broad, dispersed—better with which to scan a large area. Had it been more finite, more focused, he was certain she would have sensed him right away—so out of practice was he.

The seconds felt like hours as it passed by, but finally it did.

The probe continued along the wall for some time, then retreated back to its source. Satisfied that nothing was there, the priestess turned and walked through the doorway in the wall.

Cautiously raising his head, Logan watched her disappear into the dark hall beyond as the thick, stone door ground shut. As soon as it closed he jumped down from the end of the tunnel to land on the stone floor of the room. With ginger steps and eyes darting around the room for danger, he began towards the nearest circle of stone cribs.

With a pained frown on his face he walked to one and leaned over to peer down at the child within. The Sullustan baby was no more than eight months old and looked skinnier than it should. Its face was wrinkled up in discomfort as it slept, and its head jerked from side to side as if it were trying to wake from some nightmare, but unable to do so. Logan's heart ached for the child and its plight. He had to do something. He reached out a hand and gently placed it on the child's forehead. Closing his eyes and filling himself with comforting peace, he used the Force to sooth the baby's fragile mind as much as possible. When he opened his eyes and removed his hand the thrashing had ceased, and the child lay in a calm, serene sleep.

Righting himself, he gave a pleased nod at the child. He turned to peer at the other four nearby cribs and their fitful occupants. Then, he walked past the black, metal rod sticking up out of the ground with the glowing crystal set atop of it in the center of the circle of cribs to gaze around the entire room and the many other clusters of cribs. His saddened frown returned, accompanied by a growing anger.

*There're so many! How could anyone do this to a child?* He thought, his hands clenching into fists, a scowl spreading across his face.

The glow of the crystal behind him intensified for a handful of seconds, then reverted back to normal.

*What kind of animals are these Marauders? These children are innocent! They should not have to endure such things!* He thought, nearly shaking with fury, filled with a sudden power.

The glow of the crystal behind him suddenly erupted with intense light. Noticing, Logan spun and was forced to shield his eyes from the radiance. As shock and confusion took over his anger the intensity subsided back to a dull glow.

Puzzled, he walked up to the crystal and crouched down to inspect it. Strange, black markings—ancient writing of some kind—were carved into each of the crystals eight sides. He waited for some time for its glow to intensify again, but nothing happened. He stood back up, still looking down at the crystal. He reached out a hand to touch it. A sudden sense of danger filled him and he recoiled the hand. Brow furrowed, he peered down at the crystal, wondering why reaching out to it should have caused such a feeling of danger. He reached out the hand again, and as he did he realized it was not his reaching out to the crystal that had alerted his senses, but something else entirely.

Eyes wide with alarm, he spun around to find the priestess standing just a few steps

behind him; her black eyes staring at him with fury as she reached out with those black-clawed hands for his throat.

**“HOW DARE YOU DISTURB THIS *DOMAIN OF THE DAMNED!!*”** she boomed.

Logan recoiled from the horrifying woman's outstretched hands, fumbling at his belt for his lightsaber. Towering over him, she came forward with those stiff steps, her onyx eyes sharp with hate.

Awakened by the priestess' shout, infants in cribs all around them began to wail. A chain reaction started that quickly spread throughout the room, filling it with deafening cries.

His panicked hands finally found his weapon. He shot the hilt into the quickly shrinking space between those clawed hands and his throat, but just before he could thumb the blade on the priestess made an incredibly swift swing, knocking the lightsaber out of his grip. His mouth fell open as he watched the gold hilt tumble through the air, then clank onto the cold stone floor and disappear underneath a cluster of cribs several meters away. He stretched out a hand in the direction of the hilt, trying to call to it through the Force, but the priestess was upon him before he could.

Those spindly hands wrapped around his throat in a vise-like grip. His eyes bulged and a gurgled gasp for air escaped his lips. The horrible woman leaned in close, a malicious, fanged grin on her face at seeing such fear and surprise on Logan's face. Panicked, Logan began to swing fists at the woman, beating the side of her head and arms in an effort to break her hold. One particularly well-placed swing struck her hard across the jaw, snapping her head to the side with a loud *Pop!*

The ghostly monster of a woman turned her head back to face him slowly, as if to control the rage brewing within her. But as she turned Logan saw it was not anger that filled her large, onyx eyes, but a sadistic glee. Blood trickled down the corner of her lip—deep maroon tracing a jagged line across her pale skin. She raised her head to the ceiling as if basking in the pain. A long, black, forked tongue emerged from between those pointed teeth and she lapped up the blood with pleasure.

Logan watched in disgust, his face growing redder by the second from lack of oxygen. The priestess turned her face back down to peer at him, that grin still splitting her mouth. But then, all of a sudden, that lustful smile was gone and the rage finally surfaced. The crystal dangling from the chain around her neck pulsed with a green glow. Barring her teeth in a guttural growl, she tightened her grip around his throat. With unnatural power she raised him up off of the ground, leaving his feet dangling and kicking in the air.



Logan tugged desperately at her hands, trying to pry them free with what little energy he had left. They would not budge. His mind raced with panic as he felt the life being squeezed out of him. He tried to think of a way to get out of the situation, but could not. Fear bombarded his mind not only from within, but from all around him, smothering any rational thought. He could feel Darkness circling hungrily around him; feasting off of his fears, amplifying them with every bite It took. It was taking him, stealing his will to resist.

Yet before it could consume him he made one final effort against it. Reaching behind him to the back of his utility belt, he retrieved his weapon of last resort. Bringing his right hand up, he flicked the vibro blade on and stabbed down into the priestess' left arm. She gave a startled scream of pain and released him, recoiling and clutching the cut in her arm.

Logan fell in a heap on the floor, gasping and coughing as precious air filled his lungs. Fire racing through his chest, he peered up at the priestess through teary eyes. She turned rage-filled eyes to him. The crystal hanging from her neck suddenly erupted with green light as she came forward and reached down to grab him. Still weak, Logan tried to ward her off with a wave of the vibro blade but she was too quick. Picking him up by the shoulders, she raised him to his feet. Gritting her teeth, she plowed the hard bone of her forehead into his face in a powerful head-butt.

Stars filled Logan's eyes and his body went lax with pain. The priestess gave a growl, and before Logan knew it he was being launched through the air and across the room.

Flailing his arms, Logan watched as row after row of cribs passed underneath him, hoping he wouldn't land on an unsuspecting infant. Luckily, for the child within it, he barely missed landing within a crib and crashed to the floor just on the other side. He slid headfirst into the base of another and once again stars filled his head.

Rolling over and sitting up as quickly as his bruised and battered body would allow, he shook the fog from his head and peered back in the direction of the priestess. The crystal around her neck continued to pulsate with dark power and the stiffness in her movement seemed forgotten. Like some wild beast, she leapt through the air with great agility. Her purple and black cape flapped behind her as she floated over the rows of cribs and landed just a few short paces away, those long arms already reaching out at Logan to ensnare him once more.

Logan sprang to his feet, ready this time for a fight. Adjusting his grip on the vibro blade he clicked it back on and held it ready. The priestess slowed her approach,

her eyes sharp as she watched the blade. Crouched defensively, they began circling one other, plotting their time for attack. Those long arms and talloned hands of hers swiped out at him occasionally, testing his response. Each time Logan warded them off with a quick slash of his vibro blade, keeping his senses clear of the smothering darkness and alert for danger.

Danger came unexpected from behind.

The crystal the priestess wore turned to a burning star, causing Logan to squint to shield his eyes. Those eyes went wide just a second later as he sensed the empty crib rifling for the back of his head. He dove out of the way just in time to avoid being struck by the crib, but as he rolled out of the dive and back to his feet a well-placed kick from the priestess knocked the vibro blade from his hand.

Weaponless, the towering form of the priestess charging at him with relentless wrath, Logan pulled back with a punch. He wasn't proud of what he was about to do, but this woman was vicious and couldn't be stopped.

Aided by the power of the Force, Logan lunged forward. His speed surprised the priestess, and she wasn't at all prepared for the blow that landed in the middle of her face. Her balance was compromised as she continued forward and Logan moved in to capitalize with a knee to her stomach. The air was knocked from her lungs and she doubled over, but before Logan could come down with an elbow to the back of her head she righted herself and swung around with a stunning backhand that sent him flying backwards through the air.

His wits about him much better this time, Logan was able to control his tumble through the air. He landed in a crouch several meters away in the clear space in the very center of the clusters of cribs. Looking up he saw the priestess, crystal radiant with green light, charging towards him with incredible speed, his vibro blade in hand. Logan tensed as he stayed crouched, plotting his next move. But then, a glint of metal caught the corner of his eye. He didn't have to look. He knew what it was. Confidence filled his gaze as he peered up at the charging woman.

