

STAR WARS

SHADOWCATCHER



L.E. CORSAIR

Table of Contents

[Prologue](#)

[Part 1: Animus Vox](#)

[Part 2: Palace of the Innocents](#)

[Part 3: A Dream Within a Dream](#)

[Part 4: A Fistful of Silence](#)

[Part 5: Bad Wings](#)

[Part 6: Starve the Ego, Feed the Soul](#)

[Part 7: Uneven](#)

[Part 8: Fortune Days](#)

[Part 9: Carry the Sun](#)

[Part 10: Between Two Points](#)

[Part 11: Fly By Night Only](#)

[Part 12: We Can Make the World Stop](#)

[Part 13: Alto](#)

[Part 14: Skytalk](#)

[Part 15: Warrior Concerto](#)

[Part 16: Siren Song](#)

[Part 17: Can't Kill Us](#)

[Part 18: Our Demons](#)

[Part 19: Drive It Like You Stole It](#)

Prologue

Jedi Master Mu-Daru-Kardu feared that he already knew why he was holding the lightsaber. He met the resolute gaze of his student, waiting for her explanation.

“I’m resigning from my apprenticeship,” she said, flatly.

Kardu’s heart sank; he’d wanted to be wrong. Still, this was to be expected. Now, the Cerean had to at least try to change her mind. Anything less would disrespect their bond as teacher and student, though he didn’t think any use would come of it.

“Renuka, I understand why you feel the need to do to this. However, you are playing directly into—”

“I’m joining the Agri-Corps. A letter of recommendation would help,” she cut him off, her eyes cold as she bled fierce determination into the Force.

Kardu sighed. The pair stood wordlessly, a susurrus of contemplative Jedi footsteps around them. Outside, the sun was setting over the artificial Coruscant skyline, spilling a gradient of red-orange light into the Temple halls.

“I will have it ready for you in the morning.”

“Thank you.”

Core Worlds. Byss. Slopes of Mount Signis. Five Years Later.

The man was already dead. Miniature drifts of snow piled on the folds of his clothing. Tendrils of smoke rose from his body and twined with the swirling winds. His corpse convulsed, flipped over and sent dry snowflakes flying back into the storm. A scavenging figure hunched over the body, working furiously with utter disregard for the extinguished life and concentrated only on urgently peeling off his cloak.

The lining of the robe was still warm, but that didn't matter to the scavenger; the stinging cold of the rising blizzard was only a nuisance and the contents of this dead man's pockets were as good as lint. *It* wasn't there, either.

No, what mattered was finding it, and getting away from here.

Frantic hands scraped through the snow, seeking. A few ragged, manic sobs rose above the roar of the gale, followed by a gasp as desperate, blistered fingers clamped around the frozen lightsaber hilt, and instantly secreted it away.

Part 1: Animus Vox

Renuka Vosk sat at the edge of a cliff overlooking a violently green valley a dozen kilometers away. Her own jade Mirialan complexion could hardly compete with the vibrant color.

Byss was a twisted contradiction: a nearly untouched paradise-world full of natural beauty, hidden away deep in the blindingly bright galactic core. The planet steeped deeper and deeper into the dark side with each passing day, as per Emperor Palpatine's persistent bidding. The planet's nature was deceptively peaceful. Even geologic conflict was rare, with hardly any volcanoes worth noting. Technically, there was an extant society on Byss; not native, but they held a greater claim to the planet than the Imperial arrivals did. They also didn't matter much to any of the Empire's forces building cities and citadels across the primary continent.

Relco Training Facility lay in a valley hundreds of kilometers from civilization, surrounded by razor-blade mountains. Mount Signis's smaller, sharper siblings were unimpressive foothills that would have been majestic peaks if they'd formed anywhere else. The perfect grid of the training facility lay at the base of Mount Signis; a prison barcode tattooed on a pristine alpine landscape. The facility employed isolation rather than fences to keep its inmates from escape.

A row of tall, black-domed buildings cast long shadows across the rest of the facility in the early morning light. Renuka's teeth clenched as she looked over her prison for what would, absolutely, be the last time. The uncertain nature of that finality, however, sickened her. *Destiny, chance, karma, pure banthashit. Promote me or execute me. Of the two, I'd rather be*

dead. She'd never have to see Relco again, no matter the route her fate took.

Renuka scoffed, realizing now that Byss's finest training facility would have been fine real estate for any other purpose. It was immaculate and hardly boasted any evidence of its recent construction. *And not even a bloodstain. How tidy.* She was grateful Relco didn't have a graveyard or any space for memorials. On one hand, the facility sorely needed one or the other, but then again, none of the dead deserved to have their remembrances chiseled here. They deserved better.

Relco's southern edge featured a simple and ruthlessly efficient starport, constantly flooded with Important People who needed to be somewhere else Immediately. And they were never happy about where they were going—or where they'd been. They were never happy at all. That made for a great deal of impatient yelling at the sullen rabble who did their jobs better than anyone else on the planet; anything less invited ugly repercussions.

Uncoiling from her clifftop perch, Renuka pulled her hood down low over her eyes and gathered her black robe around her. It would have complimented her colorless apprentice's uniform, except for the horrible clash in rank that the robe represented.

The wet, painful burns on her hands protested even the lightest touch from the thick fabric. She hissed at the sensation, and stopped suddenly, stunned. What an odd indulgence to reach for at a time like this. Visibly reacting to pain! Such weakness! It was... *hilarious.*

Renuka's lonely laughter pattered over the mountain field, disturbing a clutch of birds hidden in the wild bushes. The sound was hoarse, heady and heartfelt. She couldn't remember

the last time she'd honestly laughed. Her riot of humor tore on and on, her eyes watered. She blinked, sending a matched set of forbidden tears down her cheeks. They dried almost instantly in the cool, clean wind. Better to destroy the evidence, anyway.

Her sides hurt. Her cheeks ached beautifully. She felt fantastic.

Good sense crawled back into her mind and strangled her amusement. Down there, in Relco, merely acknowledging the presence of pain could be a liability. Even though the sensation itself was inevitable, given their teaching practices.

With a deep breath, she set her focus on the scene ahead of her. Renuka reached out to the Force to settle her concentration and went on her way down the sloping mountainside.

At the edge of the facility, half an hour later, Renuka paused to meditate and perform a set of mental and spiritual ablutions; vestigial Jedi habits that she hoped would give her a chance, if only one in a million. She drew in the Force, driving out the nagging pain in her hands, centering her thoughts, and, finally, dulling her Force Aura. With her calm complete and control established, she loosened the reins on her anger. Byss was drowning in the dark side; tapping into that power was far easier than searching for Light in this murk.

She rallied hatred with a wicked litany of thoughts, mostly remembering the hateful lessons with her private instructor, and every other torturer working at the facility. She allowed herself to hate them all, and then, to take pride in her hate. Perfect camouflage for a Relco dark adept. It was only after she had nearly arrived at the outer wall that she remembered the cloak.

The heavy material spun into an awkward, bulky roll, which she tucked under her elbow.

Then, she walked into the maw.

Renuka strode onto the permacrete path at a sharp pace, Mirialan features obscured by the shadow of her hood. She didn't bother acknowledging the redundant guard, which was exactly what they'd expect of someone who had authorization to leave the base and return at will. There was no fence, but they still kept tabs on the students to discourage them from wandering. Her every step exuded an unpleasantness that was just enough to keep them from asking why she'd been outside the compound.

Occasionally, a dull-eyed initiate would glance at her, but their attention slid off just as quickly. These force-sensitives recognized the particular tang of hateful satisfaction most often found radiating from successful adepts and kept their eyes down and strides quick. None of them was as good at backstabbing as their teachers had hoped, though it wasn't for lack of trying.

Save for Zeraina Holl, the treacherous Miraluka ex-Jedi who collided with Renuka's shoulder. The walkway had more than enough room for the both of them and Renuka knew it. Zeraina had taken a deliberately careless step in order to intercept her. After the impact, she spun around and grinned at the irritated Mirialan. "Oh, I didn't see you there, Vosk."

"Zeraina," she droned her sole acknowledgement, and kept on her way.

"Did you hear? Mag finally expired. I remember you two were

close,” Zeraina called after her, words dripping with excessive sympathy. Or perhaps she was annoyed by Renuka’s initial unwillingness to chat with a blind arachnid. Curiosity craned Renuka’s neck to turn back to Zeraina and the rest of Renuka’s body followed hopelessly.

“Mag? How did he die?” Renuka *had* liked Mag; he was a bit neurotic but he had a kind streak that had managed to survive the weekly beatings he earned from his instructor.

“Where have you been? Oh, I forgot, you were off-campus on your special field trip.” Zeraina had answered her own question with an unusually small dose of contempt for Renuka in her tone. “Mag got caught out in the storm when he tried to escape, *poor thing*. He got two kilometers up the valley wall before the frostbite set in. They dragged most of him back here and tied him out in the yard for a few days.” She dropped her chin to her chest, adding, “Not sure if it was the gangrene that got him or the dehydration. I’m sure you would have tried to put him out of his misery, if you’d only known.”

Renuka studied Zeraina’s overplayed, mock-sorrowful posture for a moment. This woman was known to take a particular joy from the scheduled, bloody attrition that came from the sparring tournaments. She wasn’t very good with the sword but she had more than enough dirty tricks to kill her unlucky partners. Renuka had bested her once and conveniently broken the competition saber in the process. Zeraina was an arachnid, but Renuka couldn’t bring herself to kill a fellow Jedi, even a rotten one.

“The yard is off-limits during an execution, even if it takes days. But I’m certain you already knew that, Zeraina.” Renuka nodded curtly and stepped around her.

“I’ll be sure to keep that in mind for the future, Vosk,” she cooed after the Mirialan.

She left Zeraina plotting treachery in her wake, as per most of their conversations. Mag’s body had probably been cleared out shortly after he died, the message already made clear to the students. The Empire rebuked sentimentality, even when one of their own grisly acts provoked it.

Several students had expired in their attempts to escape and the inmates at Relco had been made aware of every single one. Those who had been foolish enough to try to leave on-foot were routinely retrieved and given slow, painful deaths in the middle of the outdoor exercise yard. Only one had tried to steal a ship and fly off of Byss. He was shot down without the slightest concern for the loss of the vessel. It was an old shuttle, anyway.

Despite the dismal success rate—a perfect zero percent—Renuka refused to lose her nerve. Death by blaster or even in the yard seemed, to her, a certain kind of honorable death. Pitiful, yes, but with a sad dignity, loyal to the Jedi Order’s ideals. The thought of breathing her last as a fully-fledged dark adept with a knife in her back nauseated her. She refused, if she had anything to say about it, to die like that.

The grid of streets lying before Renuka was perfectly clean and utterly sanitized. Grey buildings sat ensconced between slate grey roads, all built to precise Imperial regulations to allow for precise Imperial vehicles to perform their patrols. Every edge was sharp, every surface flat. Renuka suspected that unnecessary curves were against regulations, and therefore forbidden in Imperial design. Or perhaps were reserved for those to whom the rules did not apply. As she turned another perfect corner, she vowed to live somewhere that violated as

many regulations as possible.

Renuka's daydreaming was interrupted by a familiar—and foreboding—silhouette lurking at the far end of the hospital row. A frozen wash of horror came over her as the recognition set in. It wore a shaggy grey cloak with an impractically high collar, and that garment identified the equally drab wearer as Sly Moore.

Moore was well known for being many things, including ruthless, powerful, and painfully ascetic. What concerned Renuka most of all, at the present moment, was the well-known rumor that Moore was actually telepathic. There was also the small matter of her noteworthy role as personal pet of the Emperor. Failing to meet Moore's expectations could easily be fatal, which was probably why she was in charge of Relco Training Facility.

The Umbaran woman stood nearly two meters tall and was completely bald. Her pupils were severe pinpoints of disdain in poisonous quicksilver irises. Renuka so rarely encountered Umbarans that she was never certain if the blue blush that highlighted Moore's skeletal cheekbones was borne of birthright or vanity. Pondering such mysteries offered her a refuge against the terror-inducing miasma that surrounded Moore.

The Mirialan cursed under her breath; her single slip of emotional control when she'd spotted Moore might have cost her everything. Still, the Umbaran woman would certainly notice if Renuka abruptly changed her course to avoid an encounter. And predators have a nasty habit of pursuit.

Renuka had withstood enough unfortunate dealings with Moore to know that the latter thrived on heavily outmatched

confrontation with her inferiors.

Renuka was making every effort to look busy and appropriately apprentice-like, staring straight ahead as she walked, spine stiff, when Sly stepped into her path. The Umbaran simply stood before her, silently taking her measure. Protocol demanded that an apprentice keep mute until asked to speak, so Renuka did her best to look calm to the point of polite disinterest, though her traitorous heart was racing.

Eye contact was best avoided.

Can Umbarans read your pulse? Renuka searched her memory, trying to think of just how ultraviolet vision worked. All she could do was hope not and curse herself for thinking such thoughts out in public.

As Moore's appraisal stretched on, Renuka relaxed under the realization that her fear was normal and even desirable in Sly's mind. She demanded that everyone be afraid of her. Nothing about Renuka would be considered out of the ordinary—except perhaps for the fact that she had left Relco with her instructor, and returned alone. There was also the matter of the instructor's black cloak, rolled up under her arm.

"Kull did not see fit to execute you," Sly stated coldly. Kull being Bythar Kull, the pallid human assigned to re-educate Renuka in the *vastly superior* ethos of the dark side. Renuka flicked her blue eyes up to meet Moore's metallic stare. *Damn, she's tall. What could Renuka possibly say to that? Nope, I'm still not dead, thanks for noticing? Being alive looks good on you too? That shade of ultraviolet color that I can't name looks great in the common spectrum?*

Renuka settled for silence. Without a word, she made a point of exuding near-toxic amounts of pride into the Force around her.

“Congratulations on your promotion,” Moore continued after an uncomfortable pause, and inclined her head in a shadow of a nod.

Renuka’s green skin blanched. *Promotion?* How did failing to die as intended constitute—*Sith! Of course.*

"Thank you, Ma'am," she replied curtly and returned the gesture, though more deeply and with a thin veneer of respect. She tried very hard not to think about the obvious question: how could she earn a rank of any kind from Relco without some sort of fanfare? Did that mean that Sly knew what she’d done back on Mount Signis? Her hand clenched painfully at her side, rallying the hurt to smother any lucid thoughts before Sly could read them. If she could read them.

Another long pause commenced between them; a thick fog of imposing Force Aura rolled off Moore as she loomed, immovable and mountainous. Renuka’s neatly-trimmed nails bit into her already blistered palm. Red crescents welled up in her burnt-jade skin as she tossed her consciousness into the alternate reality of distracting pain. She knew better than to offer up an anxious explanation for her presence back at the base without her instructor.

“Your hair is distracting. See to that. You’ll be receiving your assignment soon.” The Umbaran turned on her heel and left suddenly. Renuka could have sworn that she’d seen a self-satisfied smile flicker over Sly’s features. She barely suppressed another wash of panic.

“Of course, Ma’am,” was all she could say to Moore’s back, through a haze of anxiety and confusion. She pulled a few strands of hair into view, without a thought to the sticky sheen of blood on her fingertips. The hair was shock-white.

In fact, her hair had been shock-white for nearly a day now. She had easily forgotten that detail in the midst of her daring plot to escape. The unnatural shade stood out in stark contrast against the youth of her skin. A smile tugged at the corner of her lips. It might have been just the healthy serving of endorphins she’d received from her narrow escape from Moore’s scrutiny, but she liked the color. Regardless of the source, she decided she liked it much better than the old dark brown. Distracting hair suited her just fine. Especially if it would be against Imperial regulations.

Now that Sly was gone, Renuka had a regulation room to go to. It was more a cell than proper quarters, containing only an unforgiving cot, basic hygiene tools, changes of clothing, and a few datapads full of Sith propaganda generously provided by the Emperor’s—Darth Sidious’—laudable research. Renuka fell to her knees in front of her boxy black dresser and slid it aside. She reached into a hidden compartment excavated a few weeks after she had been relocated to her very own private cell.

Her hand padded around the dark space; every touch lit up her blisters with a bolt of pain. She didn’t care.

She’d been collecting small bottles that wouldn’t be missed, even with the Imperial proclivity for obsessive inventory-keeping. Her thumb jammed into a ribbed plastoid cap and after a muffled curse, she snatched the bottle from its hiding place. Another two were hauled out after it.

She knew that she could buy herself at least a day, or perhaps two, if she weren't actually seen at the spaceport. Instead, she would use a few of the tricks she'd gained as an apprentice to a Jedi Sentinel.

Renuka scrambled to her feet and wrestled her dresser back into place, in front of the lonely mirror. She gathered up her shoulder-length hair into a tight, low ponytail, careful to collect any loose strands. Then, she twisted open the caps of the three bottles—one of which had a peeling label which read "graphite lubricant."

She poured the silvery, near-black powder into a bowl and mixed a good helping of white grease into it. *Too dark.* Another dash of the white material brought the tone closer to the right shade. After several tests smeared on the back of her green hand, she had a satisfactorily opaque result. It nearly matched Moore's dull Umbaran skin tone, though this powdery grey was a few shades nearer to true white.

The concoction had a vaguely industrial odor which clogged her sinuses as she spread it over her cheeks. Under the ministrations of her quick fingers, her complexion transformed from Mirialan jade-green to a Rattataki ghostly ash. She dabbed a few wedge-shaped "tattoos" onto her cheeks using pure graphite, just to break up the contours of her recognizable face.

She was careful to clean her hands before donning her new black cloak. Sloppy white fingerprints wouldn't do. She pulled a pair of regulation-black winter gloves on and set the complication of greasy, makeup-covered fingerprints aside. A vial of citrusy degreaser and a clean-enough rag found their way into her pockets, for the necessary quick-change act later.

No one was around to see a newly minted Rattataki instructor leaving Renuka Vosk's room. She put the cell behind her, for the last time.

As she arrived on the edge of the starport, she saw dozens of ships arranged with absolute precision, droids coursing around and between them like so many insect drones tending to hives. Two ships caught her eye. Each was attended by an overpopulated ground crew. One was small, a lambda-class shuttle, lower wings folded upward in the traditional resting pose. Judging by the amount of luggage—almost none—and the panicked urgency radiating from the crew, it had to belong to some politically powerful, and likely heartless, bastard. Renuka dismissed it, turning her attention to the great grey wedge on the other side of the tarmac: an Imperial cargo ship.

The ship's distinctive contours nagged at her with the itchiness of unrealized *deja-vu*. As she came closer, she was finally able to place it as an Acclamator-class assault ship, albeit with some heavy modifications. The Empire was efficient with its resources, she granted it that much.

And they were consistent. They would repurpose anything they inherited from the Republic without regard for nostalgia. A pang of sadness gripped her as she found her memories of travelling in such a ship during the Clone Wars. They'd gutted it, robbed it of its purpose and made it into something that fit their will. Renuka felt a sort of fraternity with the unfortunate ship.

At least she knew the layout of the former Acclamator. What was left of it, anyway.

Many of the armaments had clearly been stripped out to enlarge the cargo hold, which was already half full of immense

steel containers, most of which were probably emptied of their supplies by the hungry facility.

Relco didn't produce anything except for hollowed-out fallen Jedi ready to serve the Emperor's whims. In fact, the facility was meant to turn out all manner of dark adepts, otherwise known as inquisitors, according to ability and cruelty. The idea that she was leaving Byss as a successful dark adept in the eyes of Moore just pissed her off. She hated the irony of her anger even more; that she should be lauded as a practitioner of hate and rage, the very skills she had tried so hard to extinguish as a student at the Temple.

The fabric of her robe billowed around her as she strode from the permacrete roadway onto the sturdier tarmac. She walked stiffly, each step bringing a curt snap from the low, practical heels of her boots. She belonged at the starport. She had absolute authority. So long as she believed the act, the spaceport officials would believe it, too.

Renuka strode directly into the cargo ship's hold. A few dockworkers glanced nervously at her, questions in their eyes. Their confusion was met with a withering glare that spoke of Sith superiority and threatened Rattataki violence with an added sneer for good measure.

Still without a word of challenge, she ducked into a hallway and away from prying eyes.

Part 2: Palace of the Innocents

The *Winter's Intent* traveled for three days before Renuka gave into the fact that she was on the wrong side of severe dehydration. It was the way the skin on her thumbs wrinkled when it shouldn't have. That, and the blinding headache.

She had hidden in a hollow behind a corridor bulkhead near the main cargo bay, and congratulated herself by wiping off her hideously greasy makeshift makeup. The hiding place was cramped and dark; well suited to sleeping most of the trip away. Now she was annoyingly awake, her entire body hurt, and she had no idea when the ship would be putting into port.

The finer points of life as a stowaway hadn't mattered much back on Byss. The logical portions of Renuka's mind hadn't allowed her to believe that she would actually survive the escape attempt, much less succeed. Her pride, and her somewhat atrophied faith in the guiding purpose of the Force, defied logic with gusto, and had moved her feet accordingly. Now, in the midst of her flight, the practical matters of survival took precedence over any virtues or vices she could claim.

She gave her hand an experimental flex. Her burns had nearly healed and no longer bothered her. Instead, her concern was the shaky, spastic movements caused by her confinement. The uneven motions required far too much of her concentration to smooth out.

According to her pocket datapad, it was well past sunset back at the training facility. At this hour, she had to hope that, if there was any sensibility at all in the Force she'd been raised to

believe in, the crew would be busy, or asleep, or simply nowhere that they would spot her mad dash for water. Food was a target of opportunity.

There hadn't been a single footfall in the corridor for hours when Renuka eased the panel out of the wall. It was heavier than she remembered. So were her arms. And legs. As she uncurled herself from the limited space, her hand flew out against the wall to catch her unsteady weight.

Renuka looked up and down the hall and took comfort in the emptiness that greeted her. After a few moments upright, she felt her sense of balance return. Each movement was easier than the last. Soon, her feet were tumbling one after another with heady abandon. Though, to an outside observer, it was more of a drunken shuffle toward the rear of the ship.

If her head hadn't been throbbing or her mind racing, she would have probably taken careful stock of her surroundings. As it was, she began an uneven jog through the halls, digging through her memories of the ship that had taken her to engage the Separatists' droid army nearly six years ago. *What was it called? Ard... something. And the galleys were... Blazes! Remember!*

Renuka stopped and rested her back against the cool, white wall. She pressed her spine against the solid surface, taking strength from the respite as she rallied her wits. There was something she was supposed to do in a situation like this.... Master Kardu would take that dry, exasperated tone as he said it for the hundredth time.... Her mind latched onto the thought suddenly, like an engine finally turning over after sputtering fruitlessly.

Read your surroundings, apprentice! The past is written in the Force. All you need do is read it.

She pulled in a deep, purposeful breath, using it to guide her shaky concentration back to the present. For the first time in three years, when she tapped into the Force around her, it didn't carry the tang of tainted dark side. The *Winter's Intent* may have been Imperial, but it was largely neutral ground in the spiritual conflict that spanned the galaxy.

Renuka closed her eyes and flattened her palm against the bulkhead. Her mind reached for the Force that permeated this ship, searching for the ghosts of sensory details that she needed to tap into the past. She caught a hum, then a rush of white starlight: the hyperdrive spinning to life as seen through the eyes of engineers and bridge crew simultaneously. Hundreds of cots' sheets perfectly cornered. Thousands of meals, none of them tasting any good. Sweat-slicked skin, prickly with the rising panic of intense battles. Close calls with overtaxed shielding. Fearful glances at weakening, then buckling bulkheads. Her skin came alive with pins and needles, her living senses overwhelmed by the tide of the myriad experiences of every passenger, crew member, and officer of the newly renamed *Winter's Intent*.

She reeled, unable to manage the flow of experiences that crashed into her mind. Renuka pulled her hand away from the wall as if it had been red-hot slag. She spat a pitifully delicate series of curses and rammed the edge of her fist into the offending surface.

Frustration spent, Renuka stole the luxury of a few minutes standing out in the open of the corridor, sharpening her concentration to a knife point. Again her hand met the smooth

plasteel skin of the wall. This time, she sifted through the sensations with care and, more importantly, detachment. She narrowed in on a brand-new crewman: a fresh-faced officer with wide, brown eyes. He was getting the grand tour of the newly recommissioned ship.

Within seconds Renuka was on her way again, this time her stride imbued with confidence that came with actually knowing where the hell to go.

Renuka slowed her steps as she passed by doors that would open onto crew quarters—which were likely to be filled with people who would not take kindly to stowaways, even imposing ones with impressive scars and geometric tattoos.

Granted, she could only boast a burn scar on her left cheek, and a set of tasteful, black geometric tattoos across her forehead and unmarred cheek. The tattoos were the only holdover from Mirialan tradition that had managed to penetrate her disdain for arcane cultural habits. That, and a remarkable memory of her childhood Mirialan language lessons.

She made her way down several decks, always steering toward the center of the ship. It wasn't long before Renuka spotted a set of conspicuous doors, marked by signs in blocky Aurebesh, reading "Mess Hall." She couldn't afford to be so daring as to take the obvious approach, instead ducking around the corner to look for an entrance into the kitchen itself. Her vicarious guide hadn't seen this area from the view of the kitchens. He must have had some clout that kept him from the duty of peeling root vegetables.

Renuka's heart nearly exploded in her chest when she heard the first echoes of footsteps rattling down the corridor. She

froze, unable to decide if she should go for the nearest hiding spot, or keep to her galley target. The sudden jump in blood pressure reminded her overtaxed body that she needed water badly. It communicated in the most useful of ways: Renuka nearly fainted. The idea of being found in a swoon by some Imperial boots incensed her enough to push her to find the correct door, rather than just any haven.

She pushed onward with as much silence as her fatigue would allow. The footsteps came closer, but they had to be at least two junctions off and, given that this was no longer a proper combat vessel, they weren't moving with any urgency. Renuka's breath thinned into a long, silent pull of air best suited to stealth. Their conversation came into earshot as she stalked toward a promising set of doors.

"No," a female voice snapped, "Don't you pay attention?"

"Do I have to? Oh wait, no. No I don't. I'm a space janitor on a cargo ship," A male responded, not a little bitterly.

"You should still care about when you get to see sky," she replied.

"Janitors don't get shore leave at every damn port, Cage. I guess you—"

The rear galley door slid shut on their banter as Renuka leaned heavily against the wall of her refuge. With only the pause of a single breath, she dropped to the floor, cursing herself for blindly wandering in and standing in plain sight. She continued on in a crouch, her heavy black cloak dragging over foot-cushioning kitchen mats as she went. Hiding places were bemusingly plentiful now: the cramped space full of shelves,

refrigerators, stoves, cooktops, workspaces and so very many knives. The Empire didn't have a mind for security, this deep inside their ships. The kitchen was brimming with everything they needed to feed, what was it? From the imprint they left on the Force, Renuka thought there had to be close to a thousand crew on board.

When no sound of alarm, or even life, came to her ears, Renuka searched the front galley with the Force, wishing, not for the first time, that she had the eyeless Miraluka knack for Force sight. Sure, she'd miss out on colors and certain kinds of literacy, but they could see through walls. As for the kitchen, the space seemed clear. Her timing had been spot-on.

Giddy excitement raced through Renuka's veins as she realized exactly how much food and water surrounded her at that very moment. She sprang to her feet and dove for the nearest sink. Without a second thought, she drank directly from the spigot. The water was stale, carried a metallic tang, and was sour with chemical treatment. It was the greatest mouthful of water she'd ever had.

Renuka drank until she was slightly sick and her insides sloshed when she moved. Sated, she sat on the floor beneath the sink, chuckling madly to herself.

"Oh come on, nobody's going to notice." He was tired of his compatriot's cowardice and it made him sound more impatient than usual. He stepped into the rear galley while Cage was still dithering in the corridor. Who cared if they went and got a snack? The food was for the crew and even janitors were crew.

He was still looking over his shoulder at Cage, who looked even more rattled than usual. She had gone pale and darted back into the hallway as soon as she crossed the threshold into the galley.

He rolled his eyes and grabbed her arm to pull her back into the kitchen. “Come on, already. If someone sees you they might—” He wasn’t expecting the metallic clatter of falling pots. The sound came from further inside the kitchen, and he didn’t see anyone inside.

“See? Leck, did you hear that? I thought I saw someone,” Cage whispered as she tried to pull her arm away from the now frozen Leck.

“No, I don’t see, because I heard it. Seeing isn’t hearing,” he hissed. Leck released the junior janitor and stalked into the kitchen.

He always knew he was *meant for action*. Real missions. Stealth missions. The kind of combat where they used those hand signals. Leck’s janitorial career was just a step toward greater things. He gestured elaborately for Cage to check the perimeter of the kitchen while he went on ahead. She blinked at him, uncomprehending.

“Go around the side,” he hissed again.

“No way! I’m not going in there. There could be rabid voles or something!”

They both jumped when the door to the mess hall was pushed open by some unseen hand. It flipped back and forth a few more times before coming to a stop. The janitors exchanged

nervous glances and took turns suggesting that the other one go investigate. At length, they wore themselves out, agreeing to have a look through the galley together.

Someone had gotten into the energy bar rations and left a drift of empty, silvery wrappers in front of the low cupboards. They'd cleaned out an entire box before moving onto the canned fruit. One of the tins was still half-full of syrup and husk-cherries. But there wasn't any sign of the hungry ghost, so Leck and Cage crept on toward the mess hall door.

"Hey... Cage?"

"What?"

"You started locking the mess door between meals, didn't you?"

"Well, yeah. After that incident with—" A loud **bang** in the dining hall beyond the door cut her off. They both crouched low, nerves even more rattled than before. What in Blazes was going on here?

Leck braved onward, maintaining his crouch until he reached the door and eased it open. He stood up immediately, somewhat embarrassed, addressing someone inside.

"You're, um.... The galley is off-limits between meals. So is the mess," he bravely informed the dour Mirialan woman who was staring at him from her seat at a long, empty table in the hall. Judging by her hair, she must have been *really* old. His first thought was that the poor old lady was probably a confused passenger, followed by the second: *Did the Winter's Intent take on passengers?*

Cage poked her head through the doorway and looked up at

Leck. She offered him a shrug. “We should probably call this in.”

“Yeah.”

The white-haired woman gave them a look of threadbare pity—*or was that scorn?*—and laid her head on the table without a word. Cage brought her a cup of water. *The poor old thing looks exhausted.* The woman turned away from Cage and spoke with a voice clearer than her years would have suggested: “It wouldn’t have done any good if I’d killed you.”

A pang of sympathy struck Leck, *Oh dear. She’s senile too.*

Sly Moore leaned over the communication panel, her characteristically rigid spine holding her at an odd angle to the holocam. That, combined with her drab skin tone, resulted in a distorted image, all gruesome eyes and forehead in a black-and-white palette. “It is my belief that she evaded our security. That makes her either a noteworthy threat or an exceptionally worthy candidate for the program. Instructor Kull has not reported in for three days. I have a team searching the valley. If we cannot find the body, I recommend that we proceed under the assumption that she has advanced according to the revised Rule of Two.”

An uncannily deep, perpetually breathless voice responded.

“Of course, my Lord.” Moore bowed low, falling out of the holocam’s frame.

Part 3: A Dream Within a Dream

“You’re one of those... students. From Relco.” Captain Harker was addressing the stowaway, his tone a mix of dread and confusion. He was perfectly uniformed in dull stone-grey, surprisingly young, human, and something about him seemed strangely familiar. Captain though he might be, she assumed he didn’t have enough command under his belt to understand how to project an air of authority, instead giving the impression of a child wearing his father’s suit—though one that had been cut down to size.