The priestess was nearly upon him now, murder in those black eyes. At the last second Logan stretched his right hand out to the side and called upon the Force. His golden-hilted lightsaber jumped to his hand from underneath the nearby crib with ease, as if it longed to be there. In one swift motion he ignited the silver-black blade and sprang to his feet, swinging the deadly beam of energy in an upwards arch.

In the split second before the blade found its mark Logan saw something unexpected in the priestesses eyes—surprise and horror. Not at being bested in battle and the knowledge of her own impending death, but shock at seeing what

she had and recoiling in fear from the very blade her enemy wielded.

Logan stood over her fallen, lifeless body for some time, perplexed. The hum of his lightsaber was the only sound in the chamber. The crying had ceased the second the priestess died. He turned to inspect the silver-black blade, turning it over as he did, pondering what it was about it that had elicited such a response from the priestess. Nothing looked out of the ordinary with his former Master's blade. It appeared just as it had every other time he had activated it.

His brow still furrowed, Logan gave the priestess' body one final look, then deactivated the lightsaber and turned to peer around the room. There was little he could do with the children now, by himself. He would have to come back with more men. An entire strike force and take the base. Then, he would be able to save these children and give them peace. But first, he had to get off of the planet and out of the system alive to be able to return.

Regretfully, he turned and dashed out of the room, hoping to make it to his ship before the priestess' body was discovered by one of her underlings.

When Logan finally reached the top of the long, winding stair and the exit of the underground lair a sudden warmth returned to his bones, to his soul. Coming out into the moonlit night he closed his eyes and sucked in that warmth, replenishing stores that he hadn't even realized had been drained. He shed off the lasting, negative effects of the dark temple, regaining peace in his mind. Several deep breaths later, the Light restored and Darkness receded, he slunk back into the shadows of the buildings lining the streets and out of view of the scattered, passing traffic.

He began back the way he'd come. He knew he needed to get back to his ship and off the planet before anyone could discover the dead priestess. He had to get back home to tell Sci what he'd seen here; what the Mandalores were doing to these children, their dark perversion of the children's minds.

But then, the low roar of a ship's engines filled the air, catching his attention. He watched as a cargo shuttle crested the rows of buildings and clawed its way into the night sky. A pair of crescent-shaped fighters zipped up after it, meeting it quickly and settling into an escort formation for the journey to the enormous battlecruisers hanging in orbit.

Logan's eyes remained glued to the cargo ship for some time, his thoughts drifting back to images of what he'd seen there atop of that hill at the edge of the base when he'd first arrived. Another, then another cargo ship took off into the night sky, reminding him of the massive campaign the Mandalores seemed to be preparing for.

He lowered his eyes from the trail of engine light cutting into the sky and began scanning the streets ahead, getting his bearings. He remembered seeing several darkened warehouses off to one side of the base when he'd first arrived. He started off in that direction in a quick pace, remaining alert for any patrols. He would have to be quick about his inspection. He had no idea how much time he had before the dead priestess was discovered and his presence here was blown. The Temple appeared to be restricted to all but the priestess herself, so discovery any time soon seemed improbable. Yet Logan couldn't discount the possibility that there could be other priestesses inside, and that they might stumble upon the body any second.

He reached the area of darkened warehouses without incident. The whine of

starfighters and speeders echoed off in the distance. No patrols moved in this area. He gawked at the closest of the warehouses from the shadows of a squat building next to it. Not until he was right upon the warehouses did he fully appreciate their size. Each was at least one hundred meters long, half that wide and over six stories tall. And he had seen more than fifty of these warehouses spread around the perimeter of the base. He shook his head, dumbfounded by the sheer volume of military supplies.

He dashed out from the corner of the building and to a small door on the side of the warehouse. It was locked, but he was able to bypass that with the aide of the Force. With one final glance around, he opened the door and dashed in.

He stood just inside the door and looked around. Mountains of crates were spread out before him off to the left, extending all the way to the back wall. Off to his right—just inside of the partially opened, enormous main doors—were rows of armored speeders and several of those shovel-nosed hovertanks.

Turning his attention back to the sea of boxes he noted the numerous metal arms hanging down from the ceiling amongst the crates. Logan followed these arms up with his eyes to see that they were connected by rollers to the bottom of a series of catwalks set out in a grid pattern high above the floor of the warehouse. Judging by the rollers, he surmised the arms could be moved along this grid in order to more quickly and more efficiently move the cargo.

He began walking through the maze of crates, studying their labels with an ever-increasing sense of dread. Concussion grenades, blaster pistols, blaster rifles, med-kits, portable missile launchers, and several others marked with acronyms he didn't understand.

He found a lone crate marked blaster rifles and opened it. The unscathed metal of the brand-new weapons gleamed in the dim light. He reached in and took one of the long rifles out. He was surprised by its light weight. A comparable weapon in the Jardon military would have weighed more than twice as much. He studied the sleek design, noting with curiosity the handful of buttons set into the stock just above the trigger. He shook his head, wondering what new tricks these blasters held in store for his peoples' military.

He was just about to put the blaster back in the crate, but then thought better of it. He uncoiled the strap and slung the weapon over his shoulder. He would take it back to Jardon for their scientists to examine. Perhaps they could reverse-engineer the weapon for mass production. It wouldn't be the first time they had attempted such a thing. Mandalore laser technology was far advanced from anything the galaxy had seen, so the Jardon had a lot of catching up to do.

As he resealed the crate he spotted a nearby stack of longer, thinner crates marked with words that immediately got his attention—ARMOR SUITS. He rushed over, scaling up the tall stack of med-kit crates next to them so that he could reach the one on top. Perched ten meters up off the ground, Logan opened the top crate of armor suits.

Except for the color, the suit appeared to be identical to the ones worn by the troops he'd seen escorting the Marauder. This one was a dull green, with dark red lining around the black, t-shaped visor. He picked up one of the forearm pieces, inspecting the hoses and the nozzle head they were attached to. He wondered what function it might play. Images of line upon line of these armored troopers marching against his people emitting clouds of toxic gases filled his mind.

With a shiver running down his spine he replaced the gauntlet. Next, he picked up the t-visored helmet. He began turning it over in his hands when he heard the muffled sound of blaster fire outside. His eyes wide with surprise, then confusion, he replaced the helmet and shut the crate.

He listened, trying to determine which direction the shots were coming from, but couldn't tell. He looked up at the network of catwalks and saw several large windows along the walls there. He jumped from the top of the stack of crates to grab one of the dangling, metal arms hanging from the bottom of the catwalks. Quickly, he scaled the arm, then jumped up to grab the rail of one of the catwalks and hauled himself over.

The shots were steadily getting closer, and now he was able to determine that they were coming from the front and to the right of the warehouse. He ran atop of the catwalks in that direction, stopping at the first window he came to that revealed the scene on the ground below.

Four soldiers in tan uniforms were running straight for the warehouse he was in, blasting away with their rifles. Logan followed the line of their shots, trying to see who, or what, they were chasing. At first he missed them because he was looking for something bigger. But then the flash of a bolt that exploded on the ground right next to its intended target revealed the diminutive pair as they leapt into the air to avoid the spray of sparks, waving their small arms above their heads in obvious panic.

Logan's first thought was that the troopers were firing upon children and anger boiled to the surface. But then, upon closer inspection at the next flash, he was relieved to discover that they were not children, but two beings of a smaller, alien race dressed in brown robes with pointed hoods and glowing, yellow eyes.

The pair raced as fast as their stubby legs would carry them for the enormous, front doors of the warehouse, dodging and weaving out of the way of the blaster bolts zipping past all around them. Logan moved along the catwalk so that he could see the front doors, raising his hood and staying as low as possible to avoid being seen.

The two beings raced through the doors amidst sprays of sparks from near-misses. One was taller than the other and quite slim, while the other was short and pudgy. The taller of the two darted for one of the giant, sliding doors, indicating with a pointed finger that his companion should go to the other. Despite the severity of the situation, Logan couldn't help but chuckle as he watched the two tiny figures straining in vain to push the monstrous doors closed while blast bolts exploded all across them.

Knowing that the soldiers weren't far behind, Logan knew he had to act. Closing his eyes, he stretched out a hand in front of him. He reached out with the Force to the doors, struggling against their weight. He could tell by the excited chatter of the small pair and the growing intensity of the exploding blast bolts that the group of soldiers were closing in fast. Finally, and just before the soldiers reached them, Logan was able to slide the doors closed.

Breathing a deep sigh of relief, Logan opened his eyes to see that the two small beings had been knocked to the ground by the sudden movement of the doors. They both got to their feet, gazing incredulously at the doors, amazed by their own strength. Then, as if snapping out of their shock, they both erupted into jubilant, fast-paced chatter—no doubt, Logan thought, congratulating themselves for their strength.

The sound of the soldiers pounding their fists on the doors echoed throughout the warehouse. Logan watched, once again unable to hide an amused smirk, as the pair of robed figures began taunting the soldiers through the doors at their inability to capture them. But then, as those doors began to budge, all celebration was gone and the two began jumping up and down in distress. Just before the doors began sliding back open, the robed pair bolted through the rows of speeders and hovers to hide in the maze of crates.

Logan watched them go to see in which direction they were heading, then turned back around to see the soldiers begin spilling through the doors, glowlamps affixed to the top of their blaster rifles on and searching through the rows of vehicles.

Silently, Logan set off along the catwalks to find the small, robed pair before the soldiers could.

It didn't take Logan long to find them within the vast maze of boxes and crates from his vantage point high above. He moved in above them, careful not to make a sound. They hadn't gone very far at all and, quite frankly, couldn't have chosen a worse hiding place. With the vast area from which to choose, they had only ducked behind a small pile of boxes just off of the main path that split the middle of the warehouse. From his lofty perch he watched the way the soldiers were conducting their search off in the distance—efficiently, professionally. They would find the pair easily if they remained where they were.

Crouched on his haunches above them, Logan watched the diminutive pair curiously. One of them, the taller of the two, had taken something out of its robes and was holding it up so that both of them could inspect it. They were raptured by whatever it was, their focus on it intent and the threat nearby nearly forgotten.

He couldn't remember ever seeing their species before. They were an odd sight with their glowing, yellow eyes. He wondered how they had come to be here. Were they prisoners that had escaped? Was their race allied with the Mandalores? He dismissed that idea immediately. He couldn't imagine the Mandalores allying themselves with a species so gentle and innocent looking. Perhaps they had been slaves? He could definitely see the Mandalores doing such a thing. After all—someone had to build all of their war machinery.

He turned his gaze back to the glowlamps of the soldiers and was alarmed to see one circling in dangerously close from a row off to the right. The robed pair was oblivious to the threat—their attention focused on the object in the taller one's hands, with only quick glances down the main path for their pursuers. Judging by the back-and-forth scanning motion of the soldier's light he hadn't spotted the pair yet, but Logan knew he would within a matter of seconds unless something was done.

Closing his eyes to slits, Logan reached out with the Force to touch the mind of the soldier. The man's presence was sharp, focused, trained. At first Logan feared he would not be able to penetrate such an alert mind, but after some gentle prodding he found the opening he needed. Melding his own thoughts with those of the soldier, Logan imagined the sound of a soft thud! coming from behind the man, then retreated from his mind. Instantly, the soldier spun searching for the source of the sound, then hurried off in that direction.



Logan opened his eyes and watched the light of the soldier rushing off, pleased to see that it had worked. But then, something he hadn't planned for happened. The soldier whose mind he had touched must have alerted his comrades of the noise via comm. link, because all of the other soldiers were now rushing in that direction from the other side of the warehouse. And two of them were on a direct path that would unintentionally intersect the robed pair.

*Great. Really smart,* Logan thought, berating himself.

He hadn't wanted to get involved. He didn't have the time to! But, now, his actions could very well have cost this pair their lives. He couldn't allow that to happen. More direct interference was now required.

Closing his eyes to slits once again he drew upon the Force. Reaching out with invisible hands, he wrapped them around the taller, thinner of the robed pair and began to lift.

At first the small being couldn't understand what was happening. All of a sudden he felt weightless and seemed to be moving away from his chubby brother. Then, he peered down at his feet. A yelp of alarm escaped his lips when he saw that he was nearly a half-meter off of the ground and steadily rising.

His brother turned at the exclamation, then released one of his own at seeing what was happening. For a handful of seconds all he could do was watch as his brother, waving his arms and kicking his legs in frantic fear, continued to magically rise into the air. But then, as logic slowly returned and his brother's rising showed no signs of stopping, the shorter, chubby one jumped as high as his little legs would allow and grabbed his brother's legs in an effort to bring him back down to the ground. As he grabbed on his added weight caused a slight dip in the ascent, but it lasted only a second or two. In no time at all they were both rising into the air above the stacks of boxes and crates faster than ever. The sight of the soldiers' lights passing by directly beneath them was the only thing that kept them from voicing their very real terror in the form of hysterical screams.

Logan was caught temporarily off guard by the added weight of the chubby one, but adjusted quickly. And just quick enough, it seemed. The cries of the robed pair had brought the soldiers closing in from every direction at full speed, and he'd just barely lifted them out of the area before they'd arrived. Now, he carefully raised the trembling pair over the rail of the catwalk and set them down just a few meters away from where he was crouched.



**Two Small Beings – Art by Anima Mia Cooper**

The two small beings remained on all fours for several seconds, too stunned to move as they stared down through the criss-crossed metal of the catwalk at the circling soldiers below. Logan shuffled towards them, and the movement caught the pair's attention. They looked up with those glowing, yellow eyes and jumped at the sight of him. Logan could tell they were about to begin screaming again, so he quickly lowered his hood and put his finger up to his mouth.

The pair just stared at him for several seconds; confused, stunned. Logan gave a kind smile as he raised his hands up in front of him to show he meant them no harm, that he was not an enemy. The pair's heads cocked to the side, obviously confused by this gesture. They turned to one another and chattered quietly, discussing something. Then, together, they turned back towards Logan and raised their own tiny hands up in front of themselves, waving them back and forth in an imitation of his greeting.

Logan's brow furrowed in confusion. Then, realizing they'd thought his gesture to been some form of greeting, he shook his head, waving his hands back and forth in front of himself in a cutting motion to try to tell them to stop.

The pair stopped, watching him intently for several seconds, then began imitating him again; shaking their own heads and waving their hands back and forth in a cutting motion.

Logan lowered his hands and bowed his head in frustration. The small pair ceased. Trying again, Logan raised his hands once more in a sign of nonaggression. Knowing this sign the pair responded quickly; once again raising their hands and waving them happily.

All Logan could do was shake his head in frustration.

Once the pair finally stopped waving their hands at him he pointed over the edge of the catwalk and down at the circling soldiers below. Then, he pointed down the catwalk behind him and motioned for the two to follow as he started off in that direction. He looked back after several steps and was pleased to see that they were following him—happy that the communication barrier had finally been breeched.

Several meters further down the catwalk Logan stopped. He turned back around and crouched, watching the soldiers back behind them now as they fanned out once more to continue their search of the area. The two robed beings watched as well, chattering to each other as they did. As he listened to their quiet laughter, Logan got the distinct feeling they were making fun of the soldiers' futile searching. He couldn't help but smile.

Seeing that the soldiers had no clue where they were Logan turned his attention away from them and began searching the system of catwalks for a way out of the warehouse. He knew that they couldn't stay here. It was a good bet the soldiers already had additional troops on the way to help search of the enormous warehouse for the fugitive pair. Then, the place would be locked down and escape unnoticed would be nearly impossible.

Logan's heart sank as, as if on queue, eight more soldiers rushed through the parted main doors of the warehouse—coordinating with their comrades, glowlamps affixed to the barrels of their rifles as they searched through the rows of cargo.

*Great*, he thought, scanning the catwalks with even more earnest for a way out. There were large windows all along the side walls, but he dismissed those right away. Most likely they would require breaking to get out through, and then there was the twenty meter drop to the ground below. There were several staircases along the walls that led down from the catwalks and back into the maze of crates. They could go down one of those and make for a side door, but being down amongst the rows of boxes would rid them of the advantage of being able to see

where their enemy was. Logan knew it was a risk they would have to take. All other options were running out.

He scanned the staircases and the locations of the soldiers and saw that their best bet would be the stairs ahead and to the left. He turned to motion for his newfound companions to follow him when he saw the taller of the pair holding his grabbing, shorter brother back with one hand while he held a large, green gem just out of reach in the other. The chubby one continued to try to get at the gem, but to no avail. His brother blocked him at every turn. And as they struggled against each other their feet clanged louder and louder on the metal catwalk. Too loud.

Logan peered down at the soldiers spread out all around the warehouse floor below, knowing that they would hear the commotion soon enough. He tried desperately, and in vain, to get the two to stop, but they paid him no mind. They were far too transfixed by their greed for the shimmering gem. Then, waving his arms frantically for them to stop, Logan watched in horror as the shorter of the two—his frustration reaching its peak—suddenly tackled his brother.