As time passed in that austere room with Harker, Renuka recognized the source of the captain’s sense of familiarity. It was *his* sight, *his* memories during his first tour of the *Winter’s Intent* that had led her to the galley. But he’d been a mere ensign then. Somehow, Harker had found a shortcut to command of this ship. Renuka assumed it had something to do with the upheaval during the Emperor’s rise to power. Harker was the beneficiary of a favor intended to appease some aunt or uncle with something that Palpatine’s administration wanted. He couldn’t be much older than Renuka herself, and in the few years since his career began, he hadn’t matured into the confident commander every ship needed. Captain Dren Harker became a victim of his own success: too much responsibility awarded too soon. She could sense that same raw insecurity that he’d felt as an ensign, still writhing around under those captain’s stripes. He longed to be worthy of his rank, and that gave her a little hope for his character.

He might have been talking to her, but Renuka hadn’t bothered to listen. Her gaze was wandering around the antiseptically bright cabin, eyeing his lack of décor and predilection for track

lighting. She'd scoffed at the captain when Security brought her directly to Harker's oppressive quarters; apparently, the recommissioned cargo ship had launched without a brig. Or this captain didn't know any better than to order a stowaway brought into melee range. The thought of this man as one of the fledgling Empire's best amused her. She used the Force to saturate the room with an overpowering feeling of inferiority and helplessness, for the purpose of wearing down Harker's nerves.

Her own posture told a different story. She was sprawled over the uncomfortable chair opposite Harker, one elbow draped over the back. The desk between them was covered with all of her worldly belongings, a lineup of evidence further proving her presence beyond a shadow of a doubt. A data chit, some individually wrapped rations stolen from the galley, a twelve-sided token and a basic multi-tool. There was also the small matter of the lightsaber in said lineup.

"You made captain fast, Dren," the Mirialan said conversationally. She followed her non-sequitur by pinning Captain Dren Harker with a look that demanded he justify his authority.

The captain's expression careened from tense confusion to utter bafflement. First interrogation jitters, no doubt. He straightened in his seat, and was that a... blush coloring his cheeks?

"I... I suppose I did. Circumstances being what they were and—Have we met?"

She looked him over in silent appraisal. Outside the cabin, the ship's engines hummed. Sweat began to bead on Dren's forehead.

Renuka broke into an easy smile, meant to further disconcert, and sat up in her chair. “No. Of course not. I’m certain you would remember.” She casually reached forward, her hand listing toward the lightsaber, all the while watching Harker’s reaction.

As the color drained from his face, and his mouth gaped, she knew he was considering the risks of stopping her from taking the weapon. That was enough for her. She changed course and gently placed her fingers on the datachit, just a few centimeters away. She tapped the storage device meaningfully as she spoke in a soft, condescending voice. “Captain, I only require passage on your... fine... ship. What’s left of it, that is. You and I both know that’s a more than reasonable request. Especially coming from someone of my,” she paused, flicking the datachit across the table, “status.”

Dren, thoroughly on edge now, jumped in his seat at the datachit’s unexpected advance. “I... suppose.” He stared at Renuka, his anxious eyes wide. He nearly flew out of his chair when his comm panel chimed. The voice that followed informed him that a debris field had shifted into their flight path and what were his orders? Harker’s posture straightened, like a puppet pulled up by its strings. “Plot a course around the debris. Just keep us well inside the hyperlane en route out of the Core. How long until we reach Coruscant?” he asked, with a sudden confidence.

“Two days, three jumps, Sir.”

“Thank you, Lieutenant.”

When the captain returned his attention to the stowaway, the geometry of his features had hardened. He must have

remembered his command, Renuka thought. Or perhaps it was concern for the safety of his crew that snapped him out of the trance she'd been pressing on his mind. He set his elbows on the black desk as he addressed her once more, still speaking in that assured tone he'd taken with the lieutenant.

"This situation is highly unusual, so you'll understand if I need to submit your identification to Command." He lifted the datachip to read the fine inscription on the case. "Bythar Kull? The name... er... suits you," he ventured, in a half-hearted attempt at chivalry.

When Renuka didn't respond, he continued. "I'm certain everything will check out, Ma'am. As soon as we've heard from Relco, we can—"

The red blade of her lightsaber was at his throat before it had even finished ignition. The hot scent of burning dust rose in the air along with a whiff of ozone. Captain Harker tried to pull his head back from the searing heat of the blade, only to find himself trapped by the back of his own chair and held fast by the stowaway's grip on the front of his uniform. Renuka's pitiless blue eyes stared down at him. "That isn't how this is going to go, Captain."

She shoved him backward, nearly tipping his chair over as she launched herself back to her own side of the room. She made a point of blocking the door. Her lips compressed into a thin, resolute line. Even as her saber extinguished, every muscle in her stance threatened further violence. Renuka leaned forward again, this time pressing one hand into the desk as if holding it down as surely as the man seated behind it. The captain stared wide-eyed at the former Jedi, transfixed by fear.

“I spent the last *three years* at Relco—you know what it really is?” She barreled on without giving him time to cobble together an answer. “No, *Captain*, you don’t. It’s what the Empire’s calling a conversion facility. Corrupting formerly good—yes, a bit bitter—but innocent Agri-corps kids into torturers. And you know what else? I’m a really terrible student. Always have been. I don’t learn well when my teachers are sadistic murderers.” She brought her face down, closer to his. “But I might have picked up a few tricks,” she added, baring her teeth in a dangerous grin.

Captain Harker’s white-knuckled grip on his chair tightened as her threat sunk in. He responded with an involuntary gulp.

Renuka continued, the fire of her anger waning. “I don’t want to hurt anyone. Even though I’m more than capable of hurting you to get my way. I just want to be on Coruscant before they miss me. But now, I can’t trust you.”

His eyes widened, darting to the dormant saber hilt and back to Renuka herself, studying her expression and her scar. He wet his lips, though the gesture was no doubt pointless, as she assumed his mouth had gone dry. “If you’re not an acolyte anymore, why are you threatening me like this,” he sputtered.

She leaned on the edge of his desk, saber hilt still in hand. “Because you’re in my way.”

“You can’t possibly believe that gives you the right to murder anyone you like!”

She shook her head slowly. “That’s enough, Captain. I said I can’t trust you!”

Renuka drew herself up to her full height and took in a slow, meditative breath. She regarded the Captain for another moment before sliding her eyes shut. Harker nervously contemplated a rush for the door, then activating his comm panel, but panic let his indecision linger one breath too many.

Anyone aware of the Force would have recognized the oppressive presence growing in the room. Fortunately for the captain, he didn't understand any of this woman's strange behavior.

"You want to help me," she intoned, words reverberating with the dark side of the Force. The full weight of her roiling contempt combined with the momentum of the captain's fear. Her intention pierced his skull and set as solid mental permacrete.

"I want to help you," he echoed in a mechanical monotone.

Renuka's black cloak hung heavily on the hook next to the door of her quarters. The space was small, private, and very recently, and generously, assigned to her by the captain. She sat on the edge of her bunk, her face in her hands.

Was it really worth it, fighting so hard to stay alive, if she would live like this? What was the point of escaping Relco if she was going to use their wretched tools as her own?

She wanted to say it was just a bad habit. The Masters at the Temple had always gone on about the dark side being the easy path, one of constant temptation. Maybe it was a habit she could break.

Or maybe she was corrupted, *converted*. She'd killed Kull, hadn't she? He'd made her angry, angrier than she'd ever been, and she'd murdered him in the snow. The thought made the skin on her hands itch and burn.

She'd never killed anyone who possessed a soul before. The Clone Wars had seen legions of droids fall under her lightsaber as she stood back to back with Master Kardu. But she'd never killed anything that didn't have software.

Renuka sobbed a laugh as she realized, in killing Kull, she might have given him everything he had wanted. What was worse, she didn't regret it. He *needed* to die. The galaxy was far better off with him dead.

And yet, what she'd done to the captain sat in her gut with a heavy, sickening guilt. Kull was dead and he'd earned that—and worse—several times over. Harker was just a man leading a cargo ship through treacherous hyperlanes. It was his memories that had led her to the ship's galley. He cared about his people and his ship. He was *innocent*.

She brought her feet up onto the bunk and rested her chin on her knees. That hadn't been a gentle, non-violent mind trick she employed in his cabin. No, Renuka had overwritten Harker's will completely. She had dominated his mind. Her fear of Relco had been too immense, too consuming to risk his resistance. She'd brought the full strength of that darkness to bear on Harker's psyche and she had doubts he would ever truly recover his own identity.

She was afraid that she had erased a decent man from the galaxy. One of the few in the Empire.

She slid herself to the back of her bunk, resting against the sturdy bulkhead and shoved her clammy hands into her warm pockets. There, she found the familiar smoothness of her well-worn twelve-sided token. Pulling it out of her pocket, she couldn't help but smile sadly at the sight of it rolling around her palm. It was a small model, not much bigger than a cred-coin, an effigy of a Jedi holocron, carved in incredible detail.

It had come to her two years ago, during the first year of her imprisonment on Byss. Most of her fellow prisoners were hardly more than younglings and almost all of them carried crushed dreams of Jedi Knighthood. They had been delegated to serve in the Agri-corps after any variety of failures. But then, there was Master Gavaar.

The Miraluka Jedi Master had felt a calling to the Corps and genuinely believed that she could do the most good as a keeper of crops. Renuka had always appreciated her sincerity.

Their cells shared a wall, and no matter how difficult their incarceration became, Master Gavaar could offer a boon of hope or even make Renuka laugh. Her faith in the Living Force was complete and she refused to waste a single moment in despair. Even in their shared hell at Relco.

Then, the Imperials started the culling. One by one, cells went empty as potential candidates for conversion were eliminated. Too weak, too young, too old, and worst of all, too idealistic. She could still remember the rhythmic, mechanical breathing she'd heard at the end of the detention hall as the Dark Lord chose who would be discarded next.

Master Gavaar tapped the wall between them, then, as the Sith entourage paused to make a judgment one detention row away.

Renuka scrambled close enough to hear her whispering.

“...survive. At any cost, Renuka, you survive and you *escape*. Your fate doesn't end here. It doesn't end in darkness, no matter how black the night you walk through. The galaxy needs you, even if you cannot see it now.”

A rattling sounded as a tiny carved stone holocron statue rolled into view.

“Master?” Renuka's voice quivered. She didn't like the finality of Gavaar's advice. It sounded too much like a farewell speech. It wasn't like Gavaar to look so far into the future. Had the eyeless master seen a vision?

“You put one foot in front of the other, and never fool yourself into thinking you're safe, Renuka. Just keep moving forward,” Gavaar intoned softly. She could make even bleakest truth sound inspiring and even kind.

Renuka had been so involved in Gavaar's words that she hadn't noticed just how close those heavy footsteps had come. Two guards flanked Darth Vader himself. The inhuman helmet twisted toward her, though fleetingly, before redirecting his gaze and raising his arm to point to Master Gavaar's cell door. “Open it.”

Renuka let out a watery scream as Vader's lightsaber struck down the only light left in Relco.

Part 4: A Fistful of Silence

The deck plates beneath Renuka's bunk lurched as the *Winter's Intent* dropped out of hyperspace. She climbed out of her reverie, carrying the weight of nostalgia in her chest.

The Galactic Core was so densely packed with stars and black holes that even the fastest route took five times longer to travel than an equivalent distance on the Outer Rim. She counted the jumps since her meeting in the captain's cabin: this had been the third, which meant they had arrived at the brilliant seat of Galactic politics. She was only a few routine maneuvers away from freedom.

Even holding Master Gavaar's prophecy in her hands, she couldn't fully justify what she'd done to the captain. But she could hope that the mere weight of her guilt was enough to prove that she wasn't corrupted, yet.

A hurried rush of footsteps tore past her door. Then another. That couldn't simply be a few late crewmen. She set her sulking back in her pocket, along with the holocron token that had inspired it, and collected her cloak from the hook. It wasn't that the *Winter's Intent* was cold, the name notwithstanding, but she had no desire to repeat her performance with the captain. A dark robe could go a long way toward intimidation, hopefully long enough that she wouldn't be tempted to tap into the dark side to get her way again.

Reaching the door to the bridge, she lingered in the hallway, listening to the procedural performance within. From the status updates and repeated orders, it appeared that the *Winter's*

Intent was facing the routine threat of performing a docking maneuver. Even with all the levels of automation, between human error and machinery, mistakes were possible and always costly.

She leaned through the doorway to get a better look at her thrall. He seemed alert enough, reacting promptly and appropriately to all the questions posed to him. She couldn't count herself as an expert in the man's demeanor, but his affect was a little too flat for her liking.

With her fears for the captain's mind confirmed, she left the bridge, but not her guilt, behind.

The *Winter's Intent* completed docking after half an hour's maneuvers. Within minutes, a hive of droids and crew were swarming the ship, moving boxes out of the cargo hold. None of them noticed the cloaked figure making its way through the chaos.

Renuka dashed into a much smaller cargo hold, this one belonging to a Lambda-class shuttle bound for the surface.

Coruscant. Industrial Sector A03. Skylane 4561.

"First time on Coruscant, right?" A knowing voice pierced through the veil of Renuka's deep reverie. She had been staring out the window of the taxi that picked her up from Starport WEN-308. The Coruscanti skyline glittered through gauzy fog outside the cab, above a sleepless city rallying for the organized chaos of the morning commute.

Her father had been born at the capital. She, herself, had been born here. She was raised at the Temple, here. She expected

to feel the comfortable exaltation of arriving home.

Instead, what she saw was meaningless. Alien. Five years of her absence, combined with occupation by the Sith-aligned government, made her Galactic City feel as welcoming as the images she'd seen of desolate, frigid Mirial. It was supposed to carry meaning. It held nothing for her.

"What? Oh. Yeah. First time," she responded, barely wresting her attention away from the view.

The driver beamed with pride, casting the smile over his shoulder. "I can always tell. You first-timers can't take your eyes off the spires. Beautiful, isn't she? Our great capital city!"

Renuka mumbled, "Yeah. Great capital." She could feel the pulse of billions of lives around her, and the cacophony in the Force was almost too much to take after the isolation she'd lived at Relco.

"Listen. I'm gonna do you a favor. We'll take the long route past all the great sites—Senate Plaza, Sec A-89, Emperor's Palace, all the good stuff. Don't mind the fog. It's a morning thing." He was excited enough for the both of them. She didn't notice that he was also doing himself a favor: the meter would also happen to be running through the long route.

"Huh? Thanks," she answered, distracted.

The taxi wove its way through the traffic lanes, which in turn wove between the great spires of the senate buildings. She spotted the Imperial Palace looming in the pervasive fog. She recognized the location as the Supreme Chancellor's Palace, and this building had grown to fit its inflated title. The structure

was an ostentatious pyramid at the core of a cancerous boil of architecture. She tried not to hear her driver rambling on about the ongoing expansions and rumors of a great black throne inside.

Renuka could no longer deny that she was home when the cab flew a wide arc past the abandoned Jedi Temple. None of the hyperspace lanes came very close to the scorched sacred tower. She was amazed that the Emperor hadn't leveled the entire complex out of spite. Her green fingertips pressed against the window. Without any of his typical running commentary, the driver took a sudden turn and sent the Temple out of sight again.

She was exhausted from her sightseeing by the time the taxi took a downward, banking turn into a somewhat squalid neighborhood shrouded in lower-city twilight. She tapped the transparisteel divider behind the driver, asking, "Where are we going?"

"You said you wanted me to take you to a place to stay. Well, you need to stay in this place. See, you're real close to human, but human you ain't. Emperor's real worried about people being prejudiced against alie—" the driver corrected himself, "—non-humans, so he made a special part of the city to keep you guys safe. They been moving non-humans here for ages. Rent's real cheap, too, so it shouldn't be hard for you to get a room in Invisec. Officially, though, it's the Alien Protection Zone. Everybody else calls it the Invisible Sector. Dunno why. I can see it just fine!" He laughed. Renuka didn't.

The taxi pulled up near a half-constructed Twi'lek statue and the passenger door opened with a hiss. "That'll be sixty—"

She cut him off as she caught his eye just the right way. “This trip’s complimentary.”

She was already out the door when he echoed, “This trip’s complimentary.”

Core Worlds. Byss. Relco Training Facility.

Sly Moore nearly smiled, but the delicate expression could not quite survive the hostile landscape of her face, expiring before it could bloom. She was listening to a holoprojection of the delightfully ambitious Lieutenant Cear, a man who clearly deserved a better assignment than serving as second officer on the *Winter’s Intent*.

“After the stowaway met with Captain Harker, he... changed. He’s normally personable, but after talking to her, he just shut down. Hardly spoke at all, but he did order me to get her a stateroom.” The lieutenant paused, mistakenly expecting a reaction from Moore. When her affect didn’t respond in the slightest, he continued cautiously: “We don’t have staterooms, Ma’am.”

“Of course you don’t, Lieutenant. Where is the stowaway now?”

His keen expression fell away, as did his gaze as he broke eye contact with the holocam. “Ma’am, we don’t know. She must have slipped off at the orbital platform.”

“And that is all you know.” Moore let a shade of disappointment tinge her voice.

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Pity you lack the follow-through that could have earned you a

commendation. Perhaps you will keep this in mind, should you be fortunate enough to see an opportunity appear in the future. But... I doubt you will be so fortunate, Lieutenant Cear.” Her admonishment came with a hidden gift. If he recognized it, the officer didn’t show his hand. Moore could appreciate that. She closed the channel with a tap of a button.

Her quarry was leaving very heavy tracks; tracks that led directly into Moore’s own den.

Coruscant. Alien Protection Zone.

One of the easy ways to recognize a nascent police state is to look for telltale signs of surveillance. First, they argue that it’s a matter of keeping an over-large population safe. Not to worry, it’s only traffic cameras. It’s only security cameras in those poor, desperate, high-crime areas. The facial recognition software is remarkably reliable! Only the guilty need to fear the attention. No one is tracking the movements of innocent citizens. The records are deleted after a reasonable amount of time. That time period cannot be disclosed for security reasons....

Then, the umbrella of guilt expands. On Coruscant, suddenly one could now be guilty of failure to be human. Of course, the Emperor’s staff explained that the rash of attacks on non-humans was a product of heretofore hidden prejudice and that, for the protection of non-humans, the Alien Protection Zone had been built—right on the verge of Coruscant’s most infamous sector, the Works.

The sector had been a center for industry and manufacturing, as indicated by its name and evidenced by the hundreds of levels of derelict machinery rusting in darkness. A few centuries ago, off-world manufacturing became so cheap that the

enormous cost of shipping goods to Coruscant didn't matter. Then the jobs didn't matter to anyone outside the Works, and the factories came to a standstill. Those who could, left. Those who couldn't leave found other ways to survive; usually turning to theft and occasionally selling their former employees into slavery. At least it was more honest than the previous system of wage slavery.

Before the devastating Clone Wars, Renuka had actually visited the Works more than once. Her Master, Mu-Daru-Kardu, had a knack for criminal investigation. The sector had become an underworld of smugglers and drug dealers, and the Coruscant Guard hardly bothered patrolling there anymore. Though most of Master Kardu's cases began in the sunlit top levels of the city, almost all of them led through some twilight-alley in the Coruscanti underlevels. A few even led right to the senate floor. She never trusted politicians after the third time they caught a senator's aide trading favors with death stick dealers in the Works. The first two could have been just a coincidence. Coincidences come in pairs, but never in threes.

And now she was picking her way through a half-lit street, her white hair cast in a full spectrum of hues by the chaotic flickering of plasma-light signs. She kept her head high and gaze straight ahead, deaf to the beggars plying their trade in front of shuttered shops. It wasn't as if she had any currency to offer them anyway.

Since the cab had dropped her off, she'd just walked. On and on through the impoverished streets. Sure, there were alarming sounds echoing through this part of the city, and, sure, the lights were garish and unnatural, but there was something exhilarating in the dank, exhaust-filled air. Nothing about the Alien Protection Zone was Imperial Regulation, save for its

existence. The Imperial ideal of perfection did not penetrate the walls of this mandated sector. She was standing in the Emperor's junk drawer, and she loved the very mess of it.

Many of the residents were resentful and destitute, but there was a thriving spirit beneath the grime. She could feel the hum of their emotions in the Force. A lightness came to her step as she tapped into their feelings of defiance, of pride. These aliens could not conform to humanity even if they wanted to, and they didn't bother to try. Her feet tapped out the rhythm of that resilient pulse. Soon, her fingers struck the beat against her thigh. She was already steeped in music when the sound of a real, live band down the street reached her ears.

A yellow wedge of light fell from the bar's open door, and she broke into a run before she could miss another second of the music. She didn't notice the whirr of a poorly hidden camera's motor as it turned to track her sudden change in course.

The Azure Dianoga Cantina was filled with smoke, and the smokers were at least a dozen different shapes of alien. Some looked much like her, nearly passable as human, with only their skin tone to betray them. Others, Ithorians, Devaronians, a clutch of Zabrak and a lone Aqualish could easily be taken as bizarre, even monstrous, by a sheltered human child.

But, it was the unrepentant band that had her attention, not the patronage. The song they played was a syncopated riot of galactic jazz that invited her into a daydream as she listened from the closest seat she could find. It wasn't until the song was nearly over that she even noticed the dancers. They were, to Renuka's mind, the typical pair of Twi'lek women and they danced with perfect abandon, oblivious to the eyes upon them. They were *alive* in the music. The Force danced with them and

through them. Renuka was surprised to find herself envying their passion.

Her thoughts ran home to the Jedi Code, the touchstone of the beliefs she was supposed to hold to. *There is no passion; there is serenity. But, how can such lively joy be wrong? There's no Darkness here.* The Code felt hollow, like a pumice stone light with holes.

She thought of her years of training in so many physical skills, all of which stemmed from combat. The Jedi taught her to move with detachment from her emotions; to acknowledge sensation while feeling nothing at all. On Byss, she was coerced to fight using anger and pain. So much pain. Renuka could hardly recognize what she saw in the dancers, but what she could see was a truth her conceited teachers had been blind to.

The band's six-armed drummer rolled to a stop, the set finished. Renuka's dimmed awareness of the room came back into focus, and she found herself faced with an irritable waitress who wasn't about to repeat herself. She had probably been asking about a drink order.

Renuka chuckled nervously, "Oh. I don't—" The woman's angry expression crystallized into loathing. She didn't need to say anything more to make her customer reconsider her order, but Renuka never got the chance.

A wave of silence swept through the bar.

Everyone was staring at the white suit of armor standing in the doorway. Two more stood behind him, their own armor tinted yellow by the dancing plasma sign hanging just above them. She could see others waiting outside.

The guard commander scanned the faces of the patrons from behind his expressionless helmet. An uneven whirring echoed through the room as a malfunctioning speeder wobbled down the street outside. The noise eased just enough pressure on the suffocated room to allow someone to cough.

In a desperate instant, patrons dove under tables, the barkeep took cover behind his bar, the band had disappeared and that left Renuka, the only one still in her seat, casually motionless. Heavy disappointment dimmed her eyes as one hand slowly fell to the lightsaber at her belt.

“Renuka Vosk, you are under arrest. Come with us.” The guard’s voice was muffled, resonating heavily in his helmet.

“I was really enjoying the music, you know.” She scratched her nose and made a show of contemplating the peeling advertisements on her tabletop.

“I repeat: you are under arrest.”

When he spoke, she didn’t recognize him as any of the guard captains she’d worked with years ago. In fact, his accent wasn’t even that of a clone.

“I’m tired and I would really rather stay here and enjoy my evening.” Her chair sounded a grating protest as she stood suddenly. “But you’ve spoiled that.”

Two of the guards leveled blasters at her. She spared each of them a fleeting glance. Their leader beckoned her forward with a white gauntlet. “Come along.”

Her hand was still resting at her hip, waiting. One of the captain’s backup finally realized what the silvery cylinder

hanging from her belt was, and called out, "She's armed, Sir!"

She shook her head. Lifting her angry gaze to the lead guard, she aggressively tipped her chair onto the floor. "I'm tired. And I'm sick of being ordered around. How about you shoot me for resisting arrest?" She held up her arms to beckon him on.

She could hear a few of the patrons rustling under their tables at that: some shocked, some amused. All of them bled fear into the Force and the room was drowning in it. Renuka had to resist a Byss-borne impulse to tap into the power in that fear. It would have been so easy.

The guards looked to their commander, who was simply watching the fugitive before him. One of the men outside twisted around to peer through the door. He had enough sense not to ask why it was taking so long to bring her out, but too little sense not to wonder. Curiosity could easily prove a lethal trait in an Imperial guard.

Quiet fell on the cantina once more as the commander considered his options. He slowly raised his hand, pointed a single finger at the ceiling and paused. His men waited on edge, breath held tight behind their polished masks. She met the stoic grimace on the guard's helmet with her own wickedly confident grin. The expression twisted her geometric tattoos into bent smiles of their own.

Outside, an astromech droid wheeled down the street, utterly oblivious to the battle of wills only meters away. Inside, the scent of sweat and a dozen different species' signs of fear rose above the dominating odors of smoke and drink. Beneath the table next to Renuka, a small, furry-faced alien began to whine in a frequency just beyond the range of human hearing.

The guard commander's hand fell just before his voice confirmed the order: "Fire!"

Renuka's ready danger-sense caught the movement before she heard the sound. She ignited her saber, held it high and shifted into a defensive stance. The red blade's meaning was lost on the population of the bar, but the snap-hiss ignition of the blade was shock enough. She sent two blaster bolts right back toward the guards who had fired them. The men fell, each with a scream.

Before the pair could breathe their last, before the commander could even reach for his own gun, Renuka lunged. She leapt up onto the table. Her feet skipped lightly as she darted from surface to surface, hardly making a sound. With a single, practiced stroke, she bisected the commander precisely at his waist.

She didn't even slow, leaving the bar behind, death in her wake. One of the men guarding the door shot at her retreating back out of rote instinct. Forewarned by the Force, she easily dodged the bolt with a serpentine break in her stride.

The surviving guards were left looking at their compatriots-turned-casualties in horror. Patrons were climbing out from their hiding places. A horned Zabrak exclaimed, "It's all true! The Jedi did turn on us!"

Others joined him in voicing their dismay. The bloody scene at their feet confirmed the Emperor's assertions that the Jedi were dangerous traitors. Soon, the bar was humming with the engines of rumor, freshly fueled by the still-smoking bodies on the floor.

A few blocks away, she stole a respite from her escape. Her pulse was beating a desperate rhythm in her ears. Renuka wasn't winded, but she was startled. If the Imperial City Guard knew she was on Coruscant, who had told them? She was certain that no one had noticed her leave the *Winter's Intent*, and the taxi driver was clueless.

Renuka was shuffling down a sidestreet, one chosen for having just enough foot traffic to disguise her presence. The shadows were muddy here, the bright advertisements failing to cast enough light to see by, yet bright enough to betray a silhouette. Renuka found herself agonizingly exposed no matter where she stood.

Every passing citizen looked to Renuka like a potential threat. Oppressed aliens they may well be, but who wouldn't want to get on the guards' good side by giving a tip on a fugitive? She was only a handful of kilometers from the bloody scene in the cantina and news could spread faster than she could ever dream of running.

A speeder grumbled by, headlights casting long beams of dangerous light. She took an instinctive step backward and turned away from the street. She found refuge in the depths of her cloak as the lights skimmed over her back.

She was beginning to regret coming to Coruscant. Hiding right under Palpatine's nose? The idea was laughably bad. *Sloppy! What was I thinking? I'm not in some holodrama. The villain isn't going to conveniently fail to notice that I'm right here.*

She shook her head and returned her attention to the walkway. There was something about the scene that bothered her, but she couldn't quite place the problem. A glance over her

shoulder yielded nothing, and neither did a cautious scan of the street.

Her breath caught in her throat when she realized what was wrong.

The something was actually a nothing: the absence of anyone in the street. The entire roadway had inexplicably cleared out.

"I expected better of Bythar Kull's successor." A cold steel voice pierced Renuka's pensiveness with devastating precision.

She spun round and found a pale figure standing where she had very specifically seen no one just moments prior. Moore knew exactly how to sneak up on a nervous Jedi, and that made her all the more frightening.

Renuka began a retreat, slow and deliberate and, she knew, futile. She cast her senses as wide as she could, trying to find any sort of trap or convenient debris. Renuka found nothing, considered Moore's sudden appearance in the midst of nothing, and decided to stop trusting her vain senses. Instead, she determined to rely on her wit.

"You know, I just didn't think the job was a good fit after all. Maybe he should find another successor." Renuka hated the fact that she couldn't bring herself to speak Kull's name.

Sly Moore stood utterly still. Her quicksilver eyes watched Renuka with fearsome interest. She looked like a breathing statue, her pallor only enhancing the illusion. "How did he die, Vosk?" Moore spoke each word with ghostly dispassion.

"Can't say that I remember. My day was packed and all that, so it just blurs together."

Renuka nearly ran when Moore took a sudden, long stride forward. The Umbaran's shaggy cloak shivered back to stillness after the shock of movement. "I think he died screaming. It's so invigorating when they scream, no?"

Renuka was looking for exits now. She had never known if Moore was combat trained and she preferred never to find out. What Renuka said was, "You always were really big on that whole lightning as motivation thing. I seem to remember you told the instructors not to worry about killing us."

"The weak die, the strong survive. There is no other way. That is why you are here with me and Instructor Kull was incinerated." Moore extended a hand to her, "Time you returned for your reward."

"Oh, that won't be necessary. I got enough from killing him!" The words left her mouth before her mind could censor them. She felt the swell of darkness rise up within her chest and immediately hated herself for letting it loose.

Moore's dead expression began to warp. Her lips slowly spread thin across the scaffolding of her teeth, then parted to reveal a sickening, satisfied grin.

Renuka's hand shot out from the generous sleeve of her robe as she called a heavy trash compactor to rise with the Force. She gestured with adrenaline-born speed and sent the compactor flying toward Moore. The dark adept avoided the debris without even shifting her stance.

"You resist me, but you only fight yourself. Part of you wants this recognition. Accept it and end the nonsense," Moore retorted. If her tone was any indication, she was tiring of their

conversation.

"No!" Renuka shrieked, wounded so easily by Moore's words. She sent more urban detritus at her opponent, who sidestepped the attacks with infuriating ease.

"You appear to be suffering from the delusion that you have a choice in the matter." Moore raised a powdery grey hand, fingers curled in a recognizable claw-like rigor. The Umbaran intended to throttle her with the Force. Renuka turned to run; the better, rational parts of her brain eroded by panic.

Her legs tensed, poised for the first step of the sprint—when the Force closed down on her throat and her feet lifted from the ground.

Moore approached her prey with glacial grace. Renuka was able to barely scrape out a gritty breath. The wisp of air brought her a few more seconds of consciousness.

She could feel the veins in her scalp protesting the constriction on her windpipe. Her eyes hurt. Her head tilted back as instinct drove her to desperate gasps.

"You have ten seconds before you black out. You should have known better than to run."

Renuka spotted a rusted-out sign as her vision began to dim; the sign was heavy, covered in sputtering plasma displays. It dangled from a broken fixture and Renuka used the last of her consciousness to raise her hand and send the sign crashing down onto the approaching Sly Moore.

She wasn't sure if it struck the Umbaran, but her death grip on Renuka's neck released. The former Jedi's feet met blessed

pavement and she dashed down the first alleyway available. She let her mind go blank and gave every iota of her concentration to the escape. Each step was a precious gift of freedom and deserved her full attention.

Still, there was the urge to look back, to try to detect Moore's anger or life or anything that would tell Renuka if she was being followed. She crushed the temptation under the superior weight of her desire to escape. Followed or not, her flight would be the same.

She employed the living Force within her body to accelerate her steps and soon she was moving at a speed only the greatest sprinters could dream of.

A few blocks of cracked permacrete passed beneath her feet and she became the run. Her breath burned hot in her lungs, her heart abandoned the fluttering rhythm of panic for the steady beat of exertion. Step by step, the fear was drummed out through her feet.

Perhaps it was the fear that had made her steps so sure. Without it, her stride became careless. So careless that the toe of her boot caught on an outcropping of Invisec garbage. She hit the grimy ground hard and skidded nearly a meter. The shock jarred her teeth. Her tongue bled where her rear molars had taken a gash out of it.

Renuka allowed herself a moment of sympathy for her body's pain before she picked herself up with a grunt. She spat out as much of the blood as she could and wiped her chin. If Moore had been on her heels, now would be the prime opportunity for a biting reproach or stun bolt.

When neither came, Renuka jogged on.

Renuka's tongue had finally stopped bleeding when she took refuge in an alley several kilometers from the Azure Dianoga. She was exhilarated, reveling in her survival against the Empire's failed attempt to apprehend her on their very own capital world. She had just outrun Sly Moore! Her psyche carefully glossed over the part where she murdered three men who were only doing their duty.

She may have caught her breath but her mind had gone foggy. She really was tired; that hadn't been a lie back inside the cantina. Imperial Security would be tracking her, even now. Especially now. Just as they had tracked her to the bar. She knew she only had two options: get rest in hiding or escape, but not both. Her best chance was to keep moving and find a route off-world right away.

She leaned against the wall and turned her face to where the sky should have been. Instead, she found an ancient ceiling hundreds of meters above her, another sublevel's floor. She let out a resigned sigh.

Get going, she thought. You're supposed to stay in place when you want people to find you. Go before she catches up. For all the stirring of her thoughts, she couldn't bring herself to move. She kept watching the skylanes.

Speeder traffic was light. Only a few vehicles bothered crossing over the sector. Most of them probably belonged to the locals. Nothing short of a hyperspace-capable ship could help her, anyway. Her eyes started to glaze over, giving up on the effort to focus.

Then, as she dismissed the view as pointless, she spotted her salvation. A fully-laden CAB freighter dashed through the scene, slowing just in time to make a turn and land right in the heart of the Alien Protection Zone. A peal of laughter rose from the former Jedi and she set off after it.

Part 5: Bad Wings

There were patrols everywhere. She'd nearly walked straight into one.

Renuka had been going full speed down the darkest alleyway available when she reached the intersection with Invisec's main pedestrian thoroughfare, Lansu Way. The street was packed at this hour, shoulder to shoulder with every manner of undesirable alien.

And at that very corner, five city guards were, as expected, on guard. She ducked back into the darkness, heart recovering from a skipped beat. This commercial part of the sector was clogged with foot traffic and the guards were more concerned with watching the crowd than watching the alley behind their very backs.

She dared a look around the corner. Her last encounter with the boys in armor really could have ended better. Thanks to her violent outburst, they were now on high alert. Her explosive exit from the bar must have been relayed back to their central command. Now they were looking for her everywhere. Unlike before, they knew she was armed and dangerous.

Why hadn't they known before?

She didn't have time to ponder that detail now. Instead, Renuka

doubled back and found another path that met with Lansu Way one block over. From there, she took a smooth step into the flow of the crowd and buried her presence among them. She even took an extra measure, shrinking her aura within the Force, in hopes that the discipline of concentration would keep her darker instincts in line.

She kept her gaze down, senses open, and hood up as she passed the first guard patrol. They were stopping every Mirialan they could find. Her throat tightened with guilt when she saw a young jade-skinned father being questioned in front of his children.

How could they point a blaster at an obviously innocent citizen? Oh right, he's green, so he obviously knows me and everything I've ever done. We're co-conspirators here to overthrow the Empire. Slimeballs.

Bythar Kull's indoctrination told her to keep walking; this little family was too weak and insignificant to bother with. But then something in her rebelled and her thoughts turned to the consistently infuriating Jedi Council, who always saw the Galaxy in broad strokes and distant destinies while the Republic was crumbling beneath their sacred Temple. Would they have seen that harassed citizen as being too small, hardly a ripple in their Unifying Force?

Before she had anything close to a plan, she found herself wading out of the current of pedestrians. She stood directly across the street from the knot of guards. She tossed back her hood and waved at them. Nearly a half-minute went by before she heard one of them yell, "You there! Don't move!" She would have felt embarrassed for them, if they had been Republic Guards. But, Republic Guards were chosen for their capability,

not cruelty.

She watched as the suspicious father of two was dismissed and waited for the first of the guards to reach the thickest traffic at the center of Lansu Way. Then, Renuka *ran*.

She vanished down a side-street in a whirl of black fabric. All five guards dutifully followed her, each moving at the highest speed allowed by his armor and his skill at navigating a packed crowd. They were sufficiently separated that none of his compatriots was within sight when she leapt from behind a Dumpster to grab hold of the final, lagging guardsman. He didn't shout, mostly due to her vice-grip on his neck. Surprise deserved some credit for his silence, too.

As she wrapped her arm around the hapless guardsman's neck, she felt rage string her muscles taut; far tighter than they needed to be to hold him still. It must have hurt. She hoped so.

These guards were nothing like the honorable keepers of peace who were constantly complaining about Master Kardu's intrusions into their jurisdiction. These were not the men who loved protecting the people within their sectors of influence.

These were the Emperor's dogs.

So, she pulled her grip tighter still and pressed the hilt of her un-ignited saber to the tight black armor at the guard's neck. "Turn on your radio for me," she purred against his helmet.

The CAB freighter's pilot jumped down from his ship. His feet landed on the solid hangar floor with a loud crack. He was not a light man. The yellow-skinned Twi'lek was chuckling to himself

as he wrung his grease-covered hands with a work cloth. He jolted when he found a white-haired Mirialan woman robed in black standing right behind him, staring at him intently.

Renuka didn't waste a moment on diplomacy: "I want passage on your ship."

The rotund man let her demand hang in the air for the span of a heartbeat. Then he laughed. Loudly. He had a deep, joyful laugh that echoed in the busy hangar.

"That's great, creepy lady! Come back in a week and I'll see what I can do to—I mean *for ya*." He winked at her and turned back to his maintenance.

She jogged after his surprisingly long strides, and found herself talking to his head-tails. "I need passage *now*."

"Glad to hear it! But I just put my landing gear down after two months in the black and I'm not real keen on going back for more leg cramps 'til I've had at least... four dancers planetside." He looked over his shoulder to smile at her with bright eyes and a face full of grease smudges. She held her ground as he leaned too far into her personal space. "Then again... it's hard to tell under that cloak, but you don't look half bad, yourself. I can respect a woman with a scar like that. Maybe we could work something out? Or *in*? Or—"

A thunderclap of palm on jaw sent him reeling.

She didn't use her saber arm, but she struck hard enough to make her point. The pilot retreated slowly, and recovered with all the speed of a career womanizer.

"All right, all right! I can see you're not the playful type. I can

respect that, even if it is a little dull,” he said, rubbing his reddening cheek. The gesture brought her attention to a set of evenly-spaced scars that had been lanced over his right eye. He was lucky to still have the use of it.

“Good, then let’s get going,” her words clipped, impatient. “How long will it take to get to Nar Shaddaa?” She looked over the freighter, which was far less impressive now that it had unhooked from its cargo haul.

The ship was blocky, basic, no doubt uncomfortable, probably having room for little more than its cockpit, hyperdrive, a couple bunks and a rudimentary refresher. Still, anything was better than hiding in the walls.

“Whoa, you’re skipping way ahead, lady. I didn’t agree to anything and from what I can tell, you’re the one who’s asking a pretty damn big favor. How much you offering?”

She looked away from the pilot and began an unconscious retreat. “I’m not exactly....I can get you credits when we arrive.”

The pilot laughed again and retrieved a hydrosprayer from his toolbox. “I only work for two things, and you don’t propose either of them. I sure as hell don’t do charity. I’d tell you to find someone else, but we both know that my ship’s the only one in this hangar that can break atmo. Rest been stripped for parts in this busted-down sector.”

She opened her mouth to argue when he pointed the sprayer over her shoulder at the hangar’s entrance. Actually, he was pointing at the contingent of guards who were searching the area. “I think you just ran out of time to waste, blue eyes.”

Her mind raced with a dozen possible outcomes for her situation: most went very, very badly for her. This pilot had a sharp mind and a strong spirit, which didn't bode well for any attempts she might have made at a mind trick. She actually had to barter honestly.

The guards were getting closer now, a squad of six about a hundred meters away, but they hadn't noticed her yet. She was starting to hear the rush of blood in her ears. Why was her mouth so dry? Seventy meters, now.

"I have codes!"

The pilot peered at her, utterly baffled. He raised a hairless, mustard-yellow brow. "You have codes," he repeated.

"Security codes. They belong to one of the Emperor's higher-ups. A guy nobody wants to argue with, and I'll give them to you if you get me to Nar Shaddaa."

He spent far too long carefully wiping grease from the hydrosponder as he contemplated her offer. The guards were only fifty meters away now, and one was looking in their direction. Renuka pulled out Bythar Kull's datachip and pressed it into the pilot's chest. He looked it over with a skeptical eye and stared down his broad nose at her. "All right. If this turns out to be just a bunch of dirty pictures... well, that wouldn't be so bad either. But I'm still going to want payment. Get on board before the Imps nab you." He jabbed a thumb toward the freighter's ramp.

She smiled gratefully and clapped him on a generous shoulder. The ramp sounded a metallic rattle as she ran into the ship. Two quick adjustments later and the pilot was throwing his bulk

into the cockpit and pulling up the landing gear. He rushed the takeoff process with a practiced nonchalance that suggested he may, possibly, have had to outrun government protocols once or twice before.

The freighter's engines rumbled to life and strained against the planet's gravity. Renuka was surprised to find a copilot's seat in the claustrophobic cockpit, and buckled herself into it just before the acceleration kicked in. Below them, the guards had finally caught on and were ineffectually waving at the ship as it sped out of the hangar. The pilot wove through skylanes, breaking just about every speed, safety and courtesy ordinance on the Coruscanti books. More than a few airspeeders chided him with blasts of their horns.

Thario didn't veil his attempts to impress his fare. He put the freighter through its paces and then some, choosing the most dangerous maneuver whenever possible. The unladen CAB shredded the air and, within a few minutes, Renuka felt the pressure of acceleration relent as the cloudless blue Coruscanti sky faded to a sparkling black field of orbiting space debris. She also became aware of a few fresh bruises, courtesy of her pilot's over-sharp turns.

"They say I'm impulsive. Judging by this situation, they're right. I'm really taking a risk, ferrying a fugitive like you around." He elbowed his copilot passenger, asking, "What's your name, anyway, lady?"

The rush of yet another narrow escape had made her giddy, and a playful smile lifted her green features. "You can call me Risk."

Her Twi'lek companion bellowed out another hearty laugh. "You

might actually survive on Nar Shaddaa with a wit like that, little lady! Maybe even a whole week!” He twisted in his seat, turning to face her properly. “And you can call me Thario, ‘cause that’s *actually* my name.”

They shook hands longer than she would have liked. But not as long as he would have liked.

A shaggy, grey shadowcloak traced a straight path over the floor of the Alien Protection Zone Imperial Center Guard Outpost. Half a dozen sets of eyes watched the imposingly tall Umbaran woman strut through the office with fast, efficient steps. Sly Moore marched directly to the Sector Captain’s door. She pressed long fingers into the control panel and stepped inside without so much as a clearing of her throat. The door slid shut behind her.

The assembled officers in the bullpen outside exchanged worried glances. Three were still wearing their helmets; others were clones and therefore wearing the very same face with the very same expression of restrained dread. They were all aware that they had lost three good men yesterday, and nobody wanted to talk about what the suspect had done to Truss in the alley off Lansu Way.

When the Emperor’s Aide showed up, everyone fell silent. Now that the door was shut, and stayed shut for half an hour, one of the same-faced lieutenants ended the silence. “Why in Blazes didn’t she tell us that the suspect was armed and, oh yeah, a damn Jedi? We wouldn’t have sent in three guys with blasters to get a Jedi!”

“Shut up,” said the one who had been, until now, chewing on a stylus.

“What?”

“I said, shut up. You don’t know what kind of bantha crap we’re in right now, so shut up.”

“She cut the commander in half.”

“Shut up, Jek!”

The two-week-long trip from the Empire’s capital world to the Hutt capital of crime gave the fugitive plenty of time to ponder the merit of her decision to travel with Thario. She expected to find him an ill-mannered, slovenly, untrustworthy, uneducated extortionist and a lecher. He only proved to be two of those things.

The pair of them had just enough room in the hallway between the cockpit, bunks and refresher to play endless hours of sabacc. Risk, as she now enjoyed calling herself, had seen the game before, but never tried it. Thario was more than happy to teach her, though she did have to swat him away when he tried to “show” her how to hold her cards. Even though the man was an incorrigible flirt, he did always back off as soon as she made her lack of interest clear. It was halfway through their trip that she realized the now laughably clumsy attempts at flirting were actually making her laugh.

He claimed that an understanding of sabacc could be considered a survival skill on Nar Shaddaa, and took time to

make sure she knew how to recognize a cheater. He did this chiefly by cheating on every hand.

When they reached the edge of Hutt space, Thario dropped out of hyperspace to make an adjustment to their course. He was soberly flipping a multitude of switches when he turned his scarred eye to her. “I figure I already know why you’re on the run. I’m sure it’s got plenty to do with that data you got. And there’s a ton of things you’re too smart to tell a stranger about yourself, but there’s one thing I wonder.”

Risk canted her head and cast a tense look at her pilot. “And what’s that?”

“You ever think things happen for a reason? That fate just sorta—” he mimed grabbing an unseen person by the throat— “takes hold of you when it wants to. I’m getting to the point where I can’t ignore it, no matter how much I’d like to.”

“I didn’t take you for a philosopher, Thario.” She shifted in her seat, suddenly unable to get comfortable.

“Yeah, well. Before you came running up, I was thinking how I really should visit my son. Only he doesn’t really care for his fat ol’ cargo-hauler dad.” His voice was stained with emotion.

Risk’s chin fell to her chest. She could feel his sorrow through the Force, and felt the pain as her own. She tried not to think of her own father, a man missing since the rise of the Emperor.

Thario continued his stoic work with the navicomputer while Risk counted all the red buttons on the console in a concentrated effort not to give in to empathy and grief. “It’s difficult to be separated from the people you should be closest

to,” Risk said, her words measured and even.

Thario forced a smile that didn’t reach his eyes. She could almost hear the anxiety that buzzed underneath that false expression, and something else. Another intention was hiding in his words, but she couldn’t place it. “Well, I’ll have my chance to visit him. He lives on Nar Shaddaa.”

“So that’s why you didn’t want to take the job....” She let the thought trail off into the void between them.

He brought his fist up to his mouth, his voice straining just a little too much. “It’s just so hard to find the courage to see my boy... brings back so many difficult memories, of his mother, you know? I miss her so much.” He dabbed a tearful eye and reached out for Risk’s hand—he missed.

“Nope. Too far. You’re not going to get me into your bunk with a sob story.” She turned her attention out the viewport, disgusted.

“Can’t fault a man for trying.” He shrugged, chuckled, and eased one of his head-tails over his shoulder.

“You really do have a son, though,” Risk asserted. She had sensed his regret; that much was real.

“Sure, and I’m gonna pay him a visit. Should have gone back to Nar Shaddaa last year but my routes took me to the Outer Rim.”

Understanding cascaded over her features as she turned back to him. “You don’t care about the codes, do you?”

“Nope. Probably worth a neat pile of credits, but seeing as the guy who had ‘em is probably dead, they won’t be good for very

long.”

“How did you—“

“I do now. Never take the bait, Risk. That alone will do a fair share of keeping you alive on a moon full of criminals who aren’t nearly as charming as me.”

She crossed her arms, slouched back in her chair, and huffed like a frustrated child. What she wanted to say was that *she* was a fully-trained Jedi Sentinel, even if without knighthood, a veteran of several battles in the Clone Wars, a forensic botanist in the Agri-corps, and completely capable of crushing his windpipe like a straw in *wk’ou* melonade—with her brain! He didn’t need to worry about *her* competence, damn it. All that aside, Risk recognized valuable advice, even when it pissed her off, and refused the bait to argue.

Her sulking continued until another thought arose to distract her. She popped up in her chair and asked, “Does that mean you don’t want the datachit?”

“Oh, I’m taking it.”

“Even if it might not be any good?”

“The guy I sell it to isn’t going to know that.”

They passed another week perfecting Risk’s sabacc face and trading playful insults.

Thario was always in a good mood. Even when she spurned his advances, he took it in stride and never had to search long for a reason to laugh afterward. That was how Risk knew they were in trouble, when he was no longer in a joking mood.

She had cheerfully skipped up to the cockpit and delivered a painfully bad sabacc joke with beaming pride when Thario responded with a distracted, "Uh huh." He was staring out the viewport, and was that sweat beading his hairless forehead?

Risk followed his gaze, already feeling her stomach shrinking to the size of a credcoin. It may well have disappeared altogether when she caught the near-white, wedge silhouette of a Star Destroyer gliding by.

"Thario...."

He didn't dare fidget with the controls; he didn't dare adjust their heading or worse, increase their speed. Thario kept perfectly still, like a great, hairless bantha trying to avoid a krayt dragon's attention. His response came in a hollow whisper. "Hyperlane anti-smuggler patrol. They haven't decided if they want to search us or not."

Risk nodded gravely and poured herself into the copilot's seat. She had lived at the Empire's sick excuse for mercy before, but waiting on their vicious caprice was even more agonizing.

Outside the cockpit, the Star Destroyer coasted through space, engines off. Anyone who wasn't frightened of the Empire—a statistically insignificant value—might have suggested the ship looked lazy or even said it seemed to be asleep. Risk was waiting for the transmission that would kill her and maybe Thario, too.

Behind her, the economy-sized navicomputer was working out their next jump calculation. It was taking its sweet time, too. The freighter was small and built for long, plodding hauls through space, not breakneck smuggling speed. Thario's navicomputer

reflected that in its small storage capacity. It probably had only one jump, or two, if the math was elegant and svelte, stored in active memory at a time.

As the computer resolved their route, the pair of fugitives—Thario would be painted by the same brush so long as he stood close enough to Risk—sat in pained silence. The telltale whirring and clicking was normally inaudible, but now the mousey sounds expanded to fill the cramped cockpit from window to door.

Risk realized that she had been holding her breath and broke her lips open to pull in some air. She released a tiny gasp which echoed over the navicomputer's scratching and jolted Thario from his anxious reverie.

"Damn it, lady, can't you breathe quietly?" He snapped at her in a raspy baritone.

"We could use the codes."

"You mean the ones that belong to the dead guy."

"This ship might not be up to date."

"Because the Empire's like that. No way, Risk. Don't take the damn bait, I told you. We wait this out."

She swallowed and tried to ease herself back into the vacuum of silence. The Star Destroyer had drifted further now and she was just able to make out its inert engine exhausts over the horizon of the ship's lower hull.

In the impatient space between her ears, Risk was volleying two horrible absolutes back and forth. They would never get out

of here; the Star Destroyer would tow them in when their lousy navicomputer stranded them. Then the survivor in her, an eternal optimist, would volley back: the calculation will be finished now. ...*Now. Okay.... NOW.*

The navicomputer whirred on endlessly.

Risk's nose began to itch. Then her elbow. Then a spot on her scalp, right above her ear. She refused to indulge in fidgeting, no matter how her body begged her to. Meditating, waiting in her cell for her execution, and now waiting for a Star Destroyer to reel her in, all of these awful pauses enforced a stillness on her that made her skin revolt. Life in the Temple had taught her to acknowledge the feathery sensations without yielding to them, but that never made them go away. She became an expert at ignoring them.

For his part, Thario had become a sweaty-to-the-point-of-soggy statue. If he was breathing, she couldn't detect any movement. Risk knew he was still alive from the rapt look in his eyes and the occasional reflexive twitch at the tips of his head-tails.

The navicomputer clicked twice and stopped whirring. Risk felt her pulse in her throat as she twisted to check the readout. There was no readout. The computer was switching over to a new line of calculation. She sank back into her seat, embarrassed and even more impatient.

They now had an excellent view of the Star Destroyer's engines. Without the iconic plasma exhaust, they looked like a set of empty eye-sockets in a skull and were just as white against the dark velvet of space.

Risk's capacity for anxiety was wearing thin. She couldn't

maintain her balance on the knife's edge of fear so she began to crawl her way back to a more comfortable seat on the hilt of worry.

Blue-white plasma flickered to life at the stern of the Star Destroyer. The engines began to heave the immense ship forward in steady acceleration. That could be a good sign or a very bad one.

The navicomputer dismissed all speculation when it spat out a flat buzz. Thario's hand shot out in rote motion and grabbed a control-lever, pulling it with all of his strength.

Stars smeared into dazzling streaks as space gave way to hyperspace and Risk remembered how to breathe again.

A roll of laughter—a phenomenon usually belonging to an entire crowd of beings—came from Thario alone. Soon Risk was giggling helplessly with him. She clapped the Twi'lek on his shoulder and, leaving her seat she went to revel in her freedom with a sanisteam.

A few days later, Thario's CAB freighter dropped out of hyperspace while Nal Hutta was still just an over-large speck in an untwinkling tapestry of stars. Risk raced to the cockpit as soon as she felt the shift back into normal space. She leaned over Thario's chair and peered out the viewport, waiting for Nal Hutta's speck to divide into two and reveal Nar Shaddaa.

Powered by sublight engines at full speed, the freighter covered the distance in a matter of minutes. Risk's mind rapidly switched between two painfully excited states: the thrill of arrival on the world whose very rumors were considered intellectual contraband in polite society, and the dread anxiety that came

with the knowledge that she would be *living* in such a world. The dissonant thoughts crashed together, throwing off mental sparks and eliciting a dry chuckle from her.

Thario found the sound more than a little disturbing, and told her so.

Risk hadn't even realized she was laughing out loud, and blushed. "It's just that I realized that my safe haven... is the most dangerous world in the galaxy. That's got to be funny, right?"

"If you say so. Customer's always right, or so I've heard. I don't care, so long as the credits work." His detached, businesslike words saddened her. Risk thought she'd made a friend.

Nar Shaddaa filled the freighter's viewport now. Beneath the ship, the dark side of the Smuggler's Moon glowed with the lights of industry and crime ceaselessly operating around the clock. Risk was forced to shade her eyes as they came around to the sunlit side of the world. Daylight made the ecumenopolis sparkle—the parts that could sparkle, anyway. The few towers that weren't covered with soot were topped by ostentatious Hutt penthouses, and they glittered enough for the entire moon.

Thario bantered with control towers, one of the Hutts' few concessions to order on a world dedicated to lawlessness, and navigated a sky crowded with ships carrying everything the galaxy wouldn't admit it wanted.

Thario's freighter rumbled a tired protest as the atmosphere assaulted its reentry shielding. Plasma licked up around the ship's magnetic force field, casting the cockpit in an orange light normally given to healthy stars and controversial lightsabers. A

few minutes later, they were soaring between towers and merging into skylanes. Without the Empire's finest on his tailpipe, Thario actually bothered to obey the tenets of common courtesy.

He set the ship down on a platform filled with dusty taxis, shining airspeeders, and small private yachts destined for rendezvous with larger Hutt pleasure ships. The space was very clearly loading-zone-only and held none of the features of longer-term hangars. Thario flipped a set of switches. The main ramp had already met the tarmac when the door popped open with a pneumatic hiss. He kept the engines running.

"Nar Shaddaa! Everybody off! Please leave payment with your captain. Thankyouverymuch." He held out his hand expectantly.

Risk looked out the viewport, then back at her still-seated pilot. "What about your son?"

"He knows better than to live in this sector. Rent's way too high. It suits newcomers who would get eaten alive by undercity gangs anywhere else, though." He brought himself closer to Risk and spoke in a conspiratorial whisper. "You know, *tourists...*"

Risk's eyes narrowed as she leaned in to mirror Thario's stance. Her voice turned grim and gravelly, a tone she had learned to reserve for heavy threats during one of Bythar's mandatory interrogation lessons. "Someone has to give those gangs a reason to stay in the dark. Tourists don't leave dead Imperial inquisitors in their wake."

Thario eased his bulk back into his seat and put up his hands defensively. "Whoa, lady. Shouldn't have assumed. Don't ask,

don't get killed, I always say. Can I get paid now?"

She tossed him the datachit and summoned a smile to banish the dark. It took a moment to filter up towards her eyes, but soon the expression became sincere enough. "You're a scoundrel, and definitely a lech, Thario, but you're a good man. Don't worry, I won't tell anyone. Wouldn't want you getting a good reputation."

"Damn straight. Now get off my ship, you're wasting fuel." His practiced callousness would have fooled anyone, save for the Jedi-trained. He spoke harshly, but she knew it hid a dread of loneliness. Thario didn't want her to know he was going to miss her. She understood the sentiment too well.

Risk nodded and left the cockpit behind. She bounded down the ramp onto the platform. The freighter immediately retracted its landing gear, barely giving her time to escape the engine's backwash. Thario disappeared into a skylane.

Renuka Vosk, hereafter to be known to all new acquaintances as Risk, was utterly alone on Nar Shaddaa.

At least she had nothing to lose. No credits, no contacts, no plan. At best, nobody knew she was here, except for a freighter captain who knew the incredible value of a mouth kept shut.

She pulled in an experimental whiff of air, and choked on the platform's wide array of fumes. Everyone around her was minding their own business and didn't care one whit about the white-haired Mirialan hacking up a lung on the platform, so long as she wasn't in the way. After a few more breaths, she began to acclimatize to the exhaust-rich Nar Shaddaa air and was able to get her bearings.

Mist and dirt fused with smog to wrap the cityscape in a rheumy gauze that Risk found comfotringly reminiscent of the scenes outside the Temple windows. Nar Shaddaa was called Coruscant's infamous twin for good reason. Among other conspicuous similarities, this weather (assuming a planet could even have weather without an intact hydrologic cycle) reminded her of the muggy updraft mornings of Coruscanti winters. True rain had gone extinct centuries ago. Sure, there were the Drips, but they only happened in the unfortunate sublevels.

She moved to the edge of the platform to get a better view of the world. She found an ancient forest of towers, every one plastered with billboards and garish signs in a dozen colors. The entire moon looked as if someone had shorn off Coruscant's polished upper levels and brought the twilight sublevels out for air. Master Kardu had once told Risk that daylight was the best disinfectant, especially for criminal behavior. Risk decided they'd have to send Nar Shaddaa crashing directly into its sun to see any results.

Gusts of wind tossed her cloak up behind her like a black flag. A chorus of airspeeder engines competed with the rushing roar of the early morning jetstream. Her new home stretched out before her, all the way to a jagged horizon.

If Master Gavaar was right, she had a destiny already written in the Force. If not, she was going to make damn sure reaching her untimely end was as entertaining and non-regulation as possible. Today, Risk didn't care to waste time believing in either outcome.

Part 6: Starve the Ego, Feed the Soul

Risk's first lesson in Nar Shaddaa Etiquette: everyone is going to steal from you.

Half of Nar Shaddaa's economy ran on the unwilling transfer of goods and credits between those paying attention and those paying to replace lost belongings. The best defense against pickpockets was not having anything worth stealing. Risk's defense was almost perfect.

Everyone on the street was deftly dipping into everyone else's pockets. She could feel light fingers searching the lining of her cloak every time she passed another pedestrian on the rundown, ancient Promenade. Each of the would-be thieves kept their pace as if nothing had happened, but Risk could sense a disappointment of the same shade as the discovery that someone else had gotten the very last cookie and left the empty box behind.

After Thario's lecture on the culture of the Smuggler's Moon, she had relocated her few personal effects to places in her clothing that didn't allow for wandering hands: the cuffs of boots, internal vest pockets and the like. The technique had, so far, worked flawlessly.

That is, until one of them actually managed to lay a finger on the wide belt compartment at the small of Risk's back, where her lightsaber was hidden. Risk had the deceptively-fuzzy Devaronian female lying on the dirty, soot-tracked pavement before she could even feel the fall.

Unfortunately, the Devaronian wasn't working alone.

Risk's second lesson in Nar Shaddaa Etiquette: turnabout is fair play, but nobody plays fair.

She realized that the Devaronian had at least one partner at approximately the same time Risk's head hit the wall. Her instincts had her reaching for her lightsaber before the pain could blur her senses, but her fear of being recognized as a Jedi stayed her hand.

She spent a dangerous span of seconds trying to clear her vision. When she did, she saw a thin, blue-skinned Duro thug standing over her. He was pointing the business end of a blaster at her face. His small mouth warped into something approximating a grin, and he gestured with the gun to suggest that she should probably go ahead and give him anything worth pickpocketing.

Risk dropped low and kicked at the Duro's kneecap, ducking just in time to dodge the blaster bolt. He cried out in pain and fired three more shots, all of which went wide into the wall. Risk grabbed his blaster by the barrel and tried to wrench it from his hand. His grip was strong—too strong—until she planted her knee in his gut. She didn't know much about Duro anatomy, but just about every species kept their vital organs in their midsection. The Duro were no exception.

The hapless Duro doubled over and relinquished his gun. She turned the weapon on the Devaronian, who had gotten back to her feet and was about to rush Risk. The threat of a blaster bolt was enough to send the thief running, and the breathless Duro after her.

Risk looked over her prize. It was an older blaster, scuffed, but sturdy. She snapped the battery pack out of the hilt and

discovered that it only had about one-quarter charge. She holstered it in her belt, where it hung at an awkward angle and rubbed uncomfortably against her hip.

Two pickpockets tried to steal it before she reached the next street. Risk felt it was time to get out of the tourist district.

Streaks of decades-old dirt decorated the walls of Nar Shaddaa's lower levels, punctuated by nests of torn flimsy advertisements. Sunlight hadn't touched these streets since before the most distant memories of the oldest Hutts. Rust grew on the corners of signs just as the lichens in the Temple Gardens had crept over the branches and trunks of trees. These dirty, sublevel streets were usually damp, if not wet and puddled. The fluid dripping from the upper levels must have been rife with infections unknown to the Core Worlds.

Risk was exhausted and her head still throbbed from the fight with the Duro. She settled on finding a refuge rather than using a meal to get her energy back. After all, she was without food and too afraid of the contagion of the water, even the mostly-clear liquid coming from pipes.

Without credits, no merchants would have her and the thought of appealing to the kindness of strangers was laughable. If anyone answered the door at all, they would probably shoot her and sell her organs piecemeal on the local wet-goods market. Risk wondered what her redundant organs might be worth and if she could survive parting with them.

No, she had only been on Nar Shaddaa for a couple of days, and she wouldn't allow herself to indulge in such desperation so early.