The clang of their bodies hitting the catwalk and the wrestling match that ensued was loud enough to draw the attention of each and every one of the soldiers' glowlamp beams from below.

They froze mid-struggle when they realized they were bathed in light.

"Look!" "How'd they get up there?" the soldiers asked.

"There's someone up there with them!"

"Blast 'em!" another yelled.

Frantic, they sprang to their feet as blast bolts zipped up all around them. Some struck the metal mesh of the catwalk right below them, spraying sparks up at them and sending them jumping to avoid them.

"Come on!" Logan yelled, ducking and dodging blast bolts as he turned and ran. There was only one way out of here now. The staircases weren't going to be of any use to them now. That thought was confirmed as he watched the lights of two soldiers running up a staircase ahead and to the right. He turned left at a junction in the catwalks and sprinted for the window dead ahead; hoping his guess had been right and that they were heading in the right direction as sparks exploding all around him from below, frightened yelps coming from the small pair directly behind him.

As he neared the window he was relieved to see that his guess had been right. They had ran to the side of the warehouse with the squat building next to it. Skidding to a stop just a few meters away from the window, he thrust his right arm out and hit the glass with a Force Push. The window exploded, sending a shower of tinkling glass to the ground twenty meters below.

Logan turned around to the robed pair, who were staring in amazement as they approached at what he had just done. He held his arms out in front of him, gesturing for them to come into his arms amidst the continuing hail of blaster fire from below.

The pair looked up at him, then leaned out to the sides to peer around him and out the window at the long drop below. They turned to one another with stunned stares, then looked back up at Logan and shook their heads in protest. Logan nodded, only to be answered by more adamant head shaking and hysterical chatter.

“There's no time to argue!” Logan urged, peering past them and at the two soldiers that had just reached the top of the stairs and were now racing towards them along the catwalks. He looked back down at his companions, urging them once more to come to him, but they continued shaking their heads, backing away from him and the window as if he were insane.

The two soldiers that were running along the catwalks began opening fire. Logan knew they were out of time. Lurching forward he scooped up the two small beings as they turned and tried to run away. He placed one under each of his arms. They kicked and pried as he turned back towards the window, yelling words he'd never heard before, but whose meaning he was quite certain he knew.

Laser bolts zipping by all around them, Logan ran to the window and jumped into the night while the small pair clutched in his arms let out long, high-pitched screams of terror.

“He actually jumped!” one of the guards said in disbelief as the two of them raced for the window. When they reached it they immediately looked down, shining their lights on the ground below. Both expected to find the crumpled, broken bodies of their quarry, but as they searched back and forth across the duracrete below all they saw was broken glass. They exchanged confused looks, not believing what they were seeing.

Raising his comm. link to his mouth, one guard said, “Search the east side of the warehouse. Target still on the run. We’ll remain put and serve as lookout until you arrive.”

*“Roger that,”* a soldier replied through the comm.. *“Backup?”*

“Alerting them now,” the soldier said, shaking his head in frustration. He thumbed in the proper channel and waited for the connection to be made. The lights of the other guards running around the corner from the front of the warehouse came into view. Trying to explain how they’d lost the diminutive fugitives and the need for backup, the two guards turned and walked away from the window.

Logan watched the two soldiers from behind an air circulation unit on the roof of the building next to the warehouse. He was pleased to see that his plan had worked. No even considering that someone could have made the ten meter jump from the window to the roof of the building next door, the soldiers were focusing their search on the ground below. This gave him some much needed time to figure out his next move.

After the two soldiers left the window he turned to regard his two small companions laying on the roof behind him. They had fainted during the jump, so he’d just set them down while he watched the soldiers. Now, they were waking up

and getting to their wobbly feet, their glowing, yellow eyes searching as they tried to figure out what had happened.

“You guys okay?” Logan asked.

They peered up at him for a handful of seconds, not saying anything. Then, at the same time, they both erupted into a diatribe; pointing at the window, then at him, in anger and shaking their heads as they stalked back and forth in a fury. Logan allowed them to vent, knowing that it had indeed been frightening for them. He couldn’t understand a word, but got the gist of what was being said. Yet after several moments went by and their tempers showed no signs of lessening he decided there were much more important issues at hand.

“Okay, okay,” he urged, raising his hands. “I get it. You didn’t like what I did. Now can we please get moving? I doubt we have very long before...,” he trailed off as, all of a sudden, this entire section of the base sprang to life. The sounds of speeders and tanks approaching filled the night. The shouts and footfalls of many more soldiers reached their ears. Several alarms sounded nearby.

“Great,” Logan breathed, seeing a pair of starfighters crest the hills off to the left and heading right towards them, searchlights affixed to the bottoms of their hulls. He looked across the roof and saw a door leading down into the building on the far side. “Come on,” he said, then ran for the door.

He’d hoped the door would just open when he reached it, but it remained closed. Judging by the red light on the panel it was locked. He turned to see how close the fighters were—close enough that his lightsaber would serve as a beacon alerting them to their location should he use it. Damn, he thought, eyeing the door. He rushed at it, plowing into it with his shoulder. “Owwwww!” he exclaimed under his breath, clapping his throbbing shoulder, rotating his arm to try to work out the stiffness.

His small companions chuckled at his pain.

Logan turned to gauge the progress of the fighters. They were closing in fast and would be upon them in a matter of seconds!

He turned back to the door, having decided on a different method to open it. Yet before he could even try to use a Force Push, the shorter, chubby alien produced something from inside his robes and walked to the panel. The whine of the fighters’ engines could now be heard, and they were growing louder by the second. Out of time for games, Logan reached out to shove the small being out of the way when the door slid open with a hiss.

Logan stood, gawking.

The pudgy being turned and pretended to ram into an invisible door, then grabbed at its shoulder in an over exaggerated reenactment of Logan's pain. Afterwards, he laughed hysterically, doubling over and pointing at Logan. His brother was quick join in the fun-making. They continued to laugh even as they ran through the doorway and down the darkened stairs within.

"Cute," Logan said dryly, then dashed inside after them just before the fighters zipped by overhead.

The stairway inside was dark, but the light from his companions' eyes was sufficient enough to light the way. As they descended the short stairway Logan reached out with the Force to see if anyone else was in the building, but, luckily, found it to be deserted. At the end of the stairs was another door, but this time it wasn't locked. They walked through the door and quickly headed down the long, unlit hallway beyond. At the end of the hall was another flight of stairs, this one going down the other two flights to the main floor. As they emerged from the door at the end of the stairway, they entered into a lobby with the front doors not twenty meters away.

They all hurried toward the doors when, all of a sudden, Logan's danger senses flared up. He stopped, reaching out and placing a halting hand on the chest of the two robed beings. Not a second later they saw lights approaching, then heard the sound of a speeder.

"Get behind that desk over there," Logan said, pointing. They did as he said. He ducked behind another nearby desk just as the lights of the landspeeder pulling up to the building illuminated the lobby.

From behind the desk, Logan watched as four of those armored, T-visored troops spilled out of the speeder and hurried to the front doors. The trooper in the lead punched a code into the panel next to the front doors, and when it opened they all dashed into the darkened foyer with blaster rifles raised and ready, alert and professional. Logan was impressed, not to mention worried, by their well-trained movements. His muscles tensed as the quartet neared his hiding place. He knew he would have to be at his best to catch them off guard.

With the Force aiding his muscles and his speed, Logan grabbed the metal desk he was under and flung it at the four Shocktroopers. He was amazed by the speed of their response. The two on the right turned and opened fire on the airborne desk, sparks spraying all over as the lobby was suddenly filled with blinding flashes of



light, while the two on the left dove clear. The desk slammed into the firing troops on the right, smashing them backwards into a wall, then pinning their unconscious bodies to the floor.

The other two rolled up out of their dives and opened fire on Logan. Yet, by the time they realized they were hitting nothing but the far wall and stopped shooting to scan the room for their target, Logan came up from behind them. He grabbed both in a very specific spot on their necks. They flinched and tried to turn to face him, but were both unconscious and falling to the floor before they even could.

The two robed beings rose slowly from behind the desk they had hidden under, staring at Logan in wonder, a newfound respect in their shinning, yellow eyes. They went across the room to the two soldiers pinned under the desk. Working together, they heaved the desk off of the unconscious pair. Then, just to make certain they were still out cold, they each gave a soldier a swift kick in the side, watching for any reaction. Satisfied that the troopers would not be waking up any time soon, they bent over the pair and went to work.

The chubby one began rummaging through the various pouches of the utility belt wrapped around the first guard's waist, producing several small tools and back-up blaster charges. Most things he just discarded over his shoulder as junk, but occasionally he found something of interest and stuffed it into the confines of his robes. Meanwhile, his brother first removed any weapons from the second trooper, then removed the helmet—turning it over in his hands, inspecting it.

Logan watched the pair, baffled by their strange behavior. But then, as he watched the tall one inspect the helmet, an idea hit him. Shrugging off his maroon robe, he turned to the unconscious Shocktroopers behind him and began stripping the closest of the two—the one that appeared nearest his own size.

It took him awhile to find out where all of the clasping connections of the different pieces were, but after he had figured it out on a couple it went a lot faster. He just hoped he could remember how it all went together later. After removing the armor he took off the man's jumpsuit, then dressed himself in the stolen uniform. Piecing it all back together wasn't as hard as he'd feared.

He was surprised to discover how light the armor was and how form-fitted it felt. He moved his arms in circles and bent his elbows, testing the range of motion of the suit. He was amazed at how easily he could move, how the suit didn't impede him at all. Then, he put on the only remaining part of the outfit—the helmet—and found himself immersed in a totally different world.

Looking through the t-shaped visor, he saw the lobby as if it was fully lit. There

were no shadows, no dark corners for anyone to hide in. He saw it all clear as day and in perfect focus. He peered out the large windows on the front of the building and, once again, saw the streets and grassy slopes beyond nearly as well as if it were midday.

A small group of tan-uniformed soldiers ran by in the distance outside. Logan was amazed as the visor surrounded each soldier with flashing, yellow boxes, which quickly turned to green. He looked at the lower left corner of the inside of the visor and saw the word **FRIENDLY** flashing in green. In the upper left corner, the words **search and threat-assessment mode** were displayed.

He removed the helmet, stunned as he turned it over in his hands. He ran a finger along the thin shaft of metal sticking up above the right side, figuring that the rotating box at its end must be the sensor scanner.

He placed the helmet back on his head and continued scanning the area in front of the building. Shaking his head, he thought of the advantages this technology would give these soldiers. He had known that Mandalorian technology was more advanced than the Jardon Kingdom's, but he had no idea that it was this advanced! Someone wearing this gear would be able to assess an entire battlefield with minimal energy expenditure and with maximum results. This, accompanied by their superior training, would make these soldiers super warriors!

And then there was the weaponry built into the suit itself! There was the small blaster built into the top of one forearm, while the other gauntlet had a dart gun and something else with a lot of hoses. Not to mention the other gadgets and buttons on the forearm mini-computer.

He was stunned by the capabilities of the suit because this was almost the same as being able to use the Force. Almost, because machines could break down or malfunction, and the Force was eternal. Also, someone with the Force could distort the mind of a person using this gear so that what they perceived, or thought that they had perceived, was something totally different. But the gear was still very impressive. And terrifying.

A red flashing in the lower left of the visor appeared: **WARNING!!! UNIDENTIFIED ENTITIES AT REAR!** Logan watched down in the lower left corner as the search mode showed a small image of his two robed companions surrounded by red, flashing boxes. The activity was beginning to give Logan a headache. Remembering the various buttons in the mini-computer on his right forearm, he began pushing buttons. After a few buttons he was able to stop the flashing and returned the search and threat assessment mode back to normal.

“Amazing,” he breathed, once more stunned by the technology. Then, deciding they had lingered far longer than they should have, he turned to his companions and said, “Alright. Let's get moving.”

His voice sounded metallic and synthesized through the audio receptors. It didn't sound like his own. It also startled the robed pair, because they jumped into the air and, upon seeing him standing there dressed in the suit of armor, the taller of the pair grabbed up one of the soldier's blaster rifles.

**“No! No! No!”** Logan screamed, waving frantically.

But the terrified midget fired anyway, hitting him square in the chest and sending sparks flying all over.

The force of the blow sent him stumbling backwards and into the wall. After having slid down to his backside and coming out of the shock of the blast, Logan realized that he wasn't dead. Wondering why, he reached up with an armored hand and felt for the gaping hole the blast bolt surely had ripped through his chest, ...but found nothing. Looking down he saw there was no hole, only the armor with a small, black, scorch-mark.

*This is different...*, Logan thought. Standing back up, he reached out with the Force and plucked the blaster from the small hands of the tall, skinny one to prevent a repeat of events.

The two robed beings went ballistic—running in circles, screaming and flailing their arms in the air.

Removing the helmet again, Logan said, “Hey. Hey! It's just me!”

They stopped their scrambling upon hearing his voice, peering at him in confusion.

Logan moved over to the desk where he'd laid his robe and lightsaber. Setting down the helmet and picking up his lightsaber, he ignited the blade. The hum of the black-silver blade filled the lobby as Logan stood there. Then, slowly, he cut down at the helmet with the blade. A brilliant flash—followed by a spray of sparks—followed. But the helmet was unscathed. Amazed, Logan repeated the experiment a second time hoping with his whole being that the first try was just a fluke.

The exact same thing happened again.

Picking up the helmet, Logan examined the area that he had tried to cut with the

lightsaber, searching for any signs of damage. All he found were small black scorch-lines.

“How in the...?” he breathed, his mouth agape. “This is not good,” he said as he studied this seemingly indestructible Mandalorian metal.

Hearing the Jawas approaching as they chattered away at each other, Logan turned and said, “Come on. We've got to find a way off of this rock.” He handed the trigger-happy, taller one back the blaster he had taken from him and put the helmet back on.

[If I were him, I'd never let you touch another blaster for as long as I lived!] Logan heard a metallic, synthesized voice say into his ear.

[Shut it! How was I supposed to know that it was him in that suit? It was an accident! We both know that you've had your share of them, too. Remember the time when we were trying to get away from those crazy Toydarian Pirates and stupid you lit your old robe on fire with that torch!]

[Only because you were the idiot that broke our glowrod! You know that I never handled fire well!]

Logan couldn't believe his ears. He was actually able to understand what it was that his short companions were saying to each other! Noticing a flashing icon in the lower left part of the visor, he read the yellow words translation mode on: **sub dialect—unknown variation**. The suit also had a built in translator! Unknown variation? Logan thought. The language that these two used must be unidentified by the translation unit, but it was still similar enough to another language for it to make some sense out of it. This was going to make things a lot easier for all of them. Hopefully, it was able to translate everything that he said back to them in their own language. Only one way to find out...

"Who are you guys?" Logan asked. He heard the words reverberate through the inside of his helmet and in his mind in Basic, but through the audio receptors he heard the words in the language of his troublesome companions.

Four yellow, glowing eyes stared up at him in utter shock. Nothing was said for a few seconds and none of them moved. Logan couldn't help but smile behind the black visor at the reaction of two robed midgets. For once they were speechless.

After a few more seconds of silence, the shorter, pudgy one took a half step forward. In the helmet, Logan heard the electronic voice say, [What did you say?]

“I asked who you guys were.”

The small pair nearly jumped in surprise as, once again, they heard their own language coming from the voice amplifier of the helmet.

“What are your names? Mine’s Logan.”

After another brief pause the chubby one raised his hand to his chest and said, [My name is Tadoo.] Then gesturing to his right, he said, [This is my brother, Ping.]

[*Older* brother Ping,] the other chimmed in quite matter-of-factly as he held the large blaster across his chest.

[Only by a few minutes!] said Tadoo, spinning on Ping.

[Hey, older is older,] Ping said. Then, looking up at Logan, [That means *I* decide what is best for us, and I say that we should stick with you. You seem to know how to take care of yourself, and we need to get out of here before they kill us!]

[Hey! It was my idea to stay with him—not yours! You’re the one who shot him, remember?] Tadoo said, anger growing in his voice.

[And I told you that it was an accident!] Ping retorted, rage brewing in his tone. Then, lowering the blaster to point at Tadoo, he added, [Keep it up, and I’ll shoot you too. Only *this time* it will be on purpose!]

[You couldn’t hit the broad side of a Dewback!] Tadoo said, stepping forward challengingly.

[Oh yeah?] Ping said, dropping the blaster and hitting his brother across the face.

Logan watched them wrestle around on the floor for a while until he decided that he’d had enough. Reaching out with the Force, he grabbed them by the back of their robes in an invisible grip. He pulled them apart from one another and lifted them a few feet off of the ground. Although the two were suspended in mid-air, they continued to struggle against the Force Hold Logan had on them, attempting to kick or claw or punch at one another. Their struggling only resulted in their twisting around in circles as if they were lying on a slow-spinning top. After a few more seconds of spinning, Ping realized it was useless and stopped struggling, while Tadoo continued to try and get at his brother like a wild animal to food.