The uppermost levels were bright, commercial and opulent, and Risk almost wished she'd stayed there. The middle levels could claim an occasional shaft of sunlight during a few hours of each day. Up there, holoprojected advertisements leapt out onto the streets in blue brilliance. Enormous dancers beckoned to potential customers with transparent fingers. But down here, no one at this level had the credits to even consider such luxuries and no one wasted money on advertising to them.

Here, in the sunless depths of the city, garbage accumulated in the streets on its way down to the heart of the Moon, where it added more and more layers to the filthy pearl at the center of Nar Shaddaa. Risk couldn't help but notice that the larger piles of refuse would shudder as she passed. Her mind hoped that rodents and other fauna that survived the Moon's urbanization were infesting the piles. Her Force sensitivity told her differently. Beings were making homes in there, using trash for insulation against the worst of the damp and the cold.

She swore a silent oath that her fate had to be brighter than living down here. Just a few hours' rest and she would go back up and make her destiny better. Somehow.

Risk's wanderings led her through the city's treacherous labyrinth of lower levels. Failing lights managed to cast just enough illumination to prevent her from tripping over most of the debris in her path. Every dreary corner looked exactly like the last and she was beginning to believe that she was going in hopeless circles. At least, without a destination in mind she couldn't technically get lost.

Around another corner she found an impressively wide street. The distance yawned before her, vast, compared to the tight maze she had been walking, perhaps a full ten meters wide. An

unusual light drew her eye, a dancing sparkle at the edge of her vision.

It's impossible.

A pale, haggard shaft of sunlight dared to reach down well beyond its jurisdiction. It shouldn't have been able to find a clear path through the innumerable levels of ecumenopolis above. Yet, it had.

A little temple, so small it might well have been merely a shrine, occupied the rogue sunbeam. This insignificant structure must have been ages upon ages old and had made this tiny patch of sky too sacred to obstruct. But, not so sacred as to avoid the rain of garbage from above.

Some clever and reverent soul had erected a net above the temple, which caught the falling debris just a couple of meters before it could hit the roof. A myriad of empty, colorful bottles and transparent bits of material had found their way into that netting. Sun filtered through them and cast the shrine in a coruscating, multicolored light.

Risk didn't recognize the statue at the center of the shrine; it must have belonged to some beleaguered yet unforgotten deity of the people who built Nar Shaddaa's city so long ago.

Someone still loved this god, as there were bowls of fresh gruel and vibrant crystals placed at its feet.

There were two well-worn indentations in front of the statue, where worshippers would no doubt kneel and mumble their prayers. Risk followed the custom as best she could guess it, and set her knees into the appropriate spots.

She had never considered herself truly religious. The Force was a matter of fact, though the philosophy surrounding it had become unbearably slippery ground for her in the past few years.

Trying to pin down her beliefs was about as simple as nailing a cephalopod to a durasteel wall. Messy, unpleasant, and pointless. She wondered if the Force resented her constant attempts to define it. Probably no more so than it resented the competing sects of the ever-antagonistic Jedi and Sith.

Her hands came together in a clumsy supplication and she began an attempt at prayer. The result was more a half-mumbled, one-sided conversation.

"I... don't know who you are. But you were able to inspire order in a city that doesn't believe in laws, and that's something. I don't know what I believe, though I don't think I believe in statues being gods. Sorry about that. But belief, that's... something I do, well, believe in." She chuckled softly to herself. "Conviction, I guess you could call it. Yeah. I could use some conviction right about now, some certainty. I prefer light to the darkness, and I think you do too. I wish I knew how you kept the sun with you all these years; that's a secret I could really use today. I guess that's what I'm really praying for. A way to keep the light in the darkness. I wish I could leave some kind of offering. Not a bribe! But, you know, a token of respect. I'm sorry."

She rocked back onto her heels and uncoiled from her prayer. The movement turned her clothing in awkward directions and upended her pockets. A soft rattling came from the pitted duracrete at her feet. Risk crouched to retrieve her stone holocron token. It looked so small in her green fingers, a mere

mote of hope.

Risk cast a glance at the nameless god and smiled softly. She let the token roll into her palm and gave it one final sentimental squeeze. Cool and smooth. Her heart warmed with gratitude for Master Gavaar's faith. Risk didn't need the token to remind her of the hope the Miraluka Jedi had given her in the very last moments of her life. That memory was etched deeply into her soul.

She set the delicate dodecahedron at the statue's feet, stepped back, and offered it a reverent bow. "You have my respect and my awe," she said, quietly, followed by an even softer, "Thank you."

There were many more paths to follow before she could find a place to rest; Risk thought she had better get to walking them. Her feet were a bit more patient with her now and her steps a bit lighter.

She walked on for countless hours.

Most of the structures at these levels were victims of construction run amok. Additions were pieced onto upper levels; unstable balconies jutted out from squalid apartments. A few of these homes, if they could even be called such, showed signs of habitation without the most basic services. Dented buckets waited to carry in the day's water. Patched, threadbare clothing hung hopefully out to dry on derelict power cables which were already dripping with the lower city "rain." At least, **some** of what was dripping onto Risk's white mane of hair could have been considered rain. It had precipitated out of the atmosphere and fell downward. The rest of the moisture came from leaking pipes and not all of it was water. The damp gave

every street its own uniquely sour smell.

Fetid air recirculated by ancient fans served to keep the film of contagion even throughout the lower levels. The fans also kept people breathing passable oxygen, most of the time. She had heard stories about failures that had left citizens of unlucky sectors dead at their dinner tables.

Within the buildings, she could hear worn-out audio playbacks that must have been on loop for decades; crooning out the same tunes that had fallen out of fashion around the time she'd been born. Packs of dirt-covered children tore past her, utterly consumed in their athletic games and oblivious to Risk's horror at their sunless, neglected lives. Ultimately, she was somewhat cheered by their joyful abandon, even in this muck.

Risk pressed on through claustrophobically tight streets, hardly two meters wide at best. Taller beings would have had to duck under the tangle of improvised cables lacing between the structures overhead. More than once, she had to wait for oncoming locals to pass through the cramped alleys before she could take her turn.

She wasn't sure where she was going, only that she had to keep going until she could stop. The details were too heavy for her mind to carry around, so she left them to the universe to carry for her.

A few turns later, a relatively spacious gap between buildings—a whole four meters—offered a reprieve from the stifling network of alleys. Tight knots of undesirables stood around the communal space, smoking something Risk couldn't even begin to identify.

Across the “square,” she spotted another alley and within it she noticed a loose flap of thin durasteel peeling away from a patched-together wall. Her senses were overwhelmed by the painfully dense population inside these buildings, but something told her she may have just found her resting place. Risk lifted the flap and found a dark, private space devoid of angry inhabitants.

In fact, it was empty of anyone at all. She found evidence that squatters had been here in the past but, in the absence of food and bedding, Risk decided she had the place to herself. Sleeping on the ground in an abandoned hovel wasn't ideal, but it was preferable to sleeping in a pile of garbage on the street. She would take what she could get.

She made a makeshift pillow from her robe and set her back against the wall. Her spot had a fine view of the door and no one could sneak up behind her. Master Gaavar's words were still echoing in her head, specifically the phrase about never being safe. That had been true on Byss and it was doubly true on Nar Shaddaa. Even so, safe **enough** had to become a possibility or Risk would never sleep again.

She didn't intend to sleep well.

Once she came to terms with her hovel as being truly safe enough, sleep claimed her. It pulled her into the mindless space occupied by only the completely exhausted. She shouldn't have allowed it to happen, but her body didn't give her any choice in the matter.

She slept far too well.

In her dreams, Risk felt something grab her with rough,

misshapen hands. She had been weaving a tapestry from thick, crimson thread in what the dream told her was a Mirialan home. In truth, Risk had no knowledge of Mirialan culture outside of archival pictures shown in her childhood language classes. But the hands—they came from nowhere. Their appearance didn't make sense, in the way that dreams often don't, and she accepted the confusion as dreamers do.

She woke up just before she hit the wall. Her shoulder took the worst of it, which was fortunate for her head and neck. Unfortunately, that left her with a dislocated shoulder. Risk was wide awake shortly after the sickening pop and blinding pain. She scrambled to her feet, using her good arm for support.

The former Jedi dodged just in time to avoid another attack. She leapt backwards and landed with a painful jolt to her already injured shoulder. Now that she had enough distance, she recognized her attacker as a childhood nightmare.

A Yinchorri male was glaring at her, his reptilian eyes sparkling in the half-light of the hovel. He was muscular, bulky, and judging by his actions, extremely angry. He hissed at her, yelling, "Not yours! *My* home!" and charged again. She ducked under his meaty arm and rolled effortlessly away to the opposite side of the close room. Her shoulder betrayed her as she tried to stand, dismantling her grace as she struggled back to her feet.

That was the only opening the Yinchorri needed. He had a scaly arm around her neck in an instant, making it impossible for her to breathe. She tried to kick him, to strike him, but his hide was too thick and her angle of attack far too shallow.

Risk's vision gave in, swallowed by inky blackness. She heard

only the rushing of her frantic blood and the Yinchorri's laughter as he strangled her. Indignant rage rose up from the depths of her ego and she called the Force to strengthen her much smaller frame.

The Yinchorri's laughter was cut short as she threw him over her back, a move that elicited a fiery protest from her disjointed shoulder. He struck his head on the litter-covered ground and lay still, wreathed by a cloud of dust.

Her attacker's blunt reptilian face, full of avarice and malice, reminded her of the Yinchorri that had raided the Temple nearly two decades ago. She'd been only nine years old, then, roused from her bed and rushed to the Archives to wait out the attack.

Afterward, she had watched the caretakers removing bodies from the dormitory where she would have been sleeping, had the Masters been caught unaware. The Force had warned them. It would always warn them, so long as they listened closely.

Yinchorri haunted her dreams for months after that night.

He shouldn't have been able to frighten a battle-hardened woman at the ripe age of nearly thirty years, but there was something in that reptilian form that still told her to run for her life.

The Yinchorri leapt to his feet faster than his bulk would have suggested possible. He narrowed his yellow eyes at Risk and pulled himself up to his full height. A low, threatening hiss escaped between his teeth as he watched her.

Risk contemplated her opponent and the exit, which happened to be directly behind the Yinchorri. Her good arm wrapped protectively around the bad shoulder; if she had had sufficient time, she would have tried to restore the joint to its socket. If she were fast enough, maybe she could dodge him and get to the door....

"You cannot take from Varn!"

Risk took a pre-emptive step toward the door. "You win! I'll just leave and we can forg—"

"NO! You pay for tresspasssss." His forked tongue paid special attention to the sibillance in Basic. He produced a blaster from a previously unnoticed holster and aimed it at her.

Instinct took hold of her hand, which had opened the compartment on her belt and drawn her lightsaber before she could think better of it. Her own stolen blaster wasn't even spared a thought. Risk pointed the red blade at Varn's throat. He emitted a series of alien clicks which she could only take as laughter.

"Jedi..." he rumbled from his great chest, and made a few more threatening clicks.

She realized her mistake too late. On Nar Shaddaa, she wasn't a fearsome member of an ancient order; she was an Imperial bounty. Her shoulder hurt, she hadn't slept nearly enough and now one of her earliest nightmares was laughing at her. There had been worse days on Byss, but only in terms of injury rather than insult.

Risk was laughing, too. She couldn't believe she had been so

stupid. "You're right, of course you're right. How could I not have seen it!" Her words bounced off the Yinchorri's thick skull, and made no impact.

"Your head also mine, Jedi!" Varn roared and fired at her, blinded by his visions of fortune and unable to recognize the threat of her saber.

She deflected the bolts, but her aim was sloppy and she wasn't able to send any of them back at Varn. Cold realization ran over her like a shower of ice—she couldn't let Varn live. If he did, he would hunt her, reveal her to the entire City of Anarchy, and her nightmares would be the least of her problems.

Risk shook her head sympathetically and uttered a low "I'm sorry" before she leapt at him. Once she had committed to his demise, the Yinchorri didn't stand a chance.

The fight was over in a few hot, painful seconds. He didn't cry out, and that only made the killing that much worse for her.

She left the body in the hovel, smoke rising from both halves of his severed abdomen.

Part 7: Uneven

A destitute busker picked at an ancient stringed instrument that Risk didn't recognize. Risk passed him by, hands in her empty pockets. Her shoulder still hurt, courtesy of the Yinchorri's diplomatic solution to their territorial dispute. She had managed to restore the joint to its socket, thanks to a crash course in field medicine during the Clone Wars. Speeders tore past her, kicking up leaves of ruined flimsy and food wrappers. The Nar Shaddaan day stretched on, levels and levels above her head.

This sliver of the moon was fifty-three hours into the eighty-seven it took to reach each daybreak. She didn't notice any of it.

Her aimless path had taken her several levels up, from the perpetual midnight of the lowest levels, into the twilight layer beneath the formerly glorious Promenade. Something reeked of decay and she didn't dare speculate. Risk's appetite was undeterred by the stink in the streets. For all his concern and wisdom, Thario drew the line at sharing rations. She decided it was time to make a concerted effort to find a food vendor.

The area was crowded, with plenty of potential customers for local businesses. It wasn't long before she was downwind of something moderately appetizing. If nothing else, she was grateful for the reprieve from the city's pungent perfume. As for the food, it was breaded, fried, and otherwise completely unrecognizable. In accordance with the universal rules of cuisine, anything breaded and fried did not require identification.

The cook was a worn-out, rotund Klatoonian woman who worked the stall with a perfect economy of motion. If she wasn't flipping a fried... something, then she stood stock still. Her canine face was jowly and wan in the yellow light of her stall's sodium lamps.

Risk did her best to keep out of sight, basking in the scent and potentiality of a meal. The question of exactly how to procure that meal kept her from placing an order. She could always just ask for a handout by reminding the cook this one was on the house, with a little assistance from the Force.

The thought was appealing enough, and Risk had just stepped

into view when three children careened past her and tumbled into the stall. They were cheering their greetings in tiny voices and their clothes were covered with the grime of a day's play on hideously filthy streets. Their mother, the cook, lit up when they arrived.

Risk listened as the children babbled about the day's discoveries and revelations—including far too many dead things in various states of decomposition. One child, who looked to be about eleven, declared that he'd seen a nerf eyeball go soaring out a window of a butcher shop. Risk cringed at the idea of a Nar Shaddaa slaughterhouse. Maybe some regulations did have a place, after all.

As the domestic scene went on, Risk lost her appetite for stolen breaded-fried-thing. Her stomach burbled a complaint as she left the stall behind. Her conscience offered her lukewarm applause and a pointed comment on how nice it would be to have a *decent* meal.

Before long, she came to a pawn shop. Its ostentatious facade stood out among the other modest storefronts. This one was sparkling, covered from roof to stoop in glowing signs full of unlikely promises of amazing deals for sellers and incredible values for buyers. Even so, the blaster in Risk's belt was digging in to her thigh. Perhaps the threat of starvation was greater than being found out as a Jedi. After all, this moon was full of fugitives who had actually committed crimes. They had far more to lose from contacting the Imperials only to turn her in.

Then, Risk's hunger-addled mind turned on her, listing her own nasty rap sheet, punctuated by murders. But all those crimes would have certainly been dismissed by any decent judge. The

taxi driver back on Coruscant didn't even know he'd been mind-tricked. And every one of those men had died while trying to kill her. She silenced her guilt with a plea of self-defense. Then she went inside the pawn shop.

Thario could say whatever he wanted about her inexperience on the Smuggler's Moon, but even he would have been impressed by her bargaining skills. She had no qualms about using her Force-borne advantage in reading the lies on her opponent's mind and piercing through them. When Risk left the pawn shop, she was likely the first person in its history to walk out with her item's actual value in credits.

If not for the shop owner's sense of the blaster's true value, Risk wouldn't have had much idea what it was worth. She had never concerned herself with credits, not during her youth in the Temple, not during the Clone Wars, never in her two years at the Agri-corps, and certainly not while exiled to Relco Facility on Byss. Credits, currency, inflation, economy, these were words for people who were not called to serve the greater purpose of the Force. She was too busy defending the Republic or helping to feed it to worry about earning a living for herself.

Now, her only concern was living, regardless of earnings. She had forty credits, a sore shoulder, tired feet and a desperate need for a sanisteam. She set off in, what she hoped, was a likely direction for an inn.

Another problem with a monastic life without currency was a dearth of knowledge about budgeting. Risk had managed to protect her coinage from the wandering hands of pickpockets only to lose the entire purse in a meal, one overpriced drink, and twelve hours' rest in a stiff bed above a noisy cantina.

Her patronage had earned her the right to occupy the corner of the bar for hours, so long as she didn't expose her poverty by ordering anything else. She dimmed her presence in the Force to assure herself that nobody was going to bother her. Invisec's cantina had been a fine, upper-class experience compared to this rough establishment. The air was so thick with smoke that she could hardly smell the decades of spilled drink going rancid on the floor.

She made a point of avoiding the inevitable rust-colored stains on the furniture—and didn't need to ask where they'd come from. Every single patron was armed and the barkeep doubly so. He had an array of blaster rifles on display between the shelves of liquor and harder liquor.

A single credcoin tumbled over her fingers, rolled around her palm and began the circuit again. Risk was trying to think of options beyond turning to petty crime and living under a pile of sodden garbage. She had skills, most of which fell in the areas of combat and law enforcement. Even *her* rusted moral compass didn't allow for the first, and Nar Shaddaa didn't allow for the second. Then there was her experience at the Corps, but she didn't see much opportunity for agriculture on a moon without a single tree. A moon which also happened to be orbiting the controlled ecological disaster known as Nal Hutta. She couldn't see herself doing charity work for the Hutts.

Now what?

She watched the sabacc tables through glazed eyes, her mind wandering between observation and frustration. When she bothered to pay attention, she saw that the game played exactly as Thario had demonstrated. She was even able to pick out a few of the more artless cheaters from a distance. The tables

were run by the establishment and manned by four-armed droids, and she seriously considered the rewards she could get for pointing out the card sharks.

An Ithorian patron bellowed in anguished rage and slammed his fist into one of the cantina's sabacc tables, interrupting Risk's ruminations on her worries. He stormed out with two throats' full of curses in what she recognized as the meandering, consonant-laden sound of Huttese. His opponent, a Bothan missing the tip of his left ear, shrugged and swept a pile of chips over to his side of the table. The Ithorian's anger left a large wake in the Force, and Risk didn't have to understand his words to know he believed he'd been cheated. She assumed he was right.

Risk bit her lip, considering just how bad an idea this probably was. It wasn't bad enough to stop her from trying.

The great thing about sabacc was that nobody had to know you started the game broke, so long as you won. And then, kept winning.

She took the Ithorian's empty seat and nodded at the Bothan, who was still counting his chips. He'd done well for himself. "Care for a game?" he purred at her in Basic.

"Absolutely," she replied with all the smooth confidence she convinced herself that she had. Risk ordered sixty credits' worth of chips from the automatic dealer and tried to remind herself that she still had her saber, if things went badly. Gambling debt wasn't always fatal in places like this, only usually.

The Bothan looked her over with a greedy, lupine eye. "You're new around here," he said, as he claimed a pair of freshly dealt

cards.

Risk took up her own cards and, smiling, asked, "What makes you say that?" She had a three of staves and six of flasks. Not overly exciting. She tossed the bare minimum of chips into the hand pot. The sudden movement drew a zap of pain from her shoulder, but she had ample practice in disguising weakness and didn't allow the strain to register on her face.

"This is my table. I remember everyone who plays." The Bothan liked his hand better, or so he wanted her to think. He set a card in the interference field and doubled the bet.

Risk couldn't have asked for a better opportunity. She picked up her two new cards and pored over them thoughtfully. The face values were of no importance to her; in fact, they shifted twice as she pondered her move.

The history of the table, that meant everything. She stole the moment of quiet in the game to read the table's past in the Force. The Bothan wasn't lying; this was his favorite spot. He was here several times a week, and he always had something in his pocket....

She could feel a glossy button under the pad of a furred thumb, then his satisfaction as the rest of the table lost their hands, his pocket heavy with winnings night after night. The sense-memories stood out in sharp relief; a scene replayed dozens, possibly hundreds of times. The realization washed over her like a lightning strike: the Bothan had a transmitter! Risk fought the urge to immediately set her three of staves into the interference field at the center of the table. He couldn't possibly change the values of the locked cards, or he'd be found out.

“It’s not that late, Mirial-woman,” he said over the edge of his cards. He took a long, loud sip of his drink accompanied by an impatient rippling of his fur.

“Late?” Risk gave the appearance of rushing her bet, this time raising the stakes slightly. She tucked a lock of white hair behind her ear with a nervous flourish.

“You seem to be falling asleep at the table. I hope my game doesn’t bore you,” he growled through a set of yellowed canines. His Bothan charm was already wearing thin.

“The first few hands are never very exciting, don’t worry. I’m sure I’ll perk up when things get interesting.” Risk flipped over her cards to display a mostly-decent hand with a value of 19.

She wasn’t surprised to see that she’d actually won this round. The Bothan did a fine job of feigning his annoyance at the small lost pot. For his benefit, Risk played the role of overly-excited novice. “If the game keeps going like this, maybe I *will be* entertained. Winning is entertaining.”

“I prefer a close game, myself. You never know when the randomizer will hit and everything could change,” he replied and shrugged, with only the slightest knowing smile. If she hadn’t known exactly how he cheated, she probably would have taken the comment as a seasoned sabacc player’s effort to be sociable. Instead, she saved a mental note about his arrogance.

The game stretched on for several more small hands, with the pair exchanging subtle barbs and banal small talk. Wins and losses fell evenly between the two as they tested each other for tells and skill level. They were nearing, if not already on, the

final hand. Risk was up by about 30 credits, and the Bothan kept raising for every one of her calls. The window of opportunity was closing now, and she had put 85 credits in this pot. She was running out of chips.

Risk's stomach tied itself into knots when she saw him put a second card into the interference field. She could sense an eagerness emanating from him in the Force. The Bothan was preparing for his play. Her own hand held four cards safely in the interference field. She had been lucky enough to get a perfect negative 23 and hide it, card by card, beyond his reach.

Sweat beaded on her forehead. She had to time everything perfectly or face the hungry consequences. Her hand was good, but if her guess was right, he was on the verge of a better one.

The randomizer struck and their active cards sparkled in the dazzling animation that served to build suspense before their new values appeared. Risk's hand was an unusable set of low value cards and a Mistress of Air.

But the Bothan, he had something.

Risk went all in with her pittance of five remaining credits and a false grin on her face. *Confidence...*

He threw a handful of blue chips onto the table and began to reach for the sequestered cards. His bet outclassed her measly contribution by a factor of ten. Risk nodded and set her own hand down onto the scratched table.

She dropped one hand down to her side and flicked her wrist. Just as the Bothan was opening his mouth to declare his

victory, the button in his pocket sank into the transmitter with a nearly inaudible click.

Their cards randomized.

Risk's perfect sabacc was still inside the interference field. His vital third card—Risk suspected it was the necessary Idiot for an unbeatable array—was a worthless piece of flimsy.

The Bothan's fur stood perfectly on end. He stared, slack-jawed, at the treasonous card which now read as a fourteen of sabers.

Risk chirped, "Oh, did you have a good hand? I've got sabacc right in here...."

A low growl rumbled from his throat as Risk swept the chips onto her side of the table as swiftly as she dared. There must have been close to two hundred credits' worth of chips in her arms. Sixty of those were her imaginary seed money; that left about a hundred and forty for the Bothan to pay out.

He was still growling.

"Hey, watch it there, Grumpy. You play every night, you've gotta lose sometimes. We played a fair game. It's not like someone rigged the randomizer to go off at the last second." Risk regarded him with a knowing look.

"Are you accusing me of *cheating*?" he bellowed.

Risk's chair shot backwards as she stood up, determined not to let him anywhere near her. Threat of physical violence aside, she didn't want him planting the transmitter in her pocket. The Bothan was standing over the table, hair still bristling and his

lips curled back over his teeth.

She leveled an even glare at him. “No, I’m accusing you of backing out on your debts. Pay up or maybe we’ll have that other chat.” Risk caught an impression in the Force, a distinctive, out-of-place thought which she didn’t recognize as her own. She used it. “A chat with the Hutt who owns this place.”

He conceded a huff of defeat and sent a set of credsticks across the table. Risk totaled them to a hundred and forty. She shot him another look. “Funny, I don’t see my grievance fee for having to deal with your unsportsmanlike attitude.”

“What?”

“It seems to me that I had to go out of my way to get a decent game out of you, and now I have to deal with your bad behavior... maybe I’d do better getting the reward for turning you in, after all.”

Another hundred credits landed on the table.

“When I see you again, green woman, you won’t find me so generous,” he growled through his long teeth. With that, the Bothan was gone, though the shadow of his resentment lingered in the Force.

Risk took up a battered bar stool and rewarded herself with a stiff drink. She followed it with a few more; she could afford them, after all.

Risk didn’t allow herself to get so drunk that she couldn’t find her way to the pitifully cheap room just down the street from the cantina. She threw herself onto the hard pallet of the shallow

bed, slightly dizzy and still quite giddy on her grifter's high.

She spent an immeasurable amount of time staring up at the ceiling, giggling intermittently at the idea of how very good her life could get if she kept up the scam. She relaxed into the euphoria of the answered prayer and didn't care how hard the mattress was.

That's why she nearly fell out of the bed when the door chime sounded. It had tried to sound, anyway, but the result was a fizzling buzz and a small shower of sparks above the door. She hadn't expected the noise and that was enough reason to be startled. The greater reason was that absolutely no one should have known where she was.

The Force offered her no insights as to danger or the intent of the caller. Her own fugitive instincts were more than ready to fill in the gaps with a variety of threats. Risk stalked to the door and flattened herself against the wall. The belt compartment at the small of her back opened with a *click*. Her fingers wrapped around the hilt of her saber as she pressed a button on the control panel. Her temples throbbed as her drinks chose the wrong moment to wear off.

A frustrated, noise followed the sound of arcing electricity as the intruder forced the door's mechanism to cycle open. Light spilled in from the hallway, outlining a long, dark shadow. The figure was wide, and seemed to have a thick mane of hair. *Why can't I get a read on it? Who in Blazes—*

"Lovely place you have here. Don't worry about inviting me in,"
A gravelly, feral voice called through the doorway.

Risk opened her mouth to respond, but thought better of it when

Thario's advice about not taking the bait came to mind. She kept her tongue and waited.

Her caller rumbled a curious growl and sniffed the air. He purred, "I can smell you, green woman. Come, chat with me." He sauntered into the room with a gait so confident that it could only belong to a Bothan.

Risk knew, peripherally, that her life was in danger. But she was already weary of dealing with this Bothan and he hadn't been in the room for more than a minute. It reminded her of sitting at a mathematics exam and becoming so sick to death of working the pointless equations that it didn't matter to her if she failed the entire course. The process was just so *tiresome*.

Of course the Bothan had followed her from the bar! *How could I have been so sloppy? Damn it.*

"You ruined a really good thing, green woman. You owe me..." his lupine voice curled up against the word, "...damages."

The Bothan probably thought he had her pegged as just another grifter on Nar Shaddaa. Risk took a certain perverse pride in being a seasoned fugitive, including her readiness to cut-and-run at a moment's notice.

He was standing near the center of the room, waiting for his eyes to adjust to the darkness. *Overconfident bastard.* His nose led his movements as he tried to scent her, but the entire place was saturated with her smell.

Risk eased herself through the wide open door while his attention was on her empty bed.

Her shadow further dimmed the already poor light in the room

as she partially eclipsed the doorway. He spun round and leapt on her instantly.

Risk threw him back into the room, using the Force to move his much heavier frame with an ease far beyond the strength of her muscles. Too enraged to notice the broken physics, he charged her again. She darted outside and shut the door just before his wide, lupine nose could cross the threshold. He struck the durasteel panelling with a pathetic, furry thud.

Given that hotel doors, unlike cells, are meant to lock from the inside, Risk didn't have the luxury of locking him in. Instead, she ran.

She sprinted for the lift at the end of the hall: it was infamously unreliable—the guy at the hotel desk had told her to stick with the stairs—and right now she swore that she would use the Force to send the damn thing skyward if she had to.

The Bothan had her door open in an instant and he was fast on her heels.

The lift doors opened five seconds before the Bothan would have reached Risk. She only needed three seconds to get inside and slam her hand into the control panel to send herself to highest floor available. The look on the Bothan's face as he realized that he'd lost his chance was almost worth losing her room. Well, not really.

Engines whined in an uneasy harmony as the lift rose, accelerating faster and faster toward the roof of the low-rent tower. She had plans to take the first available taxi as soon as it got within a meter of the rooftop landing pad.

The Bothan was no doubt following her in the next available lift. She didn't know much about the Bothan culture, other than it bred excellent spies and that they had a thing about their social standing. Politics and revenge could certainly go hand in hand, but she preferred not to think on that during her two-minute-long ascension to the top of the tower.

The doors opened, revealing the windswept roof, giving her an excellent view of not-very-much. Her tower's apex was still well below the skyline; in fact, it was embedded in the twilight levels. Occasional taxis would drift by, but they rarely found fares at this building and didn't care to wait for one to show up. Risk ran out to the wide open space and waved her arms wildly. Two taxis sailed by without even so much as a tap on their airbrakes. She groaned and tossed her hands up once more, this time in a gesture of frustration. Behind her, the lift chimed and disgorged an enraged Bothan.

Her "friend" raced onto the landing pad, his fur rippling with the wind and his anger. He ran after her, only slightly dazed by the unexpected rooftop view.

Risk considered tossing him back into the elevator before the doors could close—but that would buy her seconds at most and cost her the secret of her Jedi identity. She backed up, coming ever closer to the edge of the building. A meter-high parapet guarded the perimeter of the rooftop and assured her she wouldn't simply step off the edge.

His lips curled back over his teeth in a predatory smile. Risk noticed the holster at his hip as he reached for a nasty-looking blaster. It was covered in modifications, scopes and sensors, and she was certain that was an illegal ammo enhancer.

Risk rolled her eyes as he leveled the gun at her. “You’re just going to shoot me? Blazes, you haven’t got any vision at all!” she called over the wind. “Go on, then!”

He blinked, taken aback by his quarry’s blithe criticism. His frustrated growl was nearly swallowed by the roar of the skylanes as he leveled the gun again.

“You’re really too stupid to even see it. I’m impressed! Better hurry up and shoot.”

“What?” he snarled.

She would have accused him of being the dullest of his species, if she weren’t using the Force to ply his ego. “You realize that now would be the time to get me to design an even better scam for you, right?”

“So you can sabotage me and leave me to die by Hutt? No. I’m not that stupid, green woman.”

He squeezed the trigger.

Risk twisted at the waist and watched as the first plasma bolt sailed by the space where her heart had been. Another heartbeat passed and she vaulted over the transparisteel parapet and across the bottomless chasm between the skylanes. A volley of shots chased her through the air.

The rush of wind in her ears and the roar of traffic weren’t enough to blunt her focus as she timed her next move. Veteran instincts had thrown her over the parapet in the panicked faith that the Force would see her through. Now came its moment to reach out to the believer in her.

She called upon the all-encompassing energy to sharpen her senses, guide her movements, and see her to survival. If she had a destiny worth protecting, well, now would be a good time.

The racing skylane seemed to slow; airbrakes opened as the airspeeders braced for sudden gridlock. Risk reached for the lumbering delivery speeder. She was off-course, she knew it. Her arm extended as far as it could and her fingers were not going to meet the truck's handhold.