“Tadoo!” Logan yelled, finally bringing the small being to a halt. Seeing that they were in trouble, the small pair sulked as they looked up at Logan. He wanted to

give them a really good tongue lashing and tell them that if they did this once more he would leave without them, but they looked so miserable that he couldn't bring himself to do it. So he just lowered them back to the ground.

"Wait in here!" he finally said. "I'll signal when it's clear for you to join me. Okay?"

They nodded.

Logan crept out of the front of the building, trying to be cautious yet attempting to look like he knew where he was going and what he was doing just in case anyone happened to be watching. He turned the scan and threat assessment program back on so that he wouldn't have to expend any energy in locating threats. By doing this, he could focus all of his energy on concealing himself through the Force so that he went unseen.

He walked around to the driver's side of the hoverspeeder, peered around to see if anyone was nearby, then signaled for the other two to join him. As the two rushed from the doors for the speeder, he jumped in and started it up. Its high pitched whine intensified as Logan fed power to the throttle, turned around and sped off on a road heading away from the base and towards his ship.

“Duck down! Here—cover up with my robe,” Logan said.

Nervous, the Jawas obliged without hesitation.

The base was a bustle of troops and buzzing starfighters scouring the area for the fugitives, but between the speeder and the armor Logan was wearing they were paid little mind as they turned up a road leading away from the base and into the surrounding hills. They had gone a ways away from the base and it looked as if they would get to the ship without a hitch when, up ahead, Logan spotted a roadblock. Blocking the road were two heavily-armored speeders with large, rear-mounted blaster cannons. One of those deadly-looking tanks sat in the grass off to the right of the road, its long barrel pointed directly at their speeder--communicating its message loud and clear. Standing in front of the speeders were four of the armor-clad guards, one of whom was waving for them to stop.

“We’ve got company. Stay under the robe,” Logan said to the Jawas.

The frightened pair nodded their agreement, then ducked under the cover of the maroon robe at the foot of the passenger’s seat.

As he slowed the speeder to a stop a few meters from the intimidating guards, Logan wedged his lightsaber next to the seat for quick and easy access. The guard who had waved him down headed directly to the driver’s side of the speeder. The other three circled the vehicle slowly, all business with blasters at the ready.

“Where are you going all alone, Shocktrooper? What’s your business in this sector?” the guard demanded, his blaster poised for any sudden movement.

Here goes nothing, Logan thought as he drew upon as much of the Force as he could, then projected its influencing energy into the four guards’ minds.

“You *will* let this vehicle pass,” he said, waving his left hand out at the guard.

Nothing happened. All four of the guards stopped and stared—their blank, visor-helmeted faces revealing nothing. These guards were not weak-minded. They were

difficult to manipulate, and Logan had to strain to keep contact with their minds. He could feel his influence waning, so he dug deeper into the Force, drawing more of it into himself and projecting it into the guards.

The guard who had spoken to Logan began to lower his blaster.

“Move your vehicles out of the way,” Logan said with another wave of the hand.

Two of the rear guards moved over to the speeders, walking as if in a trance. They started up the speeders and moved them out of the middle of the road clearing the way for him to pass.

Logan breathed an internal sigh of relief. He began raising his hand to the throttle when a beeping erupted from the passenger’s side. The Jawas gave a yelp of alarm, then sprang up from underneath the robe, blowing their cover. Tadoo, bobbling a saucer-shaped object with flashing yellow lights on it as if it were on fire, jumped up onto the passenger seat and flung the saucer as far from their speeder as his little arms would allow. Logan watched the saucer tumble through the air, then skid across the grass and underneath the hovertank.

His grasp on the minds of the four armored guards evaporated instantly. Not wasting any more time with mind control tricks, Logan thrust his left arm out at the guard next to his door—sending the armor-clad figure flying backwards though the air. He slammed the throttle forward and the speeder lurched ahead. As it did, the guard standing behind their speeder opened fire.

Bolt after bolt whizzed past Logan’s head, some burning fist sized holes in the windshield. He looked back as they sped off to see the guard getting into one of the speeders, both of which were now moving back onto the road and giving chase. Even more worrisome, he noted that the barrel of that tank was spinning around to face toward them. One shot from that thing could end it all for them.

“What were you thinking?!” Logan demanded of Tadoo.

But before the Jawa could defend himself, an explosion split the night behind them. Logan spun to look, thinking the tank had fired at them, but instead saw the tank engulfed by flames. His brow furrowed in confusion, but then he remembered the disc Tadoo had flung under the tank. He didn’t know how the Jawas had figured out that it was an explosive device, but he was sure glad they’d gotten rid of it.

Both Jawas sprang up on the passenger’s seat, watching the tank burn and erupt in secondary explosions, cheering all along.



The pursuing speeders opened fire as they closed the gap in their faster vehicles. Logan knew their pursuers were probably radioing in their location to the rest of the base at that very moment, so he searched the speeder's console for the frequency jamming controls. He found the switch and activated it. When he did harsh static filled his helmet, nearly blasting his ears out.

He flung the helmet off of his head to save his hearing, then looked at the buttons of the small mini-computer affixed to his right forearm. One button was flashing red. He pushed it, then replaced the helmet to find the feedback gone. Just as he did a searing hot blaster bolt shot past his head, blasting the windshield completely off.

Logan ducked as debris from the windshield shot everywhere, swerving as well to avoid another barrage from the heavy blaster cannons. He veered off of the road, driving through the grass and for the hills in a more direct route to his ship. The uneven ground caused the repulsor engines quite a bit of trouble, and the speeder jostled up and down, slowing considerably. The heavy speeders, better equipped for such terrain, were hardly slowed at all and closed in even more, their shots growing more and more precise.

"Do you have any more of those things?" Logan asked the Jawas, hunched low in his seat to avoid having his head shot off.

Sitting in the passenger's seat, the Jawas nodded vigorously that they did, reaching into their dirty, brown robes and placing several in their laps. One at a time, they activated the explosives, then tossed them over their shoulders and out of the speeder. As if they had strayed into a mine field, explosion after brilliant explosion erupted all around the heavy speeders, causing them to halt their fire and careen wildly to avoid being struck. But none hit their mark, Logan noted in disappointment.

He grabbed one of the saucer detonators out of Tadoo's lap. Depressing the activation switch, he closed his eyes to slits and stretched out with the Force. He carried the detonator through the air—directing it straight at the nearest of the two pursuing craft. Once it reached the speeder, he held it in place with the Force on the hood.

**BOOM!**

Peering over his shoulder he saw an armored figure silhouetted within the expanding fireball being launched into the air. The Jawas, now standing up in their seat, whooped and hollered as they watched the remains of the speeder tumble through the air then come crashing back to the ground.

[Did you see that?] Ping said. [That one was mine!]

[No way!] yelled Tadoo. [*I* threw that one!]

[Yeah, right, and Banthas don't have fleas!]

“We still have another speeder to worry about!” Logan reminded them as he saw the other speeder rush through the smoke and smoldering remains after them. Deadly lances of light spat out from the rear-mounted blaster cannon, pummeling the back of their speeder, melting whatever metal or circuitry it came in contact with.

“Give me another detonator!” Logan said.

[All gone!] Tadoo replied, holding forth his empty hands.

Another blast struck the speeder's backside—this one causing a small, secondary explosion inside the speeder. The craft suddenly lurched down on the left, accompanied by an increase in pitch and loudness from the engine on the right side. They had just lost the rear-left repulsors; and if they didn't do something fast, they would also lose the one on the right, along with their lives.

“Ping, can you drive?” Logan asked, reaching down to his right for his lightsaber.

[Yeah...,] the Jawa said, looking up at him in confusion.

“Do it then,” he ordered, then stood up on the driver's seat and jumped onto the back of the speeder.

Ping jumped into the driver's seat and took the controls. [Tadoo—take the pedals!] he ordered.

Noting their rapid deceleration, Tadoo complied without argument.

Letting the Force flow through him, Logan jumped high into the air. Double-flipping, he landed on the hood of the pursuing speeder. He could sense the surprise of the driver and gunner at him having done so. That surprise was doubled when he ignited his lightsaber. He used that momentary instant of shock to his advantage. Leaping over the windshield he landed on the gunnery platform on the back of the speeder.

With one quick, downward slice he cut the mounted blaster cannon's barrel in two

with an explosion of sparks. The armored trooper standing on the gunner platform raised an arm to use one of his forearm weapons, but Logan gave him a quick kick in the gut and sent him flying off of the back of the speeder.

Turning with lightsaber held ready, he saw the driver had turned around in his seat and had a pistol aimed up at him. Logan deflected two bolts, then chopped down into a gap in the suit of armor, slicing the warrior's extended arm off at the bicep. He jumped into the passenger's seat while the man grasped his new stump in howls of pain. Using a Force Push, Logan launched the armored trooper out of the driver's side door and skidding across the grassy plain.

Deactivating his lightsaber as he lowered himself into the driver's seat, he took control of the heavily-armored speeder and increased the throttle. It didn't take long for him to catch up with the other, limping speeder. Taking off his helmet to reassure the Jawas of his identity, he told them to stop. After they transferred over to the heavy speeder they continued through the grass and the hills towards Logan's waiting ship.

The speeder crested a hill and the *Silver Shadow* came into view in the small valley below. Logan made all speed for it, anxious to get out of there before they ran into any more problems.

Pulling up next to the ship, Logan shut the engines down and jumped out. His robe slung over one arm, he dashed to the ship, the Jawas right behind him. Pushing in a long code in the keypad, he opened the hatch with a hiss of venting gases. As the ramp came down Tadoo began jumping up and down, pointing at the hills and shouting. Logan turned to see yet another speeder bearing down on them.

The speeder opened fire, and blast bolts began slamming into the side of the ship all around them. Logan ignited his blade in a flurry, jumping in front of Ping and Tadoo to protect them as he deflected the bolts back into the hillside.

"Get inside the ship!" he called over his shoulder.

The Jawas were more than eager to comply. They darted up the hatch.

Logan continued deflecting laser fire as the speeder barreled down on him. It was

less than twenty meters away now. All of a sudden, two trails of flame shot up from within the speeder's cockpit. Thinking them missiles, he chanced a quick look up and was stunned by what he saw—two Shocktroopers wearing jetpacks.

The Shocktroopers hovered in midair, fanning out to Logan's left and right while the speeder came to an abrupt halt just a few meters away. The Shocktroopers opened fire with their blaster rifles. Logan dove to the side to avoid the shots, then came up out of the roll and swung his humming blade from side to side, slapping a handful more into the dirt.

Meanwhile, a woman in black—the Marauder from that dark temple—rushed out of the speeder and sprinted towards him with a long spear in hand. Five meters away she jumped high into the air, coming down with every intention of skewering Logan head-to-toe with her long spear. He did a backwards flip at the last second to avoid both woman and spear. His eyes widened in surprise as soon as he landed, for the dark woman was already upon him once more and stabbing for his chest.

Logan gave a quick swing of his lightsaber to cut the shinning, half-meter long tip from the shaft of the spear, but no such thing happened. Sparks sprayed off of the spear, but the tip remained intact! His eyes once again wide with shock, Logan spun out to his right to avoid another stab.

*The spear's made from the same metal as the Shocktrooper armor!* He realized.

The woman smirked, amused by his surprise, then attacked again and again. With a fluid grace she continued coming at him with that spear—twisting and bending her body, stabbing with such speed it was nearly a blur. Were it not for the aid of the Force, Logan was certain he would have been killed by now. But he held fast, parrying her moves as he spun and twisted himself, sparks erupting between their blades.

At the edge of his focus Logan noted that the two Shocktroopers had landed and were circling them a safe distance away, blasters held ready for an opening. Every few seconds they took a shot. Logan had to move quickly to deflect the blast bolts, then bring his blade back around to defend against another furious onslaught from the Marauder. He spun out wide as he blocked another series of stabs from that spear, then twisted his wrist just right to deflect a blast bolt off of his lightsaber and right at the Marauder's face.

Her eyes widened as the bolt came at her, but she spun her spear as if it were a staff at the last second, deflecting the blast away. Circling in more cautiously, she eyed him with renewed anger. She gave quick glances at the nearby, circling Shocktroopers, then gave a quick hand-signal. The armored warriors began

tightening their circle, blasters raised.

Closing his eyes to slits, Logan drew upon the Force for extra strength and clearer concentration. As he did, he felt the dark anger and rage emanating from the woman. Just as with that dark priestess, it pummeled his senses and threatened to disrupt his concentration. It wrapped around him in long, sharp fingers and his head began to buzz. As he tracked the movements of both Shocktroopers and woman he attempted to drive the buzzing out of his head, but with little success. It held fast.

“You are weak, Jedi!” the woman said, a blaze of satisfaction in her eyes.

She came at him in a flash. His lip curling in frustration, Logan dodged to the side at the very last instant, then came across and hit her as hard as he could in the ribs. There was a loud cracking of bones, and the Marauder stumbled backwards in shock. Logan then thrust out his left hand, hitting her with a powerful Force Push square in the chest.

Caught off guard by his sudden burst of power, the Marauder flew backwards through the air, flipping head over heels. But, with the skill of an acrobat, she brought her tumble under control and landed softly in a crouching position several meters away, grasping her ribs in pain with one hand.

A stream of red-orange flame suddenly lanced out from the forearm of the Shocktrooper on his right. Logan dove and rolled forward to escape the deadly flames, and then barely had time to raise his lightsaber to his face to deflect a blast bolt from the other Shocktrooper. Knowing now what the device on the left forearm of his armor suit with all the hoses was, Logan let loose a blast of flame of his own. The nearest Shocktrooper was caught completely unawares. The flames caught the man’s jumpsuit on fire—sending him scrambling in circles, then rolling on the ground.

Behind him, Logan heard the engines of his ship coming to life.

*What the...?* He thought, spinning to look up at the cockpit. How’d they get it started? I’m the only one that knows the code sequence! His surprise was doubled as the engines increased in pitch and his ship began rising a few feet off of the ground.

“Hey! That’s *my* ship!” he called after them, enraged that the Jawas, after all he’d done for them, would even consider leaving him behind.

His anger giving him added power, he picked up the flaming Shocktrooper’s

blaster from the ground with the Force and flung it at the other. It zipped through the air with tremendous speed, hitting the Shocktrooper square in the throat, sending him to his knees gasping for air.

With an opening now Logan ran for the rising ship. Tadoo was standing at the top of the ramp, waving for him to hurry with one hand while holding a blaster much too big for him in the other.

Just before he could jump up to the ramp, Logan's danger senses flashed a warning. He spun to see the Marauder, still crouched in pain several meters away, throw a dagger. He swung his lightsaber to bat the missile away, sending it spinning through the air, then clanging into the ground. Something over the tops of the hills beyond the woman caught Logan's eye, and he looked up to see several crescent-shaped starfighters approaching. He turned and jumped up onto the ramp, deactivating his lightsaber and walking up into the ship as it steadily rose into the night sky.

Tadoo let out a yell and raised his blaster to fire. Worried that Tadoo was going to blast him, Logan raised his lightsaber to activate it. But then he realized Tadoo wasn't aiming at him—he was aiming at something just behind him.

Logan ducked and spun just as Tadoo fired, finding the marauder standing at the edge of the ship's ramp. She blocked the blast bolts with an incredibly fast spin of her spear, the metal staff a blur of motion. Logan thumbed on his lightsaber and came at the woman. He knew he needed to end this quickly. Those fighters were coming in fast and they'd be sitting ducks against their blaster cannons.

Tadoo was forced to stop firing lest he hit Logan in the back, but he remained where he was, watching the fight.

The marauder reacted quickly to Logan's advance, blocking his first swipe, then bringing the end of the spear around like a staff to catch him off guard. Logan blocked the attack easily, but was nearly sliced across the cheek by the long tip of the spear as the Marauder, displaying incredible handling of the weapon, spun it around her back, then thrust it forward at his face.

Logan bent his upper body backwards to avoid the stab, batting across his body with his lightsaber to knock the spear out wide. Straightening, he ducked under yet another swipe, then came up out of it with a powerful backhanded swipe that sent the Marauder stumbling back half a step.

"Tadoo—get to the cockpit! Help Ping get us out of here before those fighters tear us apart!" Logan shouted.

The Jawa nodded, then ran off to help his brother.

Having a slight opening, Logan raised his left hand to hit the Marauder with a Force Push and knock her off the ramp, but, knowing what he was about to do, she pulled yet another dagger from her belt and flung it at him. Forced to bat the dagger away, he lost his opening as the woman came back in at him.