She managed to wrench her wrist as she grabbed at a poorly-secured metal bar on the back of the speeder. The rusted fastenings rattled, one popped loose, but the rest held. Her handhold swung back and forth wildly as her momentum wore itself out. The entire vehicle shook like a nerf after a sudden rainstorm. She scrambled onto the bumper of the Nerf Steak & Bone Meal Market's dirtiest delivery vehicle and threw open the unlocked rear door.

The Bothan's blaster sent a few more spiteful shots into the truck. Hot plasma turned the thin, cheap durasteel to slag but failed to perforate it. The damage only served to complete its shoddy gestalt.

Fortunately, the speeder's driver, an accomplished death stick smuggler, had been able to correct for Risk's sudden impact without careening into oncoming traffic. He'd no doubt been hit by far worse before.

Even so, it was plain to see he wasn't quite sure what to say when a bedraggled Mirialan opened the back of his truck, climbed in, and sat down between an order of aged nerf flanksteaks and ready-pack bone-slurry mineral smoothies.

She blew an errant strand of white hair from her eyes and gave him a half-hearted wave before he turned back to the job of avoiding traffic.

Her first mark had been a challenge, but Risk quickly got into the swing of her gambling extortion racket. She rarely had to resort to actual coercion as she had in her first game. More often the mark scurried off into the night, with mutterings of fixing her obviously faulty equipment. That left Risk with a pocketful of credsticks and no one to complain about her uncanny winning streak. She could even afford to lose some games, just to keep up appearances.

The best games happened at tables where nobody could be sure who the cheater was and therefore blamed everyone else. Often, she could fold out with a tidy profit before anyone noticed that she was interfering.

She'd started off in the lower levels of Nar Shaddaa. Living was cheap and she didn't have to worry about oversight from sentient dealers. As her grift went on, Risk slowly but steadily improved her economic status. About six months in, she abandoned the noise and stale stink of rented rooms and got herself a proper apartment—as proper as such a space could be in the twilight levels.

It was also largely unfurnished. And undecorated. In truth, it was a hallway with a cook plate, a roll out bunk and a wall of empty built-in shelves. She also had a window, which cost extra. It gave her a view of the bottom quarter of a bright blue sign advertising used airspeeders. All she could make out was a handful of glowing Aurebesh letters.

She had to take extra care that no bitter card-sharps followed her home, but she was already looking over her shoulder anyway. Now, she was just trying to spot angry criminals instead of Imperials. She considered that an improvement.

Risk was confident that she'd left her days on Byss far behind her. She had her souvenir lightsaber at her back, but that was a matter of personal protection, nothing more. Absolutely nothing more.

She couldn't find a blaster that suited her tastes and didn't bother carrying one. Now that she knew her way around a couple sectors of Nar Shaddaa, she simply avoided the most desperate streets. Few pickpockets even tried their luck with her anymore.

The thought of keeping a holster at her hip did nag at her from time to time, like a necessary errand left unfinished. Her unfortunate encounter with the Yinchorri served as a reminder that being exposed as a Jedi would have severe consequences in this upturned galaxy. But, she trusted the hilt at her back far more than any haphazard shot from a clumsy gun, and she didn't want to commit herself to such an artless weapon.

Her daily routine still included an hour's meditation, and now that she had her private apartment, she added an hour of practicing her combat forms. Risk couldn't afford to go soft, even without the pressure from pickpockets and street thugs. The day that one of her marks was too drunk to listen to a good threat, or worse, brought a Wookiee, she'd need those skills. And, her love of freedom notwithstanding, she still put a certain faith in discipline.

Rationalizations aside, Risk needed her rituals. She believed

that Master Gavaar had been right about at least one thing: she couldn't ever afford to believe that she was safe. Anywhere. She accepted that as a fact of life in the Imperial era and moved on.

A casual appraisal of her life on Nar Shaddaa could find it bleak, but Risk was actually thrilled with her progress. Sure, her neighborhood was filthy, sunless and dangerous, but it was hers. She'd earned it and she was free to do as she wanted. If she wanted to spend her entire night's winnings on a series of increasingly complex and supremely alcoholic cocktails, she could. Her day's schedule wasn't up to any instructor and she could rise or rest as the inclination suited her. Best of all, no one on Nar Shaddaa bothered with sanctimonious judgments or regulations.

There were rules of the city, such as don't mess with the Hutts' money, but breaking those rules usually meant a painful economic consequence or a quick scuffle in an alleyway, maybe killing in the name of self-defense. Compared to a jolt of Force lightning dancing up her spine or hours in Temple chambers listening to ancient masters droning on about the various and ridiculous ways they could interpret a single error of her inattention, she'd endure the corpulent Hutts' wrath gladly. She loved Nar Shaddaa for what it wasn't, more than for what it was.

When she wasn't pretending to gamble in cantinas, or attending to her rituals, Risk was usually drinking in cantinas or looking for marks in cantinas. When she let the hangovers get too bad, she kept to her apartment, left the lights out and perched in her narrow window to watch the drips and the traffic. The rhythmic roar of airspeeder repulsors and ships served as a somewhat soothing background for recovery.

Using the Force to dismiss the effects of overindulgence was a step too far, even for the “fallen” Jedi that she had probably become. She preferred to endure the consequences of her decisions, even when it resulted in a nine-alarm headache.

Core Worlds. Byss. Relco Training Facility. Headmasters’ Office.

A slender grey finger worked a datapad with quick, precise strokes. Sly Moore found it very interesting that a man seven months’ dead would bother using the weight of his security clearance to override a routine inspection of a cargo ship. Her hand fell to the terminal embedded in her desk, where she called up the flight path of the haunted vessel.

The chart told a simple story. The *Unari Diver* was carrying cargo—and the ghost of one Imperial agent—from the core worlds to Nal Hutta by way of Imperial hyperlanes. Of course the shipment had to be contraband, and that made the cargo someone else’s problem. The pilot, now, she probably had a far more interesting story to tell.

Moore looked over a brief dossier for one Giva Soon. According to the document, she was a classically attractive Nautilan woman with immense black eyes and a full mane of head tails that would have made any Twi’lek jealous. Young pilot, record full of minor infractions usually tied to speeding, other minor offences that came awfully close to smuggling. No one had detained her, and her ship was let through the checkpoint unsearched on Bythar Kull’s good word. Fortunately for Moore, her own good word had placed a tracking device on any ships making use of her comrade’s stolen codes.

Moore's comm panel lit up with an open channel. She relayed an order in her dry monotone: "Arrange for transport to the Y'toub system. Immediately."

Hutt Space. Y'toub System. Nar Shaddaa. Corellian Sector.

Risk was sulking. She was definitely sulking. One could tell by the way she tipped up her empty glass of Corellian brandy and stared at the bottom—as if it were a lover that packed all their bags and left without so much as a note. After six lucrative months, her grift had seen her thrown out of most of the cantinas in her own sector. And all the adjacent ones.

Now the commute was getting unbearable and there was the matter of getting a really lousy reputation as a rounder and successful gambler. No matter how often she threw a game, she won too much.

The cheaters had started to compare notes. Rumor had it that the white-haired Mirialan could smell a transmitter, card counter, card up a sleeve, anything. That hadn't stopped them from running their dirty games of sabacc, but it had stopped them from playing against her. Risk was a plague upon any bar she entered.

She would have called it a plague of justice. *Really profitable justice. Moderately profitable justice. It was a living, in justice.* She also would have been very drunk while saying it and slurring her words badly. But she didn't say anything, because Risk was, as usual, alone.

Empty sabacc tables ruined her business, too. Her funds were

running dry and she'd be out of yet another apartment before too long. She was back to pawning un-necessaries and down to drinking her last credits.

The Chadra-fan bartender brought her another brandy, and she immediately took it to her lips.

Risk was scanning this latest bar with a desultory eye. Sure, there were sabacc tables, but what was the point? Another week of cash, at most, then she'd just get thrown out again for being anti-social. At this rate, the entire moon would know about her and then she'd have to get a real job. Probably end up working for the Hutts.

That thought drained her glass and raised her hand to order another. *Where was she now? Corellian sector? No wonder the drinks were so damn strong. Slag Bistro? No, that wasn't it.*

Risk pawed for a flimsy menu. The top of the page was titled with "The Meltdown Café." She spilled out a drunken chuckle and sloppily pinned the page down under her index finger. The name was funny, because it was *true*.

When her giggle-fit abated, Risk spun round on her barstool. Her vision spun, too. The sensation annoyed her enough to make her reconsider the virtues of her current state of inebriation. Perhaps she would do well to back it down a peg, before she became a crime statistic.

With a concentrated effort, she pulled herself upright and centered her swirling mind. Then, she made a particularly selfish use of the Force and dismissed the more frustrating aspects of her intoxicated state. She must have been teetering on the edge of a very bad night if clearing the drink from her

system also cleared her ears. She'd been missing out on a really good song, too.

A wild movement in the corner of her eye caught her attention. She turned to find a slender, probably Corellian, human male standing on top of a table, waving his drink in the air. He went to great effort to quiet down his group while trying to keep his ale in his mug. He only lost about half over the rim. Eventually, he had their ears and began his drunken proclamation with a deep breath.

“To bounty hunting! Folks everywhere can put a price on justice. No need to depend on shabby law officers! No living in fear of the smallest muscle! Got a job, got some creds, and the right hunter will come along! So drink up, mates—that’s the taste of profit!”

The assembled party cheered his rousing toast and drank eagerly. The orator threw himself back into his seat, arms spread in a gesture of victory, and almost tipped the chair over.

Risk spun around to face the bar, hiding her grin from the cadre of hunters. She beamed with inspiration.

Before the roar of revelry could die down, she pushed her way through the crowd to the Corellian’s table. It was full, every single seat occupied by an armored mobile weapons platform commonly known as a bounty hunter. In a previous life, she would have found them distasteful. Now she saw pure potential.

Closer now, she finally understood why the blond seemed so thin next to his compatriots: he was dressed in unassuming civilian clothing. His jacket, vest, shirt, boots—nothing he wore spoke of a life of fringe law enforcement. If he even had a

blaster, he was concealing it.

Risk couldn't find a spare seat at their overcrowded table, nor any adjacent one. Annoyed, she stepped behind the Whiphid seated beside her target and whispered something in his ear.

The blond and the Whiphid had been in the throes of an engrossing—and slurred—discussion. Without so much as a grunted farewell, the furry mountain rumbled to his feet, abandoning his conversation-partner.

Risk poured herself into his still-warm seat and tried to greet the Corellian with a cheerful hello. He was staring after the vanished Whiphid with furrowed brows and an incredulous gape. She resorted to drawing his eye with a well-placed wave of her hand.

“I've never heard a toast like that before.” She had to imbue her words with a measure of the Force just to be heard over the din of the bar.

“Huh? Oh. And I would love to stay and chat about that but—” He was nearly halfway out his chair when Risk set her hand on his thigh. He sat back down.

“That's too bad. It was a *really good* toast.” She let her hand fall away, and turned her attention to the bounty hunter to her left.

The human suddenly was more than keen to talk. “He's probably off to go shoot somebody. I'm sick of shooting people today. I'd much rather talk about toasts. In fact, I've got another one you might like....”

“Honestly, it's not toasts I like, but what you were talking about, I liked that. Bounty hunters are just so *interesting*.”

He leaned in close and spoke in a secretive whisper: "I'm actually a bounty hunter, myself."

A bark of laughter heralded her disbelief. "Sure you are! That's why you're not wearing a scrap of armor. You don't even have a gun." She jabbed him in the chest with a green finger.

He set his blaster on the table with a deep, metallic clatter. "You're already wrong on one count."

"So you've got a gun. I have a gun, too. That doesn't make you a bounty hunter. For all I know, you go around toasting people and robbing them." She tempered her harsh words with a flirtatious smile.

"All right. You really want proof? Maybe I'll get someone to put a bounty on you, just so I can collect it."

"Yeah, I'm sure you'd like to try. I'd bet you wouldn't know where to pick up a bounty to start hunting one."

"Office is five levels straight down, right next to Imox Gun Emporium."

"And if I went down there and asked about you?"

"Then they'd say that Jormund Kye is one of the finest hunters on this damn moon!" He slapped the table, startling a few of the most inebriated hunters and eliciting a delayed cheer from one.

"Well, Jormund Kye, either you bluff extremely well or you're telling the truth. Maybe we should play a game of sabacc sometime and find out." She moved to leave, quite surprised with just how well she'd done in getting information out of a tipsy mercenary. He really should have known better.

“Wait! You didn’t even tell me your name!”

“If you want to know that, you’ll have to beat me at sabacc first!”
Risk melted into the wall of bar patrons, leaving Jormund to his unfinished ale.

Part 8: Fortune Days

The Corellian Sector Bounty Hunters' Guild Office sat between a weapons shop and a heavy weapons shop. The location was buried in an area with poor foot traffic, near the unfortunate warehouse district. Despite the out of the way locale, the building was rather busy.

At least two dozen different makes of armor had crossed through the doorway within an hour.

Risk watched the office from a greasy alleyway, her presence buried within the black shadows of her new dark grey robe. She found that true black stood out too well in the dingy shadows of Nar Shaddaa, and the old cloak carried the kinds of psychic stains that only a garbage scow could exorcise.

She waited for two hours for the office to clear out. Then another hour passed as the clerk, a red-faced Togruta woman, went about her duties behind the office's barred windows. She left the office, first posting a note on the door, "Back in half an hour" and sauntered off.

Risk stole out from the shadows, glanced to either side to make sure nobody was within sight, and leapt. The Force bore her upwards, onto a ledge six meters above the street below. She sidestepped over to a vent and prised open the register. The metal was rough and rusted, giving her a better grip and nearly cutting into her green fingertips. She had to take care to prevent the register from falling onto the street, where it would have attracted far too much attention.

She skillfully stepped through the new opening into the black of

the vent itself. The register was awkward but, after a few minutes' effort, she had covered her tracks. Risk peeled off her cloak and left it in a ball at the entrance to her fresh route into the Corellian Sector Bounty Office.

Every movement echoed in the metallic world of the air duct, and she was careful to soften her footsteps. This duct was tall enough to allow her a hobbled sort of movement, without resorting to crawling through the decades' of dust and grease common to the atmosphere of this sector of Nar Shaddaa. She found no reprieve from the cobwebs, though.

Fortunately, the office was small. She had only to turn a few corners before she was looking through another grate at the Togruta's terminal. Risk kicked the grate down into the space, and thrust her hand after it. Rather than attempt to catch it with her fingers, she used the Force to ease it to the floor. Risk herself soon followed after.

She landed silently and bent over the terminal. A pile of sauce packets slid off the keyboard to the floor as she tried a few keystrokes. Of course, the computer was locked. She checked the time, relieved to see that she had twenty minutes left before the clerk was due to return.

Slicing had never been Risk's, nor Renuka's, strong suit. She hardly saw the point of slicing when these systems were designed and run by Force-filled beings. Risk threw out her hands and cracked her knuckles. She twisted her neck until another satisfying series of pops signaled that she was ready to concentrate.

Her thoughts turned to the Togruta, and Risk reached out to her echoes in the Force. They were still so fresh that she had to

resist the sudden rush of emotions that arose. The clerk was having a bad day. No wonder there was a constant stream of bounty hunters at her door. There had been a conspicuous bounty advertised on the local news. Everyone wanted the details and they were all bothering the clerk. So many attempts at threats, cajoling, bribes, anything to get an edge on this target.

Risk pushed past those recent memories and reached further, to the clerk's morning. She had a cup of caff, two annoying hunters banging on her still-locked door and... there it was! Red fingers flew over the keys and entered a handy string of numbers and letters in Basic. Risk had to take a physical step backwards to draw herself out of the clerk's past and into her own present.

The password revealed a hearty database of bounties. Some were assigned to specific hunters as a special request by the client. Others had been reserved for upper level guild members. Risk pulled out a personal datachit, one she hadn't bothered inscribing her name upon, and ordered the terminal to download the entire database for later perusal.

Download Time: 20 Minutes

Risk shrugged a single shoulder. Longer than she'd expected but it—*stang!* Her eye caught the clock and her heart skipped a beat. The clerk was due back in fifteen minutes. If Risk pulled the datachit before the download was done, the entire file would corrupt and she'd be left with nothing but a wasted afternoon. And possibly a set of angry, well-armed bounty hunters if they caught her loitering in their locked office.

She tried a few tricks to speed up the system; most all she

could do was close excess background programs and hope. The download time shifted, recalculated, and landed on eighteen minutes.

Risk spat a nasty variety of phrases she'd picked up in the dirtier cantinas in the Duros Sector. Her hand tapped against the desk, trying to rattle ideas from her brain. *Come on, Risk, you're better than this. You can't let a computer get the better of you.*

Then she realized the computer wasn't her problem: the clerk was.

Risk took a deep breath and let herself fall into a half-meditative state. There had to be some sort of evidence of the clerk's habits around here, somewhere. As moved to examine the room, a sauce packet slid off her boot. Risk chuckled. She could almost taste the excessively salty food from the rundown restaurant. The weight of a takeout bag full of Corellian noodles hung heavy on her fingers.

Risk hopped over the counter, unlocked the door and set it to lock behind her. She raced down the street, and slowed her run to a slow jog when she caught sight of a particularly dingy, poorly-lit sign that illustrated rather than described a noodle shop.

She worked her fingers into her mane of white hair and shook the duct's dust loose. A sudden, grey blizzard fell from her hair onto her shoulders, and Risk cringed at the mess. She dragged a sleeve across each cheek and found another layer of dust there. She patted her clothes clean enough and strode through the restaurant's door.

The place was nearly empty. In contrast to the obviously Corellian cuisine, the sole proprietor was a Rodian male who called out a greeting to her in broken Basic. She nodded cluelessly, ordered a bowl of noodles, and threw herself into the seat opposite the only other patron.

"I have just had the *worst* day at work." Risk leaned heavily on her elbow and rolled her eyes at the baffled Togruta.

"Er...."

"Oh. Sorry. I just started at the Emporium. They've got me doing inventory and some knuckleheaded customer comes in every few minutes and starts bothering me just as I've counted about three hundred grenade boxes. Name's Risk." She extended a green hand and looked at her red companion expectantly.

The Togruta reluctantly set down her spoon and slowly took the offered hand. Her baffled expression suggested that she didn't quite know what to make of her new companion, but she seemed resigned to the fact that Risk was here now. "Dafna. I work next door to the Emporium, actually."

"No! Really? That's great. No wonder we both have great taste in lunch places. At least I hope I do. Is this guy any good at making Corellian food?" She leaned in to whisper, "Since, you know...."

"He's a Rodian?"

"Well, I don't mean to be speciesist but, yes."

"Honestly, they're not great but they aren't the worst I've had. Some Corellians butcher their cuisine."

Risk laughed amiably and perched her chin on her fist. “When you say you work next door, do you mean that weird little insurance shop?”

Dafna blinked for a moment before bursting into laughter. “You mean the Bounty Hunter Guild’s Office!”

“OH! That explains it. Wow, I’m really not very observant, am I?”

“Explains what?”

“Why I keep getting the angry, grizzled-veteran types interrupting my inventory.”

“Interruptions are *nothing*. At least you aren’t the one who has to turn them away when they don’t bring in their papers. The Empire and the Hutts are so damn buddy-buddy now, my job has become a pain in the ass.” Dafna punctuated her complaints with her dripping spoon. Risk had to make a concerted effort not to flinch as thin broth splattered all over her.

She was able to keep the conversation going through her own bowl of noodles. Dafna even hung around in spite of her paid check and the Rodian’s pleading looks to clear the table—even though he wasn’t plagued with an overabundance of customers.

The two left the shop as new-found friends, and made their way back to their respective workplaces. Risk gave “her door” a shifty look and hustled over to the Bounty Office’s stoop. “Listen, I know the old man’s going to be cranky but I can’t take another six hours of inventory. Do you think I could hang out over here?”

Dafna frowned as she worked the lock on the door. It opened

correctly, to Risk's relief, and Dafna's concern was simply a product of her consternation over Risk's request. "Well, you can hang around out front, sure. But I'm not supposed to—are you all right?!"

Risk was clawing at her eye, then holding up a dismissive hand. "It's fine, I just got... ow. Okay. Ow. Ow... do you have a refresher in there? I definitely—ow." She bumbled through the doorway and bounced against the counter.

Dafna scrambled to open the counter's door, and hurried through the open space. She tried to keep Risk from advancing but the Mirialan retaliated by doubling over. "Blazes! It feels like a metal filing got in there!"

Risk was behind the counter and wandering toward the back of the bounty office's inner sanctum. Her Togruta was more clerk than nurse and utterly lost as to how to help. Risk paused her performance just long enough to ask Dafna for a glass of water to try rinsing out the offending object.

The very instant that the Togruta turned her back to retrieve Risk's water, the former Jedi popped her now full datachit from the nearby terminal. It sat in her pocket with a satisfying weight, and wonderously, the foreign object in her eye no longer bothered her.

"Hey, Dafna, I think I got it out! Finally! Crisis averted."

A pair of striped horns peeked out of the refresher door. "You're sure? Let me look." Risk offered up her eyelid for a quick inspection. "Wow, it's really red—but I don't see anything in there."

The now-cured Mirialan sat on one of the spare stools and breathed a genuine sigh of relief. “That could have gone much worse.”

She resolved to endure a half-hour’s small talk, purely for the sake of cultivating a convenient friendship. Initially eager to leave, Risk found herself sincerely enjoying Dafna’s company before very long. The long-suffering Togruta was more than happy to give her a variety of details about working for the Bounty Hunter’s Guild, mostly through a myriad of complaints and rapid-fire anecdotes.

By the time Risk left, she had a decent grasp of the Bounty Hunter’s Creed and a brochure just in case she decided she couldn’t stand working at the Emporium any longer.

More than that, she had their entire database in her pocket.

Risk made the long trek through the hidden passage to the Duros Sector and returned to her apartment. It should have been her apartment. However, the lock was already changed and her two perfectly healthy houseplants were spilled in the hallway outside. She scraped soil back into their cracked pots and silently mourned the loss of her most recent abode. Her favorite jacket was in there. Well, her only jacket.

The nearby cafe allowed the use of their terminals for the price of a cup of caff. Risk never cared for the bitter drink but she didn’t have to actually consume it, only purchase it. She was sitting at the far end of the row of terminals, covering the display with her artificially broad shoulders. She’d bought the armor during better times, and enjoyed how it improved her marginally

intimidating demeanor. Anything to look more imposing without the strain of altering minds. Her plants, homeless along with her, were propped up on the counter to screen her work from prying eyes.

She pored over the readout; there had to be nearly two thousand entries here. They ranged from multi-million credit bounties to a mere hundred credits. Some were two weeks old, some were months old. She saw that the bounties fresher than two weeks were reserved for Guild Eyes Only and set aside under special authentication.

The most expensive bounties were to be delivered and their rewards collected in Hutt palaces. Some were meant for local, mid-ranked crime lords. Some were personal grievances brought into the commercial realm.

Risk scrolled through the list, arranged by date, for nearly half an hour before she noticed the option to view bounty photos. That feature made her review far more interesting. She flicked her way through screens and screens of the usual suspects. A galaxy full of races, both (and sometimes neither) genders, young, old, almost all wanted for offenses like theft and murder. Often the bounties were posted with mugshots borrowed from the wanted's previous encounters with law enforcement.

Her hand stopped cold when her eyes lit on a singular picture: a wolf-like Bothan missing the tip of one ear.

Galk Loga'siri

Bothan Male

Distinguishing features: damaged left ear

She tapped his picture and leaned over the terminal, grinning.

Not only could she get a little revenge, but she could get paid for it.

According to the contract, he had made the wrong people angry with his dirty sabacc games and they wanted him to pay damages. Instead, he ignored the demand and disappeared. The contract was only a few days old.

Risk decided that she was going to enjoy being a bounty hunter.

A lone light fixture held out against the heavy velvet shadows of the corridor. It flickered desperately, in rapid static bursts between random bouts of stability. Risk had carefully disabled the others; she couldn't afford to cast a shadow of her own.

The neighborhood was decent, though only by Nar Shaddaa standards. On Coruscant, it would have been considered a rank slum. Risk kneeled in front of the door belonging to the manic light. When she stood, she carefully arranged a broken mouse droid to appear as if it had haplessly crashed into Loga'siri's door. One of its wheels spun wildly while another was set a few centimeters away, lost and toppled at a jaunty angle.

She took a couple of steps backward, out of the rippling pool of fluorescent light, her long legs far more noticeable without her trademark cloak. Satisfied with her distance, she used the Force to press the door chime.

A scrabbling sound came from the other side of the door. Her fingers gripped the hilt of her pawn-shop blaster just a bit more tightly. Her breath caught in her throat as she heard the door

slide open. An eon stretched out in the corridor as she waited for her prey to take the bait.

She heard the hiss of the door closing without any sign of the Bothan from within. Nothing had prepared her for an abject failure, and she pursed her lips tightly to keep from cursing and ruining her cover.

Just as she uncoiled from her hiding space, Risk heard the door open again. She looked to find the Bothan kneeling over the derelict droid. Risk darted forward and brought the barrel of her blaster to his neck. "Don't worry about the mouse. I found it in the trash outside. Up. Slowly."

A ripple of fur spread from the point where her gun kissed his neck. Risk didn't bother to suppress her triumphant grin; he couldn't see it anyway from this angle. He growled low and tried to drop a hand to his waist as he stood.

She pressed harder. "Watch it, Galk."

He stopped. She lifted an ion blaster from his belt and tucked it into her own.

"How did you find me?" he growled.

"I followed the smell from the last time you were *trying to kill me*. Glad to see you're not much better off. Nice decorating though." Inside lay a few eclectic pieces of furniture, covered in gaudy trinkets and misguided attempts at conspicuous consumption. She directed him inside, just in case a card sharp could even claim to have any friends.

"You're here for revenge. How pathetic."

He's judging me for wanting revenge. Damn hypocrite. “No, actually, I’m here to take you on a date. I just like to prove my dominance first. Hands behind your back, Loga’siri.” Risk already had the cuffs unlocked and ready in her free hand. She couldn’t believe how well this was going.

The Bothan bared his teeth and turned a canine snarl on Risk. His arm snapped upward, elbow aimed for her nose. She wheeled backward, taking a few wild shots. The only victims were his cheap reproduction paintings.

Risk kicked out at his knees and managed to strike a solid hit. He roared in pain and his anger redoubled his attack. His shoulder met her gut and threw her into the wall before Risk could level her gun again. She coughed, hard, and gasped to replace the air stolen from her lungs. Now that she was pinned, her combat instincts took over and Risk threw him into the opposite wall with a desperate blast of Force power.

He landed on his spine, the back of his head striking the durasteel wall, producing a sickening crunch. The Bothan was stunned. He fell to the floor in a furry pile.

Risk bent over, taking the moment to catch her breath before making certain that she hadn’t killed her bounty. He was hurt, and his head would probably throb horribly, but he would wake up soon enough; possibly short a few schemes and childhood memories, but she didn’t mind his loss.

The thick cuffs barely fit his large, furred wrists, which was precisely as designed. She pulled out a portable comm and called for a speeder taxi. He would be heavy and she bemoaned the thought of hauling him to the curb of the skyway.

Her best take after a night of gambling had been nearly three-hundred credits. The Loga'siri bounty was double that and, apart from the bruises, far less work. The ion blaster she'd confiscated wasn't a bad reward either. A nonlethal weapon, handy against droids, it would do nicely as a public substitute for her preferred weapon. The pawn-shop blaster looked as if it would fall apart soon, anyway.

Happy with her trade, Risk considered the credits she'd rake in with this bounty and resolved to find herself a better apartment. Probably one in the Corellian Sector. Now that she wasn't going to be dodging bitter marks, but hunting acquisitions instead, she could afford something with a full set of windows.

Maybe she owed Jormund a drink. Maybe.

Part 9: Carry the Sun

Hutt Space. Y'toub System. Nal Koska. Arb'Mata Desert.

The last lances of Nal Koska's setting sun pierced through cottony, bluing clouds and caught the scuffed, silvered chassis of a battered landspeeder. It sailed over the scrubby desert terrain, kicking up a veil of dust in its wake. Risk's white hair danced in the wind. Her acquisition was cuffed, lying in the back seat, squealing in Gamorrean. Occasionally he was loud enough to send a drop of spittle into the airstream where it was caught and vaporized by the speeder's ancient engines.

Risk preferred to focus on the sound of the wind, the almost-clean scent of the air, and making a game out of dodging the larger scrubby bushes. Nal Koska's atmosphere was plagued by pollution, just like its cousin Nal Hutta one orbit away, but it still had a handful of plants valiantly trying to scrape out an

existence. The scent had a greenness to it, hidden beneath a pervasive chemical odor, that brought a metallic tang to the back of her throat. Compared to Nar Shaddaa, Risk was driving through a garden.

The Gamorrean was really getting agitated now. He beat the back of her chair with his bound hands. The sensation would have been rather nice, almost massaging, except for the fact that he hit like, well, an angry Gamorrean.

Risk called over her shoulder, “Knock it off! You lost! And I don’t speak Hog, so stop wasting your breath!” She twisted the wheel and banked hard enough to send him into the footwell between backseat and front. He didn’t stop yelling. The litany of porcine squeals and snorts was even a little clearer now that he was a few inches closer to her tormented ear.

She rolled her eyes and hit the air brakes. The speeder came to a slow stop. He was **still** yelling. Squealing, really. She hopped out of the driver’s seat and grabbed her acquisition by the collar. Once he was upright again, he took a swing at her and missed utterly. Risk put a finger to her lips and fixed him with a Jedi stare. She eased the tumult of Force energy whirling around him, and managed to soothe him.

“There, now we can get to the spaceport without losing my security deposit....” Risk let her words fall away, unable to maintain her cynicism. Once he’d stopped struggling, she saw the glistening trails of tears on either side of his snout.

He was a thickly built Gamorrean, just like every other one she’d seen. Hardly spoke a word of Basic, which had suited her fine, until the tantrum. Now he was all slumped shoulders and defeat.

She couldn't believe what she was about to do. "Hey, it's not like you're wanted dead. They want you alive, so I'm sure you'll have a chance to make things... right?"

Her grieved acquisition tilted his chin up to meet her gaze. He was weeping freely, though he had appeared otherwise calm. His snout opened and after a few clicks and grunts he shaped a word she could recognize: "Worse."

Her stomach churned, but she was already back in the driver's seat, so she turned her attention to getting back on the road. "Hey, hope's hope, right? And I'm hoping to get to the spaceport before it really gets dark so...."

He interrupted her with another round of snorts and grunts. "Please," he snuffled, "family."

She didn't start the engine.

"What?"

"Family," he was choking on the words, "goodbye family?"

She reached for the ignition. He *had* to be playing her. Sure, mess with the lady because *she'll* have a soft spot for piglets. "You're wanted for stealing property, and I don't grant requests for thieves."

"Slave."

Blazes.

Risk twisted around to study him, and found nothing but sincerity in his dim-witted eyes. He didn't have an ounce of guile and his Force Aura confirmed that. She pinched the bridge

of her nose and slammed her fist into the control console. “You’re wanted because you stole your family back from slavers. Damn it. How come I found you all alone out here then, big hero?”

“Bounty hunter. Family go, be safe.”

She couldn’t do it. Risk was not, and couldn’t be, mercenary enough to take him back to the Nar Shaddaa for the crime of rescuing his family.

“They’re at the spaceport, aren’t they?”

He grunted a soggy affirmative.

She hit the ignition this time and yelled over the engines, “If you’re playing me, I will make you wish that you’d been wanted dead. Got it?”

He didn’t respond.

The rest of the trip should have been quiet, filled with her wondering if he’d actually taken such a chance on her good-hearted charity or if he was just too dumb not to sell out his own half-baked, tragic plan. A more ruthless bounty hunter would have taken this slave’s family in, too. They’d be worth a few credits, if she were cruel enough to capture them.

Instead, a blaster bolt sailed over the speeder. Risk swerved and spotted a mob of swoop bikes in her rear view mirror. “Of *course* this is what I get for doing a good deed.” Her cynicism had begun to extend to the will of the Universe, as a whole.

The bikes kicked into high speed and moved to swarm the land speeder. She spun the wheel, rammed into one and sent it

spinning. She counted three, no, four more left, and she knew that trick wouldn't work again. The surviving bikers were pulling out all manner of weapons, including a heavy grenade launcher. Not the ideal weapon for a bike gang, but she assumed these were bounty hunters after *her* acquisition.

A Wookiee pulled up next to the speeder and leapt. His fur whipped in the wind, beads and feathers flying off at high speed. He raised a giant paw and took a swing at Risk. She ducked only to find the Gamorrean using his manacles to hold the Wookiee back. She did what any good pilot would do and tried to throw him off the vehicle with a set of reckless maneuvers. The Wookiee was frustratingly sure-footed, and now locked in a struggle with her bound Gamorrean. He swatted the piggy man back down into the footwell, and Risk saw a pair of sharp-clawed paws reaching for her, only to be kicked away moments later by the Gamorrean's dirty boot.

She pulled her ion pistol and fired two shots directly into the Wookiee's chest. He roared and continued his assault. The Wookiee was all teeth and spittle as he grabbed Risk by the shoulders. The speeder swung wildly, just out of the way of a massive column of dust and fire from the grenade launcher. Apparently his buddies weren't too concerned with workplace safety.

Risk was nearly hauled bodily from her seat, but she managed to get in a Force-empowered strike to his midsection. He was now clinging to the side of the speeder, hanging by one leg to keep himself from dragging against the ground. The vehicle was tipped by the severe weight imbalance, and Risk had to focus to keep from flipping the speeder over entirely.

Her Gamorrean yelled in his porcine language, to which Risk

could only respond, “Basic, unless you’ve got Mirialan in your skull somewhere, speak Basic!”

“Chain!” He barked.

Risk shook her head. “Look, we’re on the same side, I think, but I’m not sure that—” she swerved to dodge another grenade. Blaster fire pelted the air around them and more than a few shots were landing dangerously close to the important bits of the engine. “All right!”

She fired off another ion bolt at the still-clinging Wookiee and reached into a belt compartment. Inside, she kept a handy quick release just in case she was one day restrained by her own cuffs. Banthashit happens.

The transmitter whined and the Gamorrean’s hands came free. He immediately went for her blaster on the console. Risk’s eyes went wide. She couldn’t believe it. He *had* been playing—

He sent the butt of the gun into the Wookiee’s hand and the furry behemoth went rolling into the scrubland. He’d probably survive.

Her gun wasn’t returned; it wasn’t turned on her, either. Risk focused her attention on driving while her newfound comrade-in-arms went to work on the three remaining bikes.

“Take out the grenade launcher first!”

He turned back to her with a questioning grunt.

“Gren-ade launch-er!”

He nodded and started looking through Risk’s equipment in the

passenger seat. She had serious doubts about their partnership. Communication issues could doom any enterprise. Maybe they'd need counseling...

A small metal sphere came out of his hand and landed on the ground three hundred meters ahead of their speeder. Risk recognized it as one of her own ion grenades. "What in Blazes are you thinking?!" she screamed and barely missed the lightning-filled explosion. The swoop bike on her tail wasn't so lucky and shut down instantly. Its nose bit into the desert sand and sent the rider flying at breakneck speed.

The Gamorrean rolled a grunty chuckle from his chest and held his hand up to Risk. She found the interaction a touch absurd, but she met his hand a resounding high-five.

Two bikes left, including the one with the grenade launcher.

They were nearing a rocky outcropping of mesas in the scrubland and Risk gunned the engine far past its redline. In less than a minute, she was weaving between hoodoos and boulders. The smaller bikes maintained their pursuit without any difficulty.

As they drove onward, Risk saw the terrain getting tighter. The sides of their speeder threw up sparks as she scraped between formations just a little too tightly-packed to pass cleanly.

The pair of bikes was forced to follow directly behind her through a thin canyon. She was completely out of maneuvering options, soon to be out of tactical options as well. The canyon was coming to a dead-end four-hundred meters ahead.

"Can I trust you?" she yelled over the roar of the engine, which

was now much louder in the pinched space.

The Gamorrean grunted.

“I’m going to take that as a vow on your family’s honor, Buddy!” She cut the engine and the speeder’s airbrakes flew open. They hovered to a stop just before the vehicle would have met unforgiving red stone.

The swoop bikes pulled back hard on their brakes and managed to come to an unsteady stop, which, conveniently for them, blocked Risk’s exit.

Risk stood on the back of the still-hovering speeder, every angle in her stance a statuesque threat. “I’m giving you a chance to leave. Call it a holdover of a more honorable past.”

The pair of bounty hunters laughed and the Duro female took a shot at Risk with her blaster.

“You saw that, right? She shot at me!”

The Gamorrean grunted affirmatively and reached for Risk’s abandoned ion pistol. She waved him off. Her other hand was reaching for the wide belt compartment at her back.

In a blur of motion, a red lightsaber blade came down on the rocket-launcher wielding bounty hunter and cleaved him cleanly into two smoking sides of Gran.

His companion hardly had time to scream before Risk was bearing down on her. The plasma core of her lightsaber shot off sparks as it sunk into the swoop bike, after a shortcut through her opponent’s chest.

Risk extinguished the saber as she jumped backward. She had the hilt hidden away before her boots met the ground. She tossed the ruined swoop bikes out of the way with a flick of her hand and a sweep of the Force.

The Gamorrean looked as if he were seriously considering a tuck and roll maneuver; anything to get out of the speeder and away from the witch at the wheel. He kept himself as far from his dangerous savior as he could while seated in the passenger seat of the speeder.

She doubled back, bringing them out of the dead-end canyon. They covered the rest of the distance to the starport in exhausted—and on the Gamorrean's part, terrified—silence. The Gamorrean seemed grateful, even if he still flinched every time Risk moved her hands over the console too quickly.

There was nothing for it; she had to address the issue directly. Since Byss, she'd grown a distaste for the electric tremors of fear in the Force. She preferred the sensation of impersonal intimidation. It offered a sense of withdrawal, the retreat of Force aura, not unlike the way a receding wave pulls around bare feet on a beach. Fear was Kull's tool, one he so desperately wanted her to use. One that she didn't need.

“Look. I'm not sure if you know what you saw back there, so I'm going to tell you. You saw me take down some bounty hunters who would have been more than happy to kill me if that meant they got a payout from your hide. Hunters who would have kept you from ever seeing your family again. Nothing more. And now, I'm going to get you to your family before they leave the planet. Got it?”

His jowls wobbled as he nodded his assent, though he kept his

silence.

One hour later, the blue cast of twilight was fading to indigo night, and they could see a squat, shadowy mirage solidify into a city clinging to the base of a mesa. Ships were spared the final five hundred meters' descent to the planet's surface by the well-placed landing strip atop that same mesa. Occasional cargo ships could be seen starting their journey to shuttle raw materials and workers up to Nar Shaddaa for the great factories that operated without any oversight.

The pair pulled up to the great freight elevator that clung to the side of the mesa. They abandoned their speeder and took a wordless ride to the top. Risk felt a great wave of relief come off her ward when he spotted a small, olive-skinned, snout-faced child walking up the ramp into a modest freighter. He turned to Risk, regarded her with great, watery eyes, and hugged her against his heavy frame. She patted his back and sent him on his way.

The child must have heard the unmistakable commotion of a Gamorrean at a full run, because it spun on a tiny heel faster than Risk thought any piglet could. It called for its mother, who came careening down the ramp into the arms of a boar she'd probably never expected to see again. He scooped his child up and planted him on a wide shoulder, gave Risk a parting wave and stomped up the ramp with his family.

"Sight like that's almost enough to make you believe there's some kind of plan behind life in this galaxy. Maybe we all have a destiny."

Risk turned to find a geriatric human standing behind her, wrapped in layers of tattered clothing. The old woman shared

her few good teeth with Risk in a crinkled smile. Her words struck the Mirialan in a part of her chest that she didn't like. The sensation crept to her throat and gave her voice a thin, reedy sound when she spoke. "Yeah. Doesn't take much for some people."

Risk pushed past the still-smiling woman, whose dark eyes followed her all the way to the elevator. After Risk was out of earshot, the old woman shrugged and muttered something about the deficient manners of the current generation.

The freighter's captain began to loosen up after the first strained hour Risk spent in his copilot's unused seat. He occasionally took on passengers, but they were usually the type who were too poor to be picky about the steerage-quality accommodations. None of them had ever cared about watching the flight.

"Uh, you know, that, ah...." He still wasn't completely comfortable. If his stammering kept on much longer, Risk would head back to her cot in the cargo bay, view be damned. "How'd you get that scar, anyway?"

Wrong icebreaker.

Risk had her feet up on the console, her arms tucked behind her head. "Same way you got this ship: a complicated story we don't have time for. How long until we get back to Nar Shaddaa?" Her heavy boots met the deckplates with a pair of simultaneous thuds. Risk made a point of standing up abruptly, stretching, and heading for the exit.

“About an hour—oh, you’re leaving?”

“Seen one view of the Hutts’ city, you’ve seen them all. Seeya at landing, Swale.” Risk stepped through the cockpit door and made the short trip to the cargo hold.

Memories nagged at the edges of her consciousness. Her cheek itched. A small cascade of fine sand fell when she ran her fingers over the old scar. She could only dodge so many unwanted recollections before a bitter nostalgia took hold. Risk gave in, turning her thoughts to nearly a decade ago.

"Renuka, where are you?"

"Senate tower lobby." Renuka was still mad, and it was audible in her voice. She was leaning against a marble wall, watching political professionals go about their daily business.

She didn't want to speak to anyone. But Master Kardu's call couldn't be ignored, if only because he would keep calling. And calling. And that impatient chime would attract attention she didn't want.

"Did you finish the background research already?" He sounded skeptical, as usual.

"I finished everything on the... subject herself, but now I am looking for something a bit more recent. Like current associates." Renuka tried to avoid moving the muscles on the left side of her face as she spoke, a tall order that gave her speech a certain stroke-victim quality. She didn't care. The wound on her cheek was taut and pulled uncomfortably every chance it got.

In a month or so, she would have an impressive scar that

wouldn't bother her so much. **That** would be a badge of honor. Now, it was a constant reminder of her dissatisfaction with life in the Order.

"You know that we cannot afford to allow our quarry—"

"To discover that we're on her trail, yes, Master Kardu, I know it. I also know that I will go into fits if I have to sit in the Temple Archives flipping through ancient data that the investigation leads could have looked up whenever they needed it."

"Renuka. This isn't busy work. If the Council's suspicions are correct, the Republic could be in grave danger. Not only that, it's an opportunity to show the Council that you have the patience and wisdom required to earn your knighthood."

Renuka rolled her eyes and marched out of the lobby. If she kept growling into her comm while glaring at passers-by, someone was bound to take notice. She stomped past the security checkpoint at the main entrance, leaving them to recognize her robes and the lightsaber at her waist on their own time, not hers. They didn't need to see her identification.

She gripped the comm tightly, shielding it from the wind outside the tower. "You know full well that I earned my knighthood during that last battle. Three days, Mu-Daru, three days without backup and my left eye still can't see in low light!"

The Cerean took time to measure his response. She knew he was going to try to soothe her again, encourage her to be patient, to understand the Council's process. She didn't want to hear it.

"You have to understand that they are well aware of your skill

and courage. What they are concerned about..." He paused, and she knew he was looking for just the right way to phrase it, *again*. "...is your emotional nature."

"This isn't about my attitude. It's never been about my attitude. For years I've heard that I have control over my attitude, but that my *ingrained emotional nature* would be my undoing. Ever since I started at the Temple, they've always kept an eye on me. All the other students knew I was the illicit child of a Jedi. Mirialans don't get the dispensation for families that you Cereans do."

"Your father's actions should not be held against you," he began, and realizing his mistake, revised. "The Council does not hold that against you."

Renuka scoffed. "Should and is don't always go together! The Council deferred my petition for knighthood for a year. I can't even ask for consideration until then. It's a simple yes or no and they won't even give me that!"

"Your reaction to their decision is evidence enough that you may not be ready. You did not choose your lineage but you can choose the path of patience and wisdom."

"So what you're saying is, as long as I don't care if I become a Jedi Knight, they'll probably let me become one. But if I actually want to achieve that title, I'm unworthy. Pardon me, Master Kardu, but this system will only yield apathetic Jedi who—"

It was Renuka's turn to get cut off, though not by the infinitely patient Master Kardu. In fact, he could be heard asking if she was still transmitting, if something had happened? She clicked off the comm unit.

A distinctive shaggy grey cloak could be seen making its way across the Senate Tower's bridge. Renuka broke into a smile, which twisted into a wince as her burnt skin protested. She let her target get a lead of nearly a hundred meters before Renuka slipped into the crowd in pursuit.

A micrometeorite broke through the freighter's hull, neatly piercing her reverie and leaving a whistling hole beside Risk's right boot. She rolled her eyes and went for a patch kit.

Part 10: Between Two Points

Risk spent the final minutes of her return trip to Nar Shaddaa cleaning the dust and sand out of her equipment. Deserts had a pesky habit of fouling her gear with sand after even the slightest exposure. She felt the deck rocking back and forth, a telltale sign of re-entry. A few more passes with her cloth and her blaster was back in its holster.

She made a mental note to restock grenades and another battery clip—she probably only had a handful of shots left in Reward. She couldn't quite remember when she'd named the gun, only that the name suited her sense of humor.

The process of landing was mercifully short. On her way out the door, Risk tossed a handful of cred coins to Captain Swale, her impromptu ferryman. She stood on the ever-dim commercial landing pad of Corellian Sector, Level 8221, and resisted the urge to take a deep breath after leaving the stale air inside the ship. Nar Shaddaa would always smell like Nar Shaddaa and nobody wanted too much of that in their lungs at any given time.

Risk was tallying her remaining funds—which were much lower than they would have been if she could have managed to remain impartial—and going over her upcoming expenses when she felt a spike of danger-sense wedge itself into her consciousness. The sensation forced her into a nearby alcove. She heard a male voice call out, “Come out with your hands up and we won't have *any* trouble!”

She rolled her eyes, took up her blaster and yelled, “Not in the mood to get robbed today, thanks! And I'm broke so you're

wasting your time!”

“The unlicensed bounty hunter known as Risk is wanted, dead or alive, and I’m feeling generous! You get to pick which way you want to come quietly!”

Risk’s mind swam. Who priced her? It could have been one of her sore losers in sabacc—but they were all chosen for being too banthashit to retaliate. Except for the Bothan. But every sample’s got to have an outlier.

Further examination would have to come later, when she wasn’t faced with a greedy mercenary and an empty bandolier. She fired a few blind shots, all of which landed within a meter of her target.

“*Dead* it is!” That crucial syllable was stressed with the sound of a brief exertion. When the grenade landed at Risk’s feet, she understood why. She dove out of the way as the concussion brought a few shoddy ceiling plates down behind her. Risk ran for cover behind some ready refuse and rusting grease drums.

She wasn’t fast enough; a blaster bolt grazed her shoulder just beneath the awning of her only piece of armor. Battle-instincts kept her from crying out against the searing pain. The unmistakable odor of burnt fabric and torched skin curled her lip in disgust. She raised her blaster with the intention of sending a few more wild shots down the hall—and then remembered her failing battery pack.

The voice began again, suffused with arrogance. “I must be feeling *really* generous, because I’m giving you another chance to drop your gun and get turned in alive.”

Risk used the time to think of other options.

He continued: "I've got *an awful lot* of grenades left. You're worth enough dead to waste 'em all here."

She heard his boots scraping on the dirty floor as he paced back and forth. He was even more impatient than his words suggested. She smiled to herself. Risk took in a centering breath, too filled with adrenaline to mind the stench, and called the Force into her muscles. When she could feel its pulse beneath her skin, just on the verge of pins and needles, she burst out from her hiding place. She was an untargetable blur as she tore past the bounty hunter and dashed down the corridor.

The human ducked as she passed. "*Damn!*"

Risk was fast, but she would have been much faster without a hall full of obstacles that demanded constant dodging. This level should have been packed with people; instead she found herself leaping between piles of garbage and burnt-out droids rather than pushing through a nonplussed crowd. She could hear the heavy panting of her pursuer who was already winded by the chase.

He tried shooting but gave up when his bolts landed far off target, burying themselves in ancient signage. Risk laughed as she leapt the final distance to the level's freight elevator. From there, it was only a short ride to the labyrinthine streets of the city-moon. Her lead was spectacular: the bounty hunter must have been nearly a hundred meters back.

Risk struck a defiant pose when she reached the rickety platform. She even found the time to blow a kiss while she sent

the elevator skyward.

It would have been a fantastic exit, except that the elevator didn't move.

She employed a curse reserved for wrecked ships, apartments robbed clean and perhaps even Force Lightning strikes—and then she launched herself forward, straight toward her pursuer. If she couldn't escape, she'd make sure she didn't have to.

Still empowered by the Force, she closed the distance to the human in an instant and went into a slide. He had two options, jump over her or fall, and a poor reaction time forced him to fall. He tumbled in a painful tangle of limbs while Risk came to a controlled stop a few meters away. Before he could regain his footing, she ran back, flipped him over, set her knee onto his chest and pressed her blaster into the hollow of his throat.

Recognition struck them both like a runaway speeder. “*You?!*”

Rather than let their familiarity ease her anger, Risk pushed her knee down harder. Jormund winced and made a feeble effort to pry her off his sternum. “Oh come *on*, you know me!”

“You're alone?”

“I only work alone.” He managed to sound dashing even while pinned under knee and gun.

“Good, then I only have to bash *your* skull in,” Risk said, as she raised her free arm.

He lifted his hands to block the blow that never came. “Whoa, whoa, whoa! There's no need for that, Sabacc Girl!”

“That’s Sabacc Lady to you, jerk,” she retorted dryly.

“Sure, whatever. Look, I didn’t know that you were the poacher that everyone’s so upset about. If I had, well, I would’ve— anyway I didn’t know it was you!”

“Banthashit, Kye. They always put pictures in those dossiers.”

“I don’t look that closely. Just read the name and race. And how do you know about guild files, poacher?”

“Then how in Blazes did you find me?” She steamrolled his question with one of her own, and with Risk having the upperhand and only blaster, the burden of answering was on still-supine Jormund.

“Got a tip from your freighter captain there; he owes me and I told him I’d forgive his debt if he gave me a good lead. Will you let me up now?”

“Who put up the bounty?”

“Don’t know.”

She flicked the pistol’s safety off with an audible click.

“That’s an ion blaster. It’s not what I would call deadly.”

“Yes, and this,” she tapped the warm barrel on his forehead, “is point-blank range. Give me a good reason not to leave you here in a cozy puddle of your own piss, Jormund Kye.”

“Bounty’s from the guild directly, no third party! And... because I can help you!”

“A reason I’ll actually believe.”

“No, really, Risk, listen. You’ve got—damn it, that hurts!—every guilded bounty hunter on Nar Shaddaa’s looking for your round green ass. Can you shove off?” He was prying at her knee again.

She relented and even went so far as to offer him a hand up. “So long as we have an understanding that I will shoot you with this gun, it will hurt very much, and we definitely won’t be friends, if you try to take me down.”

He gave her a tired, frustrated look. She gestured with her blaster for him to say his piece.

“Against my better judgment, Risk, I’d actually prefer that you’re not dragged off to wherever they’ve got the headquarters these days.”

“Be honest. You like my round green ass.”

“Even so. You’re the only bounty hunter insane enough to rely exclusively on nonlethal weapons and I think that’s my kind of barvy.”

“How much is the price?”

“Forty-thousand dead.”

“What about alive?”

“Sixty.”

Last year, such numbers would have been far more abstract. This year, she had a tactile understanding of the difference

between wealth and poverty. “Isn’t that a little high for a bounty poacher?” she asked, with a knot cinching tight in her gut.

“I thought so too. You must have pissed off just the right people. Maybe even some of the Guild Council.”

“No idea; didn’t realize the guild had a council. Councils never like me,” she shrugged. She took careful measure of Jormund’s intentions as they carried through the Force, and holstered her gun.

“I can tell there’s a story there,” he said, “and I don’t have time to hear it. I have some ideas for getting the rest of the guild off your trail. We should see about getting you some kind of a hood, with hair like that.” He started for the elevator, with Risk close behind.

“Guild membership isn’t a requirement for taking bounties, so how come I’m a poacher?”

“You’ve been turning in bounties that aren’t public. Neat trick, by the way. Some of those acquisitions weren’t even on *my* lists.” He had the elevator’s control panel off and was reuniting the ends of a severed wire. The carriage woke with a jolt and began to groan its way upward.

The Wallowing Hutt was filled with loud music, which Risk liked, and dancers, whom Risk envied. She knew their line of work was fraught with problems and carnal demands that even an impious Jedi couldn’t tolerate. In defiance of all that, Risk admired their sense of the music and rhythm; their freedom in dance.

However, she didn't appreciate having to yell over that music to be heard. She managed to voice her complaint just as Jormund led her to a sound-protected booth in the back of the bar.

"I guess they do a lot of this sort of business. You know, catering to shady conversations?"

"You'd be surprised how many drinks a bunch of scheming thugs go through in an evening. Doesn't guarantee the quality of the schemes, but as I said, thugs. Now, about your problem."

"You do realize that it's your problem now, too, Kye."

A blue hand rapped on the transparisteel door. Risk started and went for her gun, while a calmer Jormund opened it to reveal a Twi'lek waitress patiently waiting to take their order. Noise spilled into the booth and forced him to raise his voice over the din. "I'll take an ale, and..." he gave Risk a stoic appraisal. "She seems like the brandy type to me."

"He's wrong. I'll take a Coruscant Sunrise." Risk usually found cocktails to be too sweet and fussy for her taste, but she wasn't about to let an upstart Corellian order for her.

The Twi'lek gave her a knowing nod and pulled the door shut as she left. With the seal restored, quiet expanded to fill the tight space. Risk could have sworn her ears popped. Now that the rush of blood in her veins had stopped echoing throughout her skull, the pain in her arm shouted at her. "This tab's yours. As I see it, Kye, you owe me a drink." She winced and pulled burnt fabric away from the wound.

He shrugged off her demand. "You say that as if I'm not already going out of my way to fix things."

“No, I say that as someone who’s been shot one too many times today.”

A dusty black boot found its way atop their table as Jormund spread his limbs across his side of the booth. “At least I actually hit what I was aiming for.”

She balked at this. “Banthashit, you winged me!” Laughter brought a rare, genuine sparkle to her blue eyes.

“Aimed at you, hit you.” He mimed aiming his gun at her with bonus sound effects: *pew!*

“Barely!” She shoved his foot off the table. It landed with a limp thud and its falling counterweight pulled him upright like an admonished child.

His expression sobered as he set his elbows on the table between them. “Look, Risk. You’re in deeper than you realize. The guild wants you alive, and that’s not good news. They don’t appreciate poachers, especially skilled ones. You’re on the bad side of their bad side. I think you need to admit that you’re outclassed here and let go of this whole hunting thing.”

She broke away from his conciliatory gaze to pick at her fingernails. Nal Koska’s desert grit had hitched a ride back with her. As she picked, her matter-of-fact tone belied any concerns she may have held about her present situation. “You don’t know me. Until you *shot me*, you didn’t even know my name, so I’m going to forgive your assumption that I would entertain the idea of backing down.”

“Risk... I get the badass thing. You could say I come by it naturally, but—“

“You see this?” She cut him off, pointing to her damaged cheek. The scar had healed over years ago, but it still bore the signs of the original burn. “This was a really, really bad day in the Clone Wars. Separatists and all that mess. I was blind in this eye for a week, but I didn’t leave the battlefield until three days after I’d been hit. No backup, no bacta, just me and a job to do. The guild’s army of mercenaries can come at me all they want; I like keeping busy.”

“You were Republic Army?” he asked, taking the information in thoughtfully.

Reflex kicked in and she corrected him: “Grand Army.”

“Funny, I thought they were all clones.” His voice took on an air of suspicion.

“Maybe I’m a clone, too.” Risk was too deeply entrenched in her veteran’s memories to bother herself with his disbelief, or burden him with details about fighting beside Master Kardu. Or confess her Jedi background.

“Didn’t know they came in green.” He waited for her to laugh. She didn’t. He peered at her with a skeptical eye and did the laughing himself. “I’ve met clones, unfortunately, and you’re no clone.”

Then their drinks arrived and Jormund had no breath to spare for conversation; he was too busy draining half his ale in a single pull. When he came up for air, Risk was watching him evenly as she said, “I’m not going to run away.”

“After that little story, I expect not.”

“What’s *your* story, anyway, Kye?” She spoke over the rim of

her fussy cocktail glass. The drink was an intricately-poured gradient that spanned from pink to blue; it looked nothing like a Coruscant Sunrise and Risk regretted her spiteful order. It was too sweet and left a syrupy residue on her tongue. She set it aside in an effort to look like she was intent on listening to him rather than intent on avoiding any more sugar-hol.

“Me?” He feigned cluelessness and grinned. “I’m just a Nar Shaddaa boy. Grew up here and managed not to die from the wide and varied assortment of health hazards, violent crimes, and Hutt agendas.”

“And now you’re a bounty hunter.”

“Don’t forget extraordinary gambler! And now I can add selfless do-gooder to my resume,” he added, winking at her. “I’m no war hero, but I’ve been shot more than a few times, myself.”

“Prove it.” She crossed her arms and gestured sharply with her chin.

He leaned to one side and pulled up his rust-stained, formerly white shirt. Sure enough, Risk could see a knotted, triangular constellation of cuts and scars scratched out on his side. He watched her with proud eyes and waited for her awed reaction.

Risk studied the marks on his skin and replied frankly, “You really need to learn how to dodge better.” She laughed.

He scowled and let his shirt fall back into place. His ale was finished in a mock huff before he threw his feet back onto the table. “You know, Risk, it really would be a shame if you ended up some kind of slave or, mercy me, a taxidermied head on a pike in the guild’s headquarters. So I guess, despite the fact

that you don't have *nearly* as many fine scars as I do, I'll help you out."

She flashed a self-satisfied smile and took another sip of her cocktail. It was still horrible. She forgot to wear her bravado and cringed at the taste. Jormund caught her puckered expression out of the corner of his eye, snorted loudly and smiled at her, saying, "Oh that's priceless."

It was her turn to scowl. "It's like drinking fermented honey." She shifted uneasily under the glare of his all-too-bright smile. "What are we going to do about the contract, anyway?"

"I've got a friend who can probably sort this out. Claim it's a simple matter of mistaken identity. I'm sure we can add some evidence to the whole thing and it's solved, no problem," he said, brimming with masculine confidence.

Risk lifted an eyebrow and leaned forward. "Is it really that simple?"

"That's the beauty of an alias, my dear. Now, I think you owe me another ale."

Hutt Space. Y'toub System. Star Destroyer Arbalest.

Sly Moore despised Nal Hutta. She despised Nar Shaddaa. She didn't much care for the area known as Hutt Space at all. It was completely overrun with disorganized criminals who did not fit into her clean Imperial agenda. They understood ruthless social systems, but had no respect for the necessary veneer of order needed to prevent true chaos.

She stood in the observation room of the newly commissioned Star Destroyer *Arbalest* and silently despised the scene outside the window. According to her superiors, Renuka Vosk would probably be all the more valuable considering that she was able to tolerate, and even navigate, this sort of wretched environment; assuming she was still alive at all.

From where she stood, Moore didn't have to assume. She *knew*—with as much certainty as the Force resonating in her veins—she knew that Vosk was out there and too valuable a commodity to leave to a career of whatever base crime or other pointless minutiae she'd gotten into. If she carried as much hate and potential for violence as Moore hoped, then, without proper guidance, Vosk would prove a clear threat to the Empire as soon as the inclination came to her.

All of these thoughts kept Moore orbiting the jaundiced star at the center of the Y'toub system. The Nautilan had given her enough of a lead to brave the core of Hutt Space and find that, yes, Vosk was there, on the very edge of Moore's senses. A fiery little mote that nagged at Moore's crystalline mind and made her thoughts itch.

Another nagging presence appeared at Sly's back. She waited for the adept to speak up, then considered that the girl had survived this long precisely because she knew not to interrupt her betters, especially in their sacred silent reveries. Against her better judgment, Moore resolved to give her permission to speak.

Zeraina Holl was a young and despicably eager candidate for Inquisitor; a member of Vosk's cohort from the Relco Program. This one had been far easier to tame, as her anger was well-matured after years of cultivation in the Jedi Temple's compost

heap, otherwise known as the Agricultural Corps.

Unfortunately, her background left the Miraluka with a severe inferiority complex. She had everything to prove and that made her over-eager. She often overextended herself, as well as the thin patience of her instructors.

"Zeraina. Your lurking is a distraction. Speak so you can leave."

"The captain is unwilling to continue review of the sector's communications chatter until you give him a direct, actionable order, Ma'am."

"Is that so? Then perhaps I will give you the order to assume command of his ship. We are going to continue monitoring all communications until I have a lead on Vosk. He has *no other orders*. If he fails to find what I need, I will make sure he leaves his command behind in Hutt Space. See to it that he has a *visceral* understanding of his duty."

"Yes, Ma'am." The Umbaran could sense the excitement blooming in Zeraina's Force Aura as the nature of Moore's orders sunk through her layers of Imperial decorum.

And yet, Zeraina didn't leave.

Moore turned to face her, quicksilver eyes narrowed to pinpricks, sharper than ever. "Did you have something else?"

The apprentice made a bold move, one far above her station: "I have a question of my own, Ma'am."

Zeraina withstood the brunt of Moore's glare with blind ease; as a Miraluka, she lacked the common sight of most species, seeing only through the Force. As such, they preferred to read

emotions from Force Auras directly, rather than rely on the deceptive and hollow mask of expression. Moore could not manipulate her through cruel looks or impatient scowls.

"Then ask it and be gone."

"I would like to go down to that Smuggler's Moon and conduct my own... discreet search of the city."

"Your talents are better used elsewhere."

"That is why I would like to get back to Imperial Center without delay, Ma'am. And if that means flushing our prey from her hiding place, I am more than happy to do so."

"A more subtle hand is required here," Moore said, dismissively.

"Ma'am," Zeraina insisted, "Renuka Vosk has willfully abandoned the greatest opportunity anyone from Relco could have hoped for! No amount of talent or capability can overcome her blatant disrespect for—" Her bitter tirade came to a crashing halt against Moore's disdainfully-raised hand.

"Your petty rivalry with Vosk is a waste of your ambition, Holl. Clearly, you need to learn to listen to your superiors. You are restricted to your quarters until I call for you." Moore gestured toward a datapad on the desk behind her. "Lord Vader is expecting that report."