He ducked under another straight thrust of the spear, then spun around to sweep the Marauder's feet out from under her. But the Marauder was too quick. She jumped over his sweeping foot, hitting Logan in the middle of the back with the butt of the spear and knocking him onto his face, sending his lightsaber skidding across the floor to deactivate several meters away within the passenger's area of the ship.

The Marauder landed, sneering with contempt while twirling her spear to bring the blade to bear, then raised it over her head in both hands. She was just about to stab down through Logan's back when the ship was suddenly and violently shaken. The impact of the laser bolts fired from the fighters rocked the ship, sending the Marauder careening from side to side, and Logan bouncing on his stomach towards the woman and the edge of the ramp. As if this wasn't bad enough, both of their balance was thrown off even more as the ship banked hard to the right in order to steer away from the attacking fighters.

The Marauder was forced to drop her spear and grab the hydraulic piston of the ramp to keep from falling out of the ship. The weapon clanged along the ramp as it slid towards the edge, then became wedge between the hydraulic strut on the other side of the ramp and the retracting arm. Eyes wide in terror, Logan slid right past the lodged spear and all the way to the edge of the ramp. He grabbed onto the lip at the last second, hanging on for dear life as the rushing wind buffeted him, causing him to lose his grip with his right hand.

The Marauder watched as her spear became more and more dislodged from between the retracting arm and piston, sliding closer to the edge with each bank of the ship, every blast bolt that struck the shields. She chanced reaching out with one hand to try to grab it, while holding onto the hydraulic piston with the other. She could almost reach it. Her fingers were mere centimeters away, then her fingertips brushed it ever-so-slightly. Just a few centimeters more and she would have it....

Logan pulled himself up and half-way over the edge of the ramp when he saw the Marauder reaching for the spear. He couldn't allow her to get it back. He stretched out his right hand, using the Force to call the spear towards him. At first it only twitched. The Marauder's fingers had reached it now, and she nearly had it! He

reached out with the mystical energy field again, and this time the shaft twitched a little more, nearly free. Before he could dislodge it completely and call it to him another blast bolt rocked the ship hard, jarring the spear free, but also sending Logan sliding back over that edge to dangle by one arm.

The Marauder screamed in rage as she watched the spear tumble over the edge. Her eyes ablaze, she redirected her fury elsewhere. Letting go of the hydraulic piston, she let herself slide on her knees towards the edge—towards Logan’s straining hand there. Holding onto the retractor arm at the edge of the ramp with one hand so she wouldn’t slide off, she peered down at Logan as he dangled below by a single arm. With her free hand, the Marauder once again drew a small dagger from her utility belt.

“*Weak!*” she scoffed, staring at Logan.

Holding onto the ledge with only one hand, his shoulder burning as his muscles threatened to tear free from his bones, Logan locked his own with those burning eyes. They didn’t move from hers even as she raised that blade high above her head, the moonlight reflecting off of it in a brilliant shimmer—even as she began driving that blade down towards his hand, towards his certain doom.

The Marauder’s gasp was both one of surprise, and one beyond her physical control, as, in the blink of an eye, Logan raised his free, right arm from below the edge of the ramp and stabbed her straight through the chest with her own spear. The dagger slipped harmlessly from her hand and was lost to the wind as, slowly, she reached down with a weak hand to finger the shaft sticking out of her chest. Her eyes followed, peering down in disbelief at what lie there, then further down at Logan. Her strength and life fading fast, she lost hold of the retractor arm and slid off the edge of the ramp into the dark night below.

Straining against the wind and the terrible pain in his shoulder, Logan heaved himself up over the edge and onto the ramp. He crawled up the ramp and into the ship, slapping the button on the wall to seal the hatch behind him, then falling to the floor. He laid there on his back for several seconds, regaining his breath and his strength. Finally, when yet another barrage of laser fire battered and shook the ship—this one feeling much more serious than any that had come before it—he got up and stumbled to the cockpit to take the controls from the Jawas. For he knew that, even in his current state, he could fly better than those two were right now.

\* \* \*



The *Silver Shadow* cut through space as it sped away from the dark side of the planet. The crescent-shaped fighters, still hot on its tail, blasted away as the ship spun and twisted to avoid the deadly lances. Three much larger battlecruisers closed in quickly at top speed from the other side of the planet, trying to cut off the escaping ship.

“I want full batteries from all three battlecruisers!” the hooded figure screamed from the lead battlecruiser’s wide dais. “Blast them into space dust! They cannot be allowed to escape!”

“But, My Lord—we’ll hit our own fighters,” a young man said from a console nearby.

Darth Siv froze, then turned slowly to face the technician. The young man flinched once those sickly, yellow eyes, filled with barely-controlled anger, fell upon him.

“If that ship isn’t destroyed, you’ll wish you were already dead once I start with you!” Darth Siv seethed, his pasty lips curling over his yellow teeth, pointing at the trembling technician.

“Yes, My Lord,” the young man said, then turned back to his station.

Darth Siv turned back to looking out of the large viewports at the chase outside, hands clenched in rage. His ashen face was contorted into a look of near madness, his eyes fixed on the escaping ship as if his stare alone could draw it in.

He watched with satisfaction as the three battlecruisers opened fire with full forward batteries. The space between the escaping ship and the cruisers was filled with brilliant streaks of deadly green light. The Mandalorian starfighters chasing the escaping ship tried desperately to get out of the path of the barrage, but were struck numerous times, eventually exploding into rolling fireballs.

“How long until the craft is out of the planet’s gravity well and can achieve hyperspace?” Darth Siv asked. The question was directed at no one in particular, but he knew that it would be answered nonetheless.

“Less than a minute, Lord Siv,” someone answered from nearby.

Siv watched as, all of a sudden, the Silver Shadow stopped all evasive maneuvers as full power was put into its thrusters, gunning for open space.

“Why aren't our lasers doing more damage?” he demanded.

No one dared to give a response to such a question from such a person, for they all knew that no explanation would suffice.

“Target the shield generators! And hurry!”

Streak after green streak from the pursuing battlecruisers pummeled the Silver Shadow, jostling it from side to side. But its shields held fast.

“How long ‘till it can achieve light speed?” Siv said, an edge of panic in his tone.

“Thirty seconds, My Lord!!” one of the crew screamed, terror in his voice.

“Destroy them! **NOW!!!**” Siv boomed, his voice crashing like a thunderclap across the bridge, reverberating off the walls. Seething with the dark side, his blood began to boil. He stomped across the bridge, stopping directly behind one of the crewman in charge of directing the turbo laser assault. Destroy that ship now, or you die...,” he bit out through his yellow teeth.

“Y...y-y-y...yes My Lord,” answered the young man, trembling as he moved dials, voice shaking as he gave orders.

Darth Siv opened his robe and removed his lightsaber from its place on his belt. He held it in his hand, waiting.

“Fifteen seconds, My Lord!” came a shout from across the bridge.

In one swift, violent motion, Darth Siv activated his lightsaber and lopped off the head of the young man. The head rolled across the floor, then stopped with a dull thud! as it stopped against a console.

“Launch an MTD! Launch **all** our MTD’s! We cannot lose that ship!” he screamed.

“MTD’s launched, sir,” a shaky voice said.

Darth Siv watched the blue-white flames of the torpedoes speeding toward the escaping ship, mouthing curses under his breath. He walked over behind the young man at the tracking consol and waited with his lightsaber held ready.

The cluster of torpedoes gained on the Silver Shadow as it continued to speed away from the battlecruisers and the planet's gravity well. All eyes were locked on the rockets, the bridge's crew watching with wordless prayers. Only meters away from the freighter now, the closest of the torpedoes exploded, releasing several smaller projectiles that glittered as they raced towards the ship. Less than a second later the freighter vanished into hyperspace. The rest of the MTDs exploded in its wake.

The entire bridge was still. The only sounds were the soft beeping of consoles and the hum of Darth Siv's lightsaber.

Barely containing his anger, Darth Siv bit out, "Did the MTD successfully attach to the hull of the ship?"

The man seated at the console pushed buttons as fast as his hands could move. Then, with a great sigh of relief, he said, "Yes, My Lord. And we have a strong lock on the signal."

Darth Siv deactivated his lightsaber. "Be sure we don't lose it," he bit out. Turning, he walked to the aft elevator. "Contact Darth Shi'Dow. Tell him I wish to speak to speak with him. I will take the transmission in my chambers. Captain Levardy—you have the com."

"Yes, Darth Siv," Captain Levardy said, springing from his chair and clicking his heels as he bowed to the Dark Lord.

Darth Siv fixed the middle-aged captain with a sharp look as the doors to the elevator closed.



**Mandalore Space Station - Art by ConceptArtist**