Zeraina left, chastened and venting fear into the Force. Moore was pleased to have her out of the way. Now, the Umbaran could enjoy the indulgent diversion of disciplining the errant captain herself.

Hutt Space. Y'toub System. Nar Shaddaa. Corellian Sector.

The drainage tunnel was dark, roughened by rust and featuring a lovely layer of filthy water lurking around Risk's ankles. She'd been crouched next to Jormund for the past hour and had been tired of it since the grand novelty of drain pipe exploration had worn off. About five minutes.

People were milling about in a street market on the walkway below. Vendors of all kinds were offering wares of food, ship parts, at least a dozen kinds of drugs that would have been considered contraband on any other world, and Risk was pretty sure she spotted a slave trader at the far end of the street. She couldn't look that way too often, for fear of Jedi training revolting against the injustice there. She couldn't afford to be a hero today.

"When are you going to tell me what the plan is, Kye?" She shifted as she spoke, trying ineffectually to find a way to be less uncomfortable.

"When we're in the middle of it, of course. Right now, you need to know that we're waiting for a human woman with dark blue hair to show up on the street down there." He spat the description with a level of contempt Risk hadn't seen in him before.

"And then?"

"And then we'll take her in."

"I'm not sure that I like the way you work, Jormund. I've got this unshakable sense that you're just checking a contract off your list at my expense."

"See, that doesn't bother me, 'cause I usually work alone. If I

really wanted to use you to collect a contract, we wouldn't be having this conversation, now would we?"

Risk gave up on maintaining her stealthy, action-ready crouch. Discipline was for apprentices and masters and she wasn't either. She propped herself up against the curved wall of the tunnel with just a few centimeters' clearance from the nasty puddle. Her view of the street wasn't much worse, and she could see a few dozen species' heads bobbing by as they went about their business.

To his credit, Jormund was still perched in his ever-ready posture. The stakeout must have been wearing on him as well, though, as evidenced by the butterfly knife he produced from one of his many vest pockets. He checked the vibroblade setting, found it to be in working order, and switched it off. Then, he went about the none-too-engrossing process of picking his nails clean with the tip of the knife.

Unlike the average Nar Shaddaa citizen, Jormund was a well-kept man, at least where his hands were concerned. His laundry was another matter entirely, but Risk had been relieved to discover that even dressed in dingy whites and dusty slacks, he didn't stink of anything but the subtle odor that even groomed human males were often given to. She didn't find his scent unpleasant, though she would never admit to such a thing.

She observed him under the guise of watching the opposite approach of the road. As bored as they both were, it would be all-too-easy for Jormund to catch her staring. Still, there was something about the Corellian that pestered her. Something that hovered just beyond her conscious ability to identify.

His mood, however, was easy to figure out. She didn't need to read his Force Aura to know that Jormund was agitated, even angry. His frustration was legible in the muscles clenched around his jaw, in the way his shoulders were wound up tightly next to his neck and audible in the biting tone that crept into any words he shared with her.

"So, I know it's not me you've got the problem with."

"What?" Jormund snapped at her before he looked up from his seemingly-perpetual fingernail hygiene.

"If it isn't me, then I'm going to guess it's this acquisition we're after. You're pissed at her, aren't you?"

He pointed at her with the knife, a gesture designed to clarify his point, not truly threaten her. "You say that like you know me. You don't know me. As for the target, she's earned the opportunity to get to know my blaster."

"What about clearing things up with the guild?"

"I've got a big lead on the rest of the guild. And I think your clients are too pleased with the *extreme* discount they're getting to rat you out just yet."

"You mean because I'm not licensed."

"Yeah. What's your problem with picking up a hunter card? It's only worth a cargo load of credits compared to unlicensed work." He flicked the butterfly knife shut in an elaborate blur of movement.

Before Risk could begin to respond, Jormund had his finger to his lips. He was kneeling at the edge of the tunnel, watching a

blue-haired woman four meters below them. The geometry of his face hardened; he was now all sharp eyes and tension. His movements became rapid pulses linking periods of utter stillness. He reminded her of the hawks she'd seen on Byss, perched on fences as they kept tabs on rodents invisible to all but the hawks.

He gestured for her to leave the tunnel. Risk glared at him. She sure as Blazes wasn't going first. He gestured once more before silently jumping down from their perch with admirable stealth. A vendor's stall full of rusted ship parts gave him plenty of cover.

Risk landed next to him a moment later, having used the Force to slow her descent and manage a perfectly silent landing. Jormund looked impressed. He didn't have time to congratulate her, as their target was nearly out of sight. The woman with the blue hair was moving through the market, pocketing small objects and continuing down the street before the vendors could notice anything missing. Occasionally, she reversed the process and left odd baubles for the merchants.

He leaned over to Risk. "She's almost done. Let her get to the valuable stuff, then grab the goods right out of her hand and run. Nearest alleyway should do. I'll meet you there."

Risk replied with a smart nod and stepped out of the cover of the stall and into the marketplace. Nar Shaddaa's street markets were rare and usually seen as training grounds for petty thieves. Risk navigated the crowd with skill, all the while keeping a discreet distance from the target. Blessed with completely average height, she could barely see over the throng of people, but the occasional break in the crowd was enough to keep track of the target.

She trailed the woman to a stall selling expensive equipment. From the look of it, they wouldn't be in business long; Risk saw that her target wasn't the only one pocketing wares from the table. A few street urchins were lurking on either side of the stall, one group distracting the merchant while the other harvested his unwatched goods.

The woman ambled over, nonchalantly laid a hand on the table, and admired an item in her other hand with what Risk took to be practiced ease. Risk was forced to dodge back and forth in the crowd, waiting for her opportunity.

A Selkath hissed at her after he managed to get insulted by stepping on *her* foot, and Risk turned to brush him off with a quick sneer.

When she looked back, the thief was gone. Risk scanned the multitude of faces and failed to spot her target among them. Desperate, she darted over to one of the children still at the booth. She grabbed a little boy by the shoulder and knelt to bring her face level with his.

"I'll give you a credcoin if you tell me which way that woman went."

"Who?"

"She was just here—and I can feel your friend's hand looking for my credits. I only keep a baby spit adder in that pocket. You should tell him to back off before he gets bitten. Tell me where she went and get paid or stop wasting my time."

He must have executed some sort of invisible signal, or Risk's empty threat had been plausible enough, because the

sensation of tiny hands and curious Force Auras drained away. The child held out his hand wordlessly.

"Information first. I'm an adult, not an idiot. Hurry up."

Grinning, he pointed down an alleyway. Risk raced down into the dark, but not before tossing the promised coin over her shoulder. The boy, not expecting it, was almost struck by the currency as he cried foul against her seemingly broken promise.

Risk's eyes adjusted to the dimmer light of the alley quickly. The thief walked at a relaxed pace, completely unaware of her pursuers. That was, until Jormund stepped out directly in front of her. She stopped short, not eager to engage a man she clearly recognized. The thief turned, saw only an intoxicated Mirialan stranger staggering through the alley, and chose to run past the drunk toward the crowded marketplace. Risk grinned as she clotheslined the blue-haired woman at the very last moment. The thief fell backward, hard.

Risk seized the opportunity while the target was stunned, flipped her prone and wrapped a pair of restraints around her wrists. She was happily dusting off her hands as she flashed Jormund a proud, wide smile.

Jormund didn't exhibit his usual arrogant aplomb. He certainly didn't appreciate her display of criminal apprehension savvy. Instead, he was standing over the thief, anger in his eyes. Risk took a wary step backward, tossing her cloak aside to have better access to her weapon. "We got her, what's the attitude for?"

The thief lifted her chin with a great amount of effort. She spat a

glossy wad of spittle onto Jormund's boot and bared her teeth in a wicked, bitter grin. "You're too late. I sold it." She laughed.

He rubbed the spit-shined toe of his boot on her jacket with contempt. Risk flinched when he ground the toe into the hollow of the woman's shoulder. She could feel the dark pulse of his anger in the Force. He was holding it in check, barely. Risk considered stepping in to stop him.

The thief whined a complaint and tried to recoil from the painful pressure. He relented after another small kick. "Doesn't matter, Secus. You're paying for a replacement."

For her part, Risk was standing aside, watchfully. She crossed her arms and cast a glance to either side of the alleyway. No passers-by bothered a second look at the suspicious scene. *Ah, Nar Shaddaa, where crime is the only way to live.* She caught Jormund's eye with a nod. "You ready to tell me what her deal is?"

Their captive, now known to Risk as Secus, cut in before Jormund could respond. "My deal is that Blondie needs to keep better track of his stuff! He's just bitter that he left his navicomputer out in the middle of a public hangar. Poor baby!" She pouted for half a heartbeat and then broke into spiteful laughter. Up close, Risk realized that Secus couldn't have been much more than sixteen or seventeen years old.

"You left your navicomputer unattended," she asked incredulously. "On Nar Shaddaa? I thought you grew up here!"

Jormund snapped at Secus, opting to ignore Risk's accusation entirely. "Do you have ANY idea how much a navicomputer costs? My ship isn't worth a damn without one!"

The thief made to bolt once she was upright, but Risk had been expecting the attempt and tripped her without a second thought. The girl's knees hit duracrete with a hollow crack, followed by her pained yelp. When she stood again, the thief snarled at Risk and made one principled attempt to twist out of the Mirialan's iron grip. After her inevitable failure, she resorted to pouting interspersed with sullen writhing.

Jormund's rage was further betrayed by the white-knuckled fist he held trembling at his side. Risk spun the girl around, putting herself between the thief and the bounty hunter. She laid her free hand on Jormund's shoulder, "It's not worth it. You'll hate yourself later."

He shrugged off her green hand. "I told you. You don't know me. Don't tell me what I'll feel."

"We've got her. Let's get out of here," she tried again.

He opened his mouth to deliver what would no doubt be a biting retort, when his comm chimed insistently. Diving into his vest for his communicator, he gestured with his free hand for Risk to hold that thought. The look on his face told Risk that he'd recognized the caller.

Curiosity compelled Risk to ask who was calling as he worked the device into his ear. "It's my dealer," he breathed just before he tapped the call answer.

Risk balked. "Your dealer? You can order death sticks later! We have a—" Jormund cut her off, running a finger across his throat, suggesting in no uncertain terms that she should kill her half of the conversation before he missed something important. The Mirialan turned to their captive. "You believe this guy?"

"Hey, I'll believe whatever you want if you let these restraints loose." She flashed a wry smile, featuring a gold tooth, and gave her wrists an experimental twist. In her contortions, Secus constantly brushed against Risk's robe, twisting the fabric and chafing the Mirialan's nerves.

Jormund was locked in a brief, largely unintelligible conversation with the disembodied voice of his dealer when he went deathly pale. He breathed a few desperate inquiries into the channel before he wrenched the earpiece out without a signoff or any other effort at pleasantries. His frame sagged and he stumbled backward into the wall; if he hadn't, he probably would have fallen down in the filthy alley.

"What? Your dealer mad that you missed a payment?" Risk didn't like the look of things, and she was tired of holding Secus still.

"Information dealer, my ever-so-worldly-wise companion," he snapped at Risk. "You're spaced, by the way, since she was the only person who could get you your license, and *she*," he pointed at the thief, "still owes me a navicomputer, and I need it back this damn instant."

"License? I thought you just wanted a bit of revenge or money or something. I'm not getting sold into the Trade, man, so you can forget it!" Secus was on the edge of shouting. Risk noticed the blue-haired girl's eerie cybernetic eyes for the first time as they rounded in natural panic. They were a life-like, expensive model that a little thief shouldn't have been able to afford.

The girl renewed her efforts to escape Risk's hold. The unlicensed bounty hunter pulled back on Secus' wrists, forcing the thief's shoulder blades to twist against the joint resulting in a

precise starburst of pain.

Risk mentally rehearsed all the clumsy ways she could phrase her next question. She picked the one that made her sound the least idiotic, or so she hoped. "What's the problem with your information dealer, Kye? Nobody gets this broken up over a busted deal."

He shot her an impatient look and took possession of Secus. "Not here. Like I said, she owes a debt come due."

Risk kept pace as Jormund walked the thief further into the alleyway. She spotted his airspeeder parked three hundred meters away, at a handy intersection. "I've got a thing against certain kinds of coercion, so if this is going to turn to wetwork, I'm going to have to take a step back from—" she started.

"Damn straight! I'm not into the squishy side of things either—ow!" The thief interrupted only to be cut off by the impact of Jormund's knee into her back.

"I'm not going to be a part of any deal that involves torture. And I can't let you resort to that either, no matter how angry you are," Risk continued as she put herself in his way.

Jormund shoulder-checked Risk aside and gave the captive another shove. "Secus Rue is going to return what she took. Or I'll slit her throat, sell her organs piecemeal, and get the funds for my navicomputer that way. It's not up to me, Risk. It's up to *her*." He tipped his captive into the backseat of the speeder, pulled out his butterfly knife and flicked the vibroblade to life.

By this point, Secus was nearly hysterical. She kicked wildly with her unbound feet, occasionally trying to right herself for an

escape attempt. Jormund stood by and let the knife somersault over his knuckles as he waited. Risk leaned against the speeder and considered her choice of partner. He was certainly angry, but more than that, he was frightened.

Regardless of the threats and the flourish of his knife, he had no intention of cutting the girl. She didn't need the Force to see through that ploy. But, he was growing desperate and Risk couldn't easily predict what he would try next.

It was time to step in.

The Mirialan leaned into the cab of the speeder and held Secus lightly by her throat. The girl stilled instantly. Risk whispered into Secus' ear; a simple request made irresistible by the influence of the Force. Secus spoke up, artificial eyes gone dull. "I hid it in the hangar. In a maintenance tunnel."

Jormund slapped his hand against the speeder's chassis, half-relieved and half-incensed. "You had it hidden this entire time? I should kill you, you little vilerat! You're probably lying!"

"She's not, Jormund. Your navicomputer should still be in there," Risk interjected coolly.

He shot her a suspicious look. "How would you know?"

"If I'm wrong, I'll go into the Trade and buy you a new navicomputer myself. Let her go."

Secus brightened at this suggestion and held up her wrists to facilitate the letting-go. Jormund released the restraints, while making it clear that if Risk was wrong, she had just cost them both more than she knew.

The thief melted into the dreary twilight of the sublevels as their airspeeder took off.

Jormund navigated the chaos of Nar Shaddaa's skylanes with determined urgency. A tense quiet gave room for the swelling noise of the engine and the passing traffic to dominate the soundscape. Every time he flipped a switch or changed a setting, the accompanying click was nearly deafening against the soft background noise. She flinched more than once.

Risk's hands found their way into her pockets, seeking refuge against the chill of the speeder's open cab. An unexpected shape met the pads of her fingers. It was small, familiar, and immediately comforting. Risk pulled the holocron carving into view, at a loss as to how it could have returned to her. Its polished facets caught the yellowed city lights as they raced by, giving it a lively sparkle. Risk was struck by how much she had missed the token. She attributed its arrival to a journey on unexplainable currents of the Force and secured it in a more reliable pocket.

When they arrived at the hangar, Jormund threw himself out of the speeder before the air brakes could bring it to a full stop. Risk jogged after him.

Fortunately for everyone, the little thief had been honest, as Risk had predicted. Jormund found his navicomputer laying in a nest of its own wires behind a maintenance register and hastily ran to reconnect it to his ship.

Risk took the opportunity to tour the vehicle while Jormund was engrossed in a haze of cursing and wiring. From the outside, the *Flame Skimmer* wasn't much bigger than some of the newer Republic fighters. It closely resembled the cutting-edge X-Wing

design that she had seen prototyped near the end of the Clone Wars. However, the layout was reversed, crossed wings just behind the cockpit at the front, followed by the engines and a pitifully small living space trailing in the rear. It resembled an immense dragonfly and she found the idea of Jormund riding around on a giant insect incredibly amusing.

Her unguided tour didn't take long on such a small ship, and Risk was back in the cockpit, peering over Jormund's shoulder. "Need any help?"

"Nah, as small and ladylike as you are, even your hands wouldn't fit in here while I work."

"Pretty complicated, is it?"

"No, just tedious." He gritted his teeth as a wire slipped out of his fingers, *again*.

"Good, then you can explain to me why we're in such a hot hurry to get going."

Jormund flipped over onto his back to get a better view of his work. He held out a hand in a silent request for his hydrosponder. She supplied it as he supplied an answer. "That call was really from my info dealer, Bina. She was letting me know that she might be launching out of Nar Shaddaa for a while, but something interrupted the call. Before the signal got jammed, I was pretty sure I heard blaster fire."

Risk spotted a worn-out preflight checklist and began going through the steps that didn't require the navicomputer. Jormund sat up from his disemboweled nav system. "What are you doing? We're not ready to take off yet."

"You told me that the only way to reach Bina's was by ship. And she's obviously in trouble, so we need to get going as soon as you've got the navicomputer installed."

Jormund reached up and patted a greasy hand on Risk's shoulder. He left a mechanic-chic black handprint on her armor. At least he'd had the courtesy to aim for the bescar.

Part 11: Fly By Night Only

The *Flame Skimmer* touched down lightly in the wide open hangar, deep in the core of Nar Shaddaa's undercity.

The hangar door had gaped open in clear violation of Bina's trademark love of secrecy. That fact had Jormund even more concerned than before. Risk occupied herself with inspecting the area, first through sensors, then through the Force. If someone had broken into Bina's stronghold, everything told Risk that they were long gone by now. She couldn't detect a living pulse beyond a nest of the ubiquitous rodents that infested the oldest parts of the City of Anarchy.

Jormund was climbing out of the ship as soon as the landing gear met duracrete. He had his blaster drawn and raced into a dark recess in the stained, crumbling wall, disguised by a curtain of hanging cables. This man wasn't the stealthy streetwise bounty hunter Risk had partnered with; there was something feral in his single-minded intensity and she decided it was better to let him meet whatever scene lay behind that curtain without her interference.

She followed with caution. Her senses may not have detected life, but an assassin droid could kill just as easily as a flesh-and-blood hunter. Reward eased out of its holster with a soft

leathery creak and Risk swept its barrel over her line of sight.

She was expecting to find an observation post filled from floor to ceiling with screens, holoprojectors, and readouts. Instead, she had followed Kye into a confined, cluttered, archivist's nightmare. Light strobed from the sparks thrown by split cables, blasted monitors, and one unfortunate console.

The space might have been organized, once, a very long time ago, but the layers of dust on some of the tallest stacks of debris led Risk to believe the current inhabitant didn't care for such amenities as clean living. Some of the hoarded piles had been knocked onto already overflowing workbenches, which then ejected their contents onto the floor. She stepped over a slippery rivulet of flimsies and nearly lost her footing on a puddle of datachits.

Jormund's dealer proved an information hoarder more than an information vendor. There were a few screens, half of which had been shot out. The scent of ozone and burnt electronics poured out of a smoking monitor. Risk could taste the recent violence in the air. Still, she needed more detail than an impression of a fight and some shot-out screens to understand what had happened here.

She wandered through the wreckage of Bina's living area: a cot tucked into the corner of the room, surrounded by a makeshift fortress of old data-storage units. Next to the cot, the corpse of a burnt-out astromech droid served as a bedside table. The dealer must have loved her daily news; there had to be at least five activate feeds still running on datapads strewn across her bed. Risk did her absent host the courtesy of switching them off.

A worn out chair was laying on the floor beneath the bank of screens and the blown-out terminal. Risk hadn't noticed it before.

It was *perfect*.

She tossed her cloak aside as she knelt over the upset furniture. Around the chair, the Force swirled in agitated eddies that made the skin on her arms tingle with goosebumps. Risk steeled herself against the onslaught that would accompany such a fresh, emotionally charged scene.

Her hand had barely grazed the exposed foam of the seat when the vision took hold of her mind. The warm comfort of a conversation with a loved one. Hands flying over well-worn keys, the soothing glow of monitors, the sudden throat-tightening jolt of fear brought on by a proximity alarm.

Risk had to hold fast against the rising tide of sensations, or find her mind overrun by invading thoughts. In the worst cases, practitioners of this Force technique lost themselves for hours, even as long as a day, in the identity of another.

She persevered through the vision with clenched fists.

Bina tore her comlink from her ear. She raced from her chair in a panic, going for a dusty blaster rifle that nearly outweighed her. She could barely lift it. A resounding thud came from the door. She almost pulled the trigger in her fear. Another thud and a shower of sparks heralded the first of the commandos. A red bolt of plasma launched from Bina's rifle and caught the commando in the chest. He fell. Others marched in over him and her rifle's firing rate wasn't anywhere near fast enough. Shots whizzed through the air, blasting her beloved terminal

and destroying her custom gear in pyrotechnical explosions of the worst kind. She ran for cover, but never made it. The ground came up to meet her. Her world turned black.

Risk fell backward onto her seat and realized her face was wet. She ran the heel of her hand over her cheeks and found them slick with tears. That wouldn't do. Her sleeve mopped up the sentimental mess as she reviewed her discoveries with an attempt at dispassionate observation.

The commandos were well equipped but none of them had been armed with lethal weapons. They'd meant to take Bina alive. She thought back on that very first commando, the one who had met a sudden end.

The logo on his armor was familiar, even notorious. She knew it from somewhere. Master Kardu had very choice words about that logo.

The memory tried to dance out of reach, but Risk wasn't having any of that. She grabbed hold of the thought with all the discipline of a Jedi-raised mind.

Black Sun.

As soon as she had captured the recollection, she regretted it. It would be difficult to pin this tidy little mess on a group as powerful and infamous as Black Sun. Now that she knew the truth of what had happened, she had to find the evidence to prove it.

She checked that Jormund was still engrossed in his own investigations. He seemed utterly oblivious to her scene with the chair. That suited her. Risk went about the process of

finding any scrap of evidence that she could reliably pin on the most terrifying criminal organization in the galaxy. Easy task.

She sifted through the impressions from the vision, trying to think of any easy marks of Black Sun involvement. Nothing clear-cut came to mind. So, she took a different tack. Her hand hovered over workbench after workbench, until her foot struck an unfortunate datapad on the floor. It was ruined, like so many of the others, but this one still had a legible phrase frozen on its deceased screen.

Black Sun Shipping Encryption

Bina had been snooping around in the wrong part of the Holonet. It was a stretch, but this single line might be enough to convince Jormund that Risk knew what she was talking about. Decent man he might be, but telling him that “the Force told me so, and by the way, I’m a Jedi fugitive” would spell disaster at the very best.

They had been investigating the crime scene for nearly an hour when Risk had the evidence to approach Jormund for the first time since they’d landed. He was shuffling through flimsies on one of Bina’s overflowing desks, his features etched deep with grave concern. The anxiety radiating from him was enough to sicken Risk.

Risk decided to pull him into the present with a bit of healthy conversation. “Well, you certainly have an interesting information broker here. She’s no ordinary informant.”

He rearranged the flimsies.

Risk took a few steps closer and tried again. “I said, your

dealer's an interesting person, if this place is any indication. She doesn't get out much, does she?"

He picked up a datapad and scrolled through the display.

"Jormund."

Another page of data skimmed by. He dismissed it and brought up a new set.

"Jormund, she's not in the datapad. Talk to me!" She snapped at him from a mere meter away.

He started and turned on her. "She's not anywhere! This place was supposed to be safe, damnit!" He tossed the datapad to Risk as he pushed past her. She added it to her growing stack of evidence.

"Nowhere is ever safe. If you tell yourself that lie, then this is what ends up happening. Complacency is—"

"You are **not** going to lecture me, Risk!" Rage had stolen his breath and he stood panting in the center of the cramped room, every muscle in his lean body strung taut by the strict hand of adrenaline.

"Yelling at me isn't going to help you find your friend!" She'd been berated by far more enraged and far more frightening opponents than Jormund Kye, and she wasn't about to wither under his misplaced frustration. She advanced on him, her own shoulders square and head held high, proud—but not aggressive. "Get a grip before you destroy something useful."

"She trusted me," he began, sharply. "Nobody was going to bother her here. She could run the business, give me the best

leads, it was supposed to...." His anger crumbled into grief and regret faster than Risk had expected.

She was starting to suspect that Bina meant more to him than a business partner or even a friend. What was worse, Risk found herself wrestling a tendril of jealousy. "You set up this place for her, then?"

"Yeah. Few years ago. That's how I know the way here."

"We'll get her back." Risk shifted her weight and betrayed her unease. "I think I know who took her."

He closed the gap between them and fixed her with a desperate stare. "Who?"

"Black Sun." Risk produced her feeble evidence in the form of the frozen datapad.

He snatched it from her and swallowed a shuddering breath as he read the sole line of unbroken text. His eyes watered as he stared down at the pad and Risk could almost see a hurricane of thoughts churning behind them. When he finally spoke, his voice had a tremor of anguish. "She should have known better than to mess with their networks!" He started for the door.

Risk stepped in front of him. "There's something else I need to know."

He nearly careened into her, his focus absolute. "Something else *you* need to know? You're wasting time Bina doesn't have."

"If they wanted her dead, she'd be dead. They wanted to take her alive. We have enough time for you to tell me how you're so worked up about a business associate that you'll clean up the

mess she made."

The muscles of Jormund's jaw worked in tight circles grinding his teeth as he chewed on his answer. He passed a thoughtful eye over her, as if taking her measure for the very first time. She crossed her arms, impatient and unwilling to fill his silence with her demands. Finally, he muttered, "You're already in this neck-deep and I can turn you over to the guild in a heartbeat."

"I'm aware."

"So I can afford to trust you, seeing as you're completely and utterly spaced without my beneficence."

"That's one way to look at it. Or you could just try trusting someone."

"Look who's saying that, Miss Alias."

She cleared her throat pointedly.

"All right. Bina's my sister. I set her up here when she got into some trouble with the Hutts a few years ago. Neither of us wants to leave the Moon. It's home. But she couldn't be public anymore. She's always been such a damn good slicer, so the information dealer gig made sense. Satisfied?"

She heard his words, but it was her Force sensitivity that revealed his honesty. Risk nodded, stepped out of his way, and gestured with a sweep of her arm saying, "After you, Kye." He sauntered past her with a knowing smirk that made the hairs on the back of her neck stand on end. She scowled at him.

"What?"

"You were *jealous*. You thought she was competition," he

answered in an infuriating sing-song.

The man's insight stung.

Risk wasn't sure what upset her more: the fact that she might be developing an attachment—a dangerous prospect according to any school she'd ever been subject to—or that he was right, and he knew it. Regardless, her cheeks felt hot and she didn't want him looking at her.

She pulled a page from Thario's unwritten book of Scoundrel's Laws and refused to take the bait. Jormund would believe whatever he found most flattering. The combination of his stellar insight and the thought of her pining after him proved to be extremely flattering, judging by the change in his demeanor. Her denial would only be heard as confirmation. Silence would also be a confirmation. *Confirmation...* was too uncomfortable for Risk to even begin to fathom.

They loaded themselves and some promising equipment into the *Flame Skimmer* and were underway within minutes. Jormund seemed to have enjoyed his reprieve from his grief over his missing sister, but now his mind had returned to business.

"You know where the Black Sun facility is on Nar Shaddaa?" Risk asked, leaning over his shoulder, looking out the viewport.

"The fact that you think there's just one Black Sun facility on Nar Shaddaa proves you really haven't been here very long."

"I don't deal in hard crime."

"No such thing. There's just crime, which is all we do here. You're thinking of organized crime and everybody else."

"How convenient for you, to find fine distinctions between your line of work and the kidnappers'."

"Watch it, Risk." He banked the ship a little harder than he had to, and sent her scrambling for a better grip on the back of his chair. She hadn't expected any sudden maneuvers and hadn't bothered to strap herself into the copilot's seat.

"All I'm saying is that there's a very good chance that some bounty hunters were in the group that took Bina."

"Black Sun doesn't work with freelancers. Either you're in or you're out. Or dead. Lots of dead."

Risk shrugged. "It's good you know so much about them, because we're going to have to find them sooner rather than later."

"Oh, I know where to start."

The *Flame Skimmer* broke through a gap in the crumbling warehouse district and made for open sky. The engines flared and kicked the small ship into higher skylanes intended for the reckless and their urgent business.

The Black Sun criminal organization had been a fearsome juggernaut for thousands of years. In the minds of some, it still was. But to the ruthless people of Nar Shaddaa, Black Sun counted as a slightly more violent and better-equipped Hutt House. Risk knew a bit more of their background than the average Nar Shaddaa citizen, and knew better than to dismiss them so easily, but it was true that Black Sun had faded in their renown while she was still barely an apprentice. Master Kardu was never sure why, but he had insisted that something more

insidious had been at work in their downfall than a routine shift in galactic power.

Presently, Black Sun was a shadow of its former self. While they spoke, Jormund confirmed Risk's guess that they were trying to rally and reassert their dominance on the Outer Rim. That meant they were a bit more conspicuous than they had been in times past, and it was a simple matter to check with one of Jormund's guys, who knew a guy who sold a guy (who he swore was Black Sun) a weapons shipment.

The value of hearsay could never be underestimated. Somehow, the game of comm-relay became far more reliable when information could serve as a form of currency; currency that would lose its value if the information didn't hold true. It was only a few hours and a handful of informative transactions before they had an exact set of coordinates and were en route to the Black Sun stronghold on Nar Shaddaa.

Part 12: We Can Make the World Stop

There are two paths one can depend upon when attempting to infiltrate enemy territory: the sewers, which always smell worse than expected but tend to be mercifully unidentifiable in their filthy contents, and the air vents.

Risk wondered why, if the ducts were meant only to move air—or, in the case of Nar Shaddaa, smog—in and out of buildings, why did the vents have to be large enough to hold a span of the average being's shoulders?

Still, she was glad for it, and she knew that Jormund, if he thought about these sorts of things at all, would have been glad too.

At the moment, she had an excellent view of his posterior as they crawled through the predictably sooty maze of ductwork that promised to lead into the Black Sun stronghold. Risk was also glad that the thin metal they were pawing over didn't produce an overabundance of noise. Granted, they were being careful but something had to be said for well-designed sound-dampening.

Risk turned her attention away from the minor marvels of engineering to Jormund's mood. If they were going to leave this stronghold alive, let alone with his sister in tow, he had to stay focused. She was concerned that another bout of disabling rage would see the both of them executed by the galaxy's oldest and most terrifying crime syndicate.

Now that he had a target and a reasonable belief that his sister was in their hands, Jormund had calmed down admirably. He applied his emotions well, sometimes. Risk followed after him, hand over hand, keeping to his tracks. His every palm-print and knee-track left a swath of clean, shining metal in a field of black dust, particulate, and ash. Risk didn't mind getting dirty; in a certain way, she enjoyed it. Jedi or, well, *the other side*, both put a high value on cleanliness. Their distaste wasn't limited to just the smelly, filthy kind of dirt that led to rot and disease. Even dusty earth after a day's dueling had to be cleaned away with ritual care. Risk was more interested in the doing than the cleaning up after.

No, what bothered her was the way the dust made her hands slip and how it could compromise her ability to move as she intended.

They followed turn after turn in the ductwork, occasionally coming to enormous fans and dodging between their lazy,

rusted blades. They paused at one of the larger junctions.

Jormund's blond hair stood out in comical contrast against his soot-smearred face. She grinned at him and wiped a fingerful of the black mess off of his cheek. He winked at her and continued to lead the charge with his new grimy war-paint.

After they had gone at least twice as far as she thought they ought to go, but before they'd heard any tell-tale banter from patrolling Black Sun mercenaries, Jormund brought them to a stop at an exhaust register. He made a series of incomprehensible hand gestures that Risk was only able to interpret due to his vague intentions seeping into the Force. She nodded and held the vent fast while he twisted out the screws from their side.

Now that she understood his plan, she knew that it was very, very bad news when they heard someone mutter, "What was that?" just as the final screw hit the floor.

Both of them were holding the loose register, desperate to keep it from rattling or worse, falling free. It wasn't designed to be gripped from the inside and their fingertips slipped dangerously against the sharply angled vanes.

On the other side of the register, Risk could see the silhouette of a bulky mercenary. She hoped that his excessively muscular frame was due to a fine set of armor rather than a lifetime of practice in ripping people apart.

Alone, that sort of individual wouldn't have threatened her much at all. But she couldn't afford to pull her saber in front of Jormund, and so she found the odds slightly out of favor. Again she thought of getting a more powerful blaster, but the idea of

having such an easy method to kill sentient beings bothered her.

Back in the days of the Republic, the Jedi had been able to dismember and even slay with utter impunity. They were trusted to always be in the spiritual right, acting for the greater good, so nobody questioned if they cut down a thug or two. Or an entire gang. It was all in the name of protecting the Republic.

They rarely acted in self-defense, she knew from personal experience. Any common street thug faced with the option of a warm night in prison or a searing end by a lightsaber chose the former. A few had been too strung out on death sticks and other intoxicants to have that sort of good judgment, and they usually ended up in a sort of accidental suicide-by-Jedi.

At the moment, she was trying to prevent herself and Jormund from being spotted by this *uncommon* street thug. Though the mercenary's voice had been deep and resonant, Risk suddenly recognized the form on the other side of the register as female and no, she wasn't armored. That muscular frame was hers and she had obviously earned it.

Risk caught a tiny movement in the corner of her eye and realized that Jormund's teeth were about to bite through his lower lip. His arms were beginning to shake. Soon, the metal grating would be trembling along in a terrible sympathy with him, and rattling for all the moon to hear. Risk pulled her side tighter using one hand and took over for Jormund with the other. As she motioned for him to move aside—a plan he clearly did not agree with—she flicked her wrist in an apparently unnecessary flourish. In fact, it was completely necessary in order for her mind to be in the right frame of thought to use the Force to secure the register.

None of that mattered, because the Black Sun on the other side of the vent had watched too many holodramas in the gym.

She had spent the last few minutes searching out every one of Jormund's loosened screws on the floor. When she'd found all six, and saw the completely unmoved register, she reached out a huge, gloved hand to investigate. Risk signaled for Jormund to double back the way they'd come, hopefully hiding around the bend of the hallway. He wouldn't budge.

As long as Risk kept part of her attention on the register, it wouldn't budge either. The Black Sun was more than a little suspicious now, but she was a bit slow. The leather fingers of her glove found purchase more easily than Risk would have liked.

Risk knew it wouldn't be long before the metal itself would fail. Her ability to hold fast with the Force would last far beyond the register's structural integrity. Its edge was now starting to peel, crumbling in the battle of wills. A bead of sweat traced over the geometric tattoos across her forehead, down between her brows and along the side of her nose. Others followed in its path, luckily missing her eyes. Her hands were shaking now, and Jormund moved to help her with the effort. She aimed a fierce glare at him; one she'd forged in the worst days of the attrition on Byss. He backed off.

Jormund had folded himself in half in an attempt to seat himself upright in the vent. Risk only realized why when he began fumbling with his blaster. If she didn't act soon, chances were excellent that someone else would; either the Black Sun of dubious morality, or the bounty hunter of, well, *he has a heart of gold from a certain angle, really*. Risk didn't count herself among the inevitable casualties, only because she generally

preferred not to imagine her own demise.

In a single, crystalline moment of concentration, Risk loosened her fingers and not only released her Forceful hold on the register—she reversed it. The Black Sun's prize was accelerating rapidly towards her face.

When Risk jumped down from the duct, she found her victim sprawled on the floor of the hallway with a broken nose. The patrolwoman was stunned, but that state wouldn't last long. Risk knelt at her side and, before Jormund could untangle himself from the ductwork, whispered in the Black Sun's ear. "You're exhausted. Your nose hurts and it would feel better if you got some sleep. Rest now."

The woman fidgeted an initial protest, but she was just suggestible enough that Risk's words weighed down her eyelids and she was fast asleep within seconds.

Risk nodded to Jormund, who somehow believed the lightweight register had been enough to take down a battle-hardened Black Sun.

He really must be distracted by Bina.

She even had to go so far as to suggest that they hide the unconscious mess before moving on. Actually, she had to say it twice, as he wasn't listening the first time. After some thought Jormund countered that patrolwoman wasn't going to fit in the vent and there was nowhere else to put her. So they'd just have to keep walking and hope. The decision made sense and yet, the fact that she'd had to bring his attention back to the moment had her worried.

They were extremely lucky that this stronghold wasn't doubling up on patrols. Once they had left their first obstacle behind, they went for the nearest terminal. Jormund spotted the tiny impression on the wall near a bank of processing units. He produced an enhanced datapad that looked like a slicer's tool, something that didn't belong in Jormund's calloused hands. Risk gave him a skeptical glance before taking up a lookout position at his back.

"I didn't take you for a slicer."

"I've seen Bina use one of these before. I'm pretty sure I can find some kind of map for this place," he whispered.

"Faster."

"I know."

"You don't. There's two people coming down that hallway. You might have a minute at most."

"How do you know that?"

Risk replied a little too hastily, "Auditory implant. Maybe you should invest in one."

He lifted an eyebrow at her comment but accelerated his search nonetheless. She could sense multiple presences advancing on their position and had guessed at two. She couldn't be sure, but it had to be more than one.

Jormund was flicking through the options on his datapad as fast as it could display them, sometimes faster, and the lag in response time made his temper flare. He let out a little grunt of frustration as it failed to register his commands correctly. His

impatience was costing them time.

"Jormund, knock it off."

"The damn thing is too slow. We're not going to—"

"We will, if you give it a chance to keep up with you."

Jormund fumed in silence. He gave the datapad a chance to keep up, but every single selection came with an audible thwack as he jammed his finger into the device. Chancing being heard was a small price to pay for not being seen.

An unbidden memory of Byss came to Risk, making her throat go painfully dry. She remembered Kull's words as they had been repeated again and again and again: *Use your anger, embrace it.*

Risk hadn't ever really trusted that advice. And she'd spent too many years trying to listen to the Jedi Code about emotion being ideally nonexistent. Every time her pulse sped up in response to a noise, she knew emotion damn well couldn't be wished away. Her anger at the Jedi Council was, even after their demise, a constant companion. Then again, every time she couldn't think straight because she was so angry at the Bothan, she knew anger made a traitorous ally. Watching Jormund beating the life out of his sister's datapad, Risk concluded that a healthy dose of emotional control could be counted as a virtue.

She wished Jormund could be just a bit more virtuous.

Even with his semi-patient pace, Jormund was proved right when a full trio of Black Suns rounded the corner. They drew their blasters in an instant and blue-white plasma bolts followed

a moment later. Despite his earlier anger, Risk could hear Jormund chuckling to himself as he disconnected the datapad and ran for cover. The Black Sun stronghold was conveniently cluttered and they didn't have to go far to find a set of boxes to hide behind.

"What the hell, Kye?"

"Nothing." He was looking over his explosive options in his bandolier of grenades.

"What?"

"I think we were both wrong!" He threw a small sphere over their protective crates with admirable timing. It burst in an ear-shattering blast before it could bounce even once.

Risk couldn't feel the presence of the Black Suns anymore. Just an echo of a sense of surprise. The sudden void caused by unexpected death still shook the tender parts of her. They were guards, they were inevitably going to kill not only the both of them but countless others. Even so, the loss of life still stung.

Jormund smiled at her as he scrambled back to his feet. *Was enjoying the killing?*

No. Risk found the truth as she probed a bit deeper into the emotions surrounding her partner-in-justice: he wasn't happy about the death of the Black Suns; he was happy about his own survival.

They left the wreckage of the hallway immediately. The noise from the grenade would no doubt be garnering unwanted attention and soon. Jormund led them through a quick set of turns. His excited glow dimmed with every step of his hurried

pace.

Some cell blocks have proper physical bars; others are framed by the glow of forcefields or cruel shockfields. This holding area was little more than a hallway filled with a short row of stout, locked doors fitted with dingy windows for easy inspections.

“Said on the map that these were short-term assets. Black Sun thinks just like Mercs,” Jormund whispered over his shoulder. His bright eyes were sparkling with pride.

“Assets, acquisitions, convenient that nobody wants to call prisoners *people*,” said Risk, as a bitter taste climbed up the back of her throat. She found herself sympathizing with the tenants of this holding area far more than she would have liked.

Jormund busied himself rushing from window to window. Risk’s sense of dread solidified in her gut as cell after cell offered no joy. Angry members of a dozen different races were locked in those cells, but none of the occupants felt like the human girl that Risk had seen in the ruined apartment.

“Jormund...,” she cautioned him. His impending heartbreak already cut at her and he didn’t even know it was coming.

He reached the final cell and blanched—it was empty. He began to double back, checking each door again, staring grimly into the bleak cramped spaces. A bitter Wookiee roared at him.

Risk grabbed Jormund by the arm. “I’m so sorry, but wasting time here isn’t going to help Bina.” A presence nagged at the edge of her senses. Risk’s fingers dug into the heavy fabric of his jacket. “Someone’s coming.”

He met her sympathetic gaze with his own frightened defiance. “Then we’ll interrogate them. I’m not wasting **any** more time.”

She let his arm slip away against her better judgment. Jormund grabbed at her holster and had Reward in hand before Risk could protest.

No sooner had he disappeared around the corner than Risk heard a strange, soft sound followed by the clatter of her ion pistol against the floor.

Part 13: Alto

“Took you long enough!” said a muffled, feminine voice.

Somewhere, Risk realized, buried in an all-encompassing embrace, must have been Bina. A woman, who Risk assumed must be Bina, climbed out from the hug, wearing a slightly startled expression and a worn-out smile tinged with irritation.

The girl was a head shorter than Jormund so that he towered over her, even at his quite average height. A crescent of dark metal curved around her right eye, an obvious cybernetic implant that she made no effort to disguise.

Jormund wiped at his cheeks and pulled the girl in for another hug. Risk could see the helpless look on Bina’s face this time; she endured the affection and remembered to return it after a delay. The poor girl looked exhausted; Risk wondered if she’d been tortured.

“We’re gonna go home, Bina, it’s okay. Did they hurt you?” Jormund studied her carefully and wiped a gritty smudge from her cheek.

“I escaped six minutes and seventeen seconds ago,” she informed her brother, with a hint of pride. She dodged the question so expertly that she might as well have answered it.

“Wait, if you escaped your cell... why did you stay here?”

“I needed a terminal in order to download a floor plan and figure out which way you’d come for me. I really wanted to splice into their security cameras. But they’re too dumb to have cams anyway.”

Jormund clapped his arms around her once more, though the gesture seemed to be almost entirely for his own benefit. “You’re barvy, you know that? Completely barvy. My barvy sister.”

Risk watched most of their exchange out of the corner of her eye—she was too concerned with the potential for patrols. The reunion was touching and all, but now that they had Bina, Risk wanted out of the base. She cast another glance at the siblings, and shifted her weight from foot to foot. An odd bout of self-consciousness rendered her unable to decide what to do with her hands. “I’m glad she’s all right, but can we get out of here? We’re in the middle of enemy territory and all that.” Risk waved the other two along. “You’re the ones with maps.”

The Kyes perked up in unison and immediately suggested two completely different routes. Bina thought they should head onward down the corridor and out past the low-security zones. Jormund wanted to double back and take the reliable path they’d just used to break in. He also took a moment to return Reward to its rightful owner, with one new dent in the handle.

“Forward it is,” Risk declared, not wanting to revisit the carnage left behind by Jormund’s grenade. She’d already led the group down a handful of turns when the cell-block tenants came to mind.

“What about the others? Black Sun doesn’t have any right to

hold those people prisoner.”

“What? Why? We have Bina, let’s just get back to the Skimmer. Don’t borrow trouble.”

“But those people!”

“If you want to fix every broken law and trampled right, then we better hurry up and destroy the whole moon. C’mon, Risk.”

They were only able to cover a hundred meters’ ground in tense silence, Risk’s mind busily reconsidering her choice in careers, when they reached the guard station. The trio ducked back around the corner, but it was too late. A wall of blaster-fire locked them down as the facility’s lighting dimmed. Red alarm lights took over, giving Risk’s green complexion a new, dark grey tone.

“I thought you said these halls were low-security!” Jormund yelled at his sister over the din.

“It’s not my fault that they’re lazy and didn’t update the maps! This guard station’s new!”

The bounty hunters fired a few shots back around the corner to keep the Black Suns from advancing on their painfully-weak position.

“Bina, find us another route. We can’t hold them back for long.”

The slicer’s eyes glazed over as she reviewed the files stored in her implants. Bina’s fingers twitched in midair, manipulating a heads-up-display seen only in her mind’s eye. Jormund tossed his last grenade into the fray. The Black Suns’ armor clattered against the floor as they rolled out of range.

Bina returned to the present moment, shaken by the enormous sound of the explosion. “There’s a maintenance shaft back this way—” She started to run down the hall only to be caught by her collar. Her brother hauled her back to Risk’s side. He gave Risk a quick, imploring look before turning back to send a few more blaster bolts at the Black Suns.

“If we run,” Risk explained to Bina, “they’re going to follow us.” “Can’t you close some fire doors or something?”

Bina chewed her lip thoughtfully. “I could let the prisoners go.”

Risk’s eyes widened. It was, perhaps, a little cruel to the prisoners, but using the Black Sun’s Short Term Assets against them would give the trio exactly the cover they needed. She nodded. “Do it.”

“Do it *quickly!* They’re getting bold over there!” Jormund reached for another grenade, only to find disappointment.

Bina ran over to a terminal and executed the unscheduled release. In the distance, Risk heard a Wookiee battle cry that made her blood run cold—and she wasn’t even the intended target. Moments later, a stampede of nightmares tore past them and trampled most of the guard station. Heavier mercenaries were still standing, wrestling with Yinchorri.

Risk and the Kye siblings ducked into the maintenance shaft, a tight space that gave them just enough room to shuffle sideways between the walls of the base.

“You’re confident you know where this leads?” Risk asked. After the unexpected guard station, she had lost her faith in Black Sun recordkeeping.

“They might put in new security measures, but nobody bothers

to rip out the structure of these towers. We'll be at the entrance in... well, going by our current rate," Bina's implants pinged satellite systems and ran a full set of rote, unnecessary calculations; each value a product of her obsessive love of data."We should get there in six minutes, thirty-six seconds. Ooh! thirty-four; we sped up!"

Risk smiled in spite of herself. She couldn't help but enjoy Bina's fascination with data.

Two minutes overdue, they found a junction that led back into the tower's broader, public spaces.

They'd come out near an unmanned loading dock. A great, corrugated metal door rolled up out of their way at Bina's electronic bidding. Risk jogged a couple of meters ahead of the others. She cast her senses out onto the wide expanse of the Black Sun landing pad and found nothing alive. Even after applying her standard precautions, Risk felt a lump in her stomach. She *knew* nothing could be this easy.

"Do you hear that?" Jormund trotted to a halt beside her. Risk could only catch the usual sounds of the city: the whine of airspeeder lanes, groaning metal, a random pulse of gunfire, and the crash and drone of industry.

Bina stepped forward and turned her attention to the skies. They could almost see a yellowed patch of atmosphere, if they squinted just right. "I hear it too. Sort of a—"

A huge, two-legged hunk of metal dropped down onto the platform in a rush of jet fuel. The machine's "arms" and "spine" hung limp for a second as its joint actuators ran through their startup processes. Its rocket pack fell away, emptied of fuel.

The bipedal walker had to be nearly five meters tall. Its shoulder bore a fresh Black Sun emblem, pristine against its scratched and dented armor plating.

Inside, Risk could see a mercenary pilot eagerly preparing his laser cannons. “Hit the deck!” she cried and shoved the nearest Kye sibling toward cover. They dove behind boxes and hoped that today wasn’t Flammable Loading Day.

Risk popped out Reward’s battery and confirmed her fears: she was down to three shots, nowhere near enough to take out a machine of that size. She might be able to disable an arm or a leg, if every shot landed correctly. Jormund looked just as grim as she felt. His bandolier was empty and his blaster, even at full charge, couldn’t hope to pierce that armor.

A battered taxi swooped low over the loading dock. Its stabilizers whined angrily as it wobbled unsteadily. Underneath, a blur of a lithe figure swung from a grappling line, which detached just a couple of meters above the landing pad. The new arrival rolled back to standing and broke into a run with perfect gymnastic grace.

The walker unleashed a salvo of massive, green shots from its laser cannons, sending permacrete shrapnel flying. Its target ran on, untouched. Risk peeked out from their hiding place as the dust settled and was able to make out a blue mop of short hair on their mysterious benefactor. “Jormund, is that...?”

He scrambled over for a look. “No. There’s no way she’d do this!” Jormund stared across the landing pad in shock. None of them could imagine why the girl who had stolen his navicomputer would be here, now, rescuing them.

Secus Rue had the advantage of speed against the walker; its

torso couldn't twist and so it was forced to turn step by step to track its target. Secus stopped behind the mechanical behemoth and raised a small device. She swung it in a tight circle above her head and sent it flying toward the walker at an angle.

The grappling hook caught its right leg, which was still in the midst of a labored effort to turn after its target. She took off running again, a tight metal cable trailing behind her as she went. Impossibly, she ran even faster when crossing back into the pilot's view and managed to avoid another wave of shots.

After two rotations, the walker was doomed. Secus had enough wire spooled around its legs that it toppled with its final step. The machine fell over, its cockpit crashing into the permacrete, sending the pilot's helmeted head into the viewport. The walker shot out a fresh rain of sparks and lay still.

Secus cantered over, waving happily.

"What in Blazes are you doing here?" Jormund yelled, dumbfounded.

Her smile faded. "Not even a thank you?"

"Thank you, Secus," Risk provided.

The teenager beamed again, showing off her single golden tooth. "I was just in the area for a little, um, recon. You know, looking for salvageables." She winked a cybernetic eye at Bina. "The technically-inclined gotta look out for each other, right?"

Initially utterly confused, Bina stammered an agreement.

Secus ran to the edge of the platform. "Anyway, gotta go! Keep an eye on your goods, Blondie!" She fired another grappling

hook at a hapless airspeeder, which jerked and wobbled as it carried her into traffic.

“That girl is insane,” Jormund marveled.

Hutt Space. Nar Shaddaa. Corellian Sector. Geometer Studios.

Risk’s latest apartment was forested.

She had managed to *negotiate* for a place that had the rare advantage of sunshine, and made full use of the perk. Delicate orchids grew near the window, surrounded by bromeliads with gouts of color sprouting out in lush plumes, while shade-loving ferns covered the walls.

Bina had tried pacing a few times, but she kept running into fronds. The greenhouse atmosphere suited Risk; she had chosen the Agri-Corps over the Med-Corps out of a genuine interest in botany. Unlike Risk, who had appreciated the city but luxuriated in its treasured gardens, Bina thrived on her artificial world. Technology was, quite literally, a part of her and she had the look of someone suffering the inexplicable pain of a phantom limb.

“We could send your friend to go get a couple of the computers! Just the memory drives. *Please.*” Bina scratched at her implant as she spoke. “It wouldn’t be difficult. I don’t need much.”

“Bina, you know better than this,” Jormund explained, yet again. “Black Sun holds grudges. They probably have people watching the place. Anyone we send is going to get nabbed.” He had his feet up on Risk’s caff table, hands folded behind his head. The

bounty hunter insisted upon making himself comfortable anywhere he sat.

Bina gave him a piteous, sisterly look.

Jormund sighed. "I'll get you a new computer as soon as we find you somewhere safe."

Bina's eyes teared up a bit as she continued to implore her dear older brother, but judging by his lack of response, Risk assumed Jormund was inured to this particular maneuver. Anyway, Risk had the dual advantages of perspective and the Force and could see through Bina's act. Ultimately, Risk's impatient streak won out over diplomacy. "Jormund can't even go home because of this mess, and you're whining at him over a few chunks of data? Glad I don't have siblings to muck up my life." Risk crossed her arms tightly over her chest and glared at Bina. The Mirialan leaned against the wall, nearly camouflaged between a viney shrub and an ancient-looking succulent.

"No, you do a fine job of that yourself, Risk," Jormund snapped. "Sorry, that was harsh. But she's my sister and it's my life she's mucking up."

Risk continued smoothly, "Maybe she could keep busy with the forgery?" She was more than happy to find her way out of this swamp of familial interactions that she couldn't understand.

Bina brightened at the mention of crime. "Forgery?"

"Risk got herself into a fix poaching from the Bounty Hunter's Guild. Doesn't want to go through the paperwork to get a card, and now they put a bounty on her. You can make her legitimate, right?"

Bina chewed on her lip for a long, thoughtful moment. When she finally spoke, her rapid-fire words hardly resembled Basic. “Sort of. Their networks are pretty loose, but they have redundancies and there’s the matter of their in-person authentication. It’s archaic but really effective. The best I could do is some temporary credential duping but that would only last until the genuine shows up.”

Risk’s brows knit together. “I followed most of that. I think she said she could do it?”

“It’s just a temporary fix,” Jormund answered, accustomed to translating slicer-speak. “How long would she get, Bee, a day, a week?”

“Whenever the creds got used again. We can pick someone who doesn’t swipe in often, but even then—”

“Even then, I have to deal with this myself,” Risk cut in.

Jormund stood up. “I told you I’d help with this, and I’m a man of my word.”

Risk forced a wan smile. “The short term card will work. I’ve got a plan. Let me know when it’s ready.”

Just as Risk reached the door, Bina called after her, “I’m going to need a computer!”

Risk waved a dismissive hand as she crossed the threshold. “Use mine. I’ll be back later.”

As the door shut, Bina looked over at the anemic, consumer machine in the corner of the room. “She’s not serious. Is she? Nine Hells, how am I supposed to work with *that?!?*!”

The Noodle Engine had served authentic, family recipes to upper-level clientele in the Corellian sector for six generations, and its large transparisteel windows featured gilded red Aurebesh signage to that effect. A steady stream of customers attended the restaurant, all of them better dressed than the average sublevel dweller. And, as per Nar Shaddaa custom, all of them were conspicuously armed.

The Noodle Engine wasn't fine dining by any standard, but it was classy dining. Since the bounty went out on Risk, nearly a month ago, she couldn't be seen in the shop next to the Guild Office, but she genuinely missed her lunch dates with Dafna. Before that unfortunate turn of bureaucracy, the two women had enjoyed a weekly tete-a-tete full of exaggerated, gossip-laden chatter that Risk would have never admitted to enjoying.

The Togruta girl was beaming at Risk from one of the tables near the register when she came in, apparently unfazed by the change in venue or the extended hiatus on their lunches. Her white teeth and markings gleamed brilliantly against her rich red complexion. She had a new adornment, a silvery chain strung with blue beads that laced between her striped horns.

"Do you like it? Seril got it for me. He's such a sweetheart. I really wasn't sure about dating a Nautilan, but the accent grows on you after a while!"

"You couldn't stop talking about him from the day he walked into the Guild Office," Risk corrected her with a sly smile.

Dafna's white markings flushed and nearly disappeared against the backdrop of her red skin. She giggled wildly as their waiter arrived with their noodles. Dafna had ordered their usual: a

classic dish reserved for non-Corellians, while Corellians themselves stuck to the more authentic fare—the spicy stuff that was rumored to make even Wookiees cry.

“*Ladies...*” the waiter said, capitalizing on her giddiness. He winked at Dafna as he left to deliver more orders. Another fit of giggling kept her from even sampling the food, and it nearly infected Risk as well.

“Say, Dafna, how does the whole... dating thing actually *work*, anyway?” Risk ventured after a few mouthfuls of hesitation.

“What do you mean, how does dating work? You mean you don’t know?” Dafna’s eyes widened, “You’ve never—!”

“Not in so many words, no, I mean it wasn’t ever something I... considered...” Risk’s concept of romance came from a few holovids she’d watched in the empty hours between grifts when she’d first arrived on Nar Shaddaa. They were saccharine, cheesy affairs that looked like entirely too much trouble, and intensely interesting all the same.

“Oh dear. And you’re...” Dafna looked as if she’d just discovered that Risk had no idea how food worked, or hadn’t ever gotten the knack of breathing without conscious effort. The Togruta was at a loss for where to begin.

“How’s your food? Mine’s good,” Risk said, finding herself uncomfortably warm. Her scar itched.

“Risk.”

The Mirialan set her forehead on the cool tabletop and muttered into the blessedly-clean surface. “He’s *distracting* and he knows my drink order.”

Dafna laughed and patted her friend on the shoulder. “Then let him distract you a little! So long as he’s not a bounty hunter. Those guys are the worst.”

Risk lifted her head to give Dafna an aggrieved look.

“Oh no. Who is it?”

Risk scratched at the back of her head. “Does that really matter? Anyway, I think I’m probably going to see about, you know, going legitimate myself. Two bounty hunters—”

“What do you mean, going legitimate? Have you been poaching?” Dafna’s hand flew to her lips, “Blazes, you’re not that bounty—Risk, they are *so mad* at you!” The noise of the crowded restaurant couldn’t quite cover Dafna’s outburst, and she had to lower her voice to shake off the unwanted attention of the other patrons. “Do you have any idea how much trouble you’re in?!”

“Plenty. But I have a plan, if you’ll help me.”

The message told him to call during the earliest of Nar Shaddaa's daylight hours. Jormund had received stranger instructions for retrieving valuable information and decided he might as well follow through. The line was secure, which wasn't unusual. The message had been anonymous, so he expected the sender to be some flavor of paranoid: justified or certifiable. Their credits worked either way.

The system only had time to signal once before the hail was accepted. Granted, he was calling half an hour late, but he had appearances to keep up. His terminal filled with a video

transmission. Apparently they weren't willing to shell out for a secure holocam. The head that appeared was startlingly pale, bald and nearly skeletal. The eyes bothered him the most. That gaze seemed to go right through him, and maybe shiv his brain a few times on the way by. He couldn't quite place the gender.

"All right. You're creepy," Jormund said, with just enough volume for the mic to pick him up, and he knew it. He felt an unease growing faster than it should have, considering that he was looking at a face on a monitor rather than staring down this frightening visage in person.

His potential client studied him at length. A sense of self-consciousness skittered over Jormund's skin as he sat under the scrutiny.

"You are harboring a Mirialan," the skull-faced woman told him, her husky but feminine voice letting him pin down her gender. For some reason, that helped. Her interest in Risk disappointed him. She was probably a bounty hunter lodging a complaint that he was puppy-guarding a valuable contract, *blah blah blah*.

He shrugged. "No idea who that is. I don't have my eye on any Miraluka. Good hunting!" He moved to close the channel.

"I know you are harboring her. What you should know is that I am willing to pay *you* one-hundred-thousand credits to turn her over to me, *alive*." There was something about her voice, something beyond the eerie quality to her vocal range; Jormund felt compelled to listen, to consider this offer, as ridiculously unbelievable as it may have been.

"A hundred-thousand credits?" Such a sum was unheard of, outside of a top Hutt-backed bounty. He was determined to

hear more, in contempt of the swelling rebellion in the back of his mind. He couldn't turn in Risk.

Could I?

"I will send you the coordinates. Deliver her, intact, and you will have your hundred-thousand." Jormund found himself leaning over the monitor, hanging on her every word.

"I'll be turning her in to you?" Jormund couldn't believe what he was hearing, much less what he was saying. He wrenched the sentence into a question. It was as if he had to wrest control of his own voice back from... what?

"You will complete the contract. Arrive at the coordinates with the target, alive. You have one Nar Shaddaa day." The ghostly woman closed the channel from her side. His monitor switched back to basic readouts: weather, news; other boring, meaningless crap.

Jormund slouched back in his chair. His head felt pinched, as if his skull had been stuck between an enormous thumb and forefinger. Or dealing with Imps.

He rolled his shoulders and tried to pound the tension out of his muscles with a loose fist. The suggestion that he turn Risk in kept coming back to him, nagging at him.

One hundred-thousand credits was a **lot** of money.

Part 14: Skytalk

Hutt Space. Nar Shaddaa. Business Sector. Bounty Hunters' Guild Headquarters.

“Of course, Madam,” the glossy, red protocol droid answered Risk eagerly. “If you would be so kind as to swipe your guild card for me.” It gestured stiffly toward the desk’s sole prominent feature. As the guild receptionist, the droid had no need of flimsies or a personal terminal. It also could easily be repaired in the event of a visit from an unsatisfied client. The multitude of scratches on his plating suggested that such visits might be a regular occurrence.

Risk slid her counterfeit card through the reader, disguising her uncertainty with boredom. Bina had made the credentials’ weakness abundantly clear: Risk could pose as Ryal Solum indefinitely—until the real Solum swiped her real card at any guild office or in any Imperial Security Post.

Solum hadn’t used the card in three months, checked in rarely, and seemed to only hunt bounties when it suited her. It was the best Bina could do.

A tiny light on the card reader flickered white as data bounced along network links. After a few agonizing seconds, it glowed a steady green. “Ms. Solum, Guildmaster Cradossk is waiting for you in his office. Please, use one of our complimentary weapons lockers and we will be on our way.”

Risk waved off the droid-receptionist. “I don’t need a complimentary locker today, thanks.” The combination of her unreliable credentials and the lucrative bounty she wore around her neck made disarming sound more than unappealing.

The droid shuffled around his anachronistic desk and addressed her again, his golden eyes glowing. “Madam, the weapons lockers are both complimentary and mandatory.” He raised his arms at the elbow, as if expecting to shake both her

hands at once. Instead, the droid's forearms split along a hidden seam and revealed a pair of nasty built-in blaster rifles.

Risk lifted her hands in surrender and stepped over to the lockers. "I see your point."

"Do not forget your key. I assure you that your weapons will not be disturbed until three months after your demise—should you choose to leave them with us." He recited the Guild's policy as if it were a cheerful marketing screed.

Risk wondered if the guild's doorway weapon scanners could detect her lightsaber as she stole a glance over her shoulder at the droid. She hooked her elbow into the drape of her cloak and used it to cover the locker as she obediently placed her entire private arsenal inside.

The receptionist's weaponry retracted amicably and he led her into the oddly professional central guild office. Risk would probably have been more interested in the unexpected corporate decor if she hadn't been preoccupied by the uncomfortable lightness of being unarmed.

Disarmament complete, Risk was free to address the key inconsistency, "I thought I was meeting with the council."

"Ms. Solum, Guildmaster Cradosk is waiting for you in his office," the droid repeated. He showed her to a large set of black double doors and bowed graciously before he shuffled off to resume his duties.

Risk glared at his oblivious, shiny back and mentally discharged a bit of lingering resentment over her absent weaponry. The emotion was misplaced, and she didn't care.

The doors parted to reveal a bright office caught in the height of a colorful Nar Shaddaa sunset. Risk's eyes were dazzled by the light streaming in from the floor-to-ceiling windows and she was forced to pause in the doorway to adjust to the scene.

"Enter," said the office's sole occupant, in the Trandoshan tongue. Risk could follow the language well enough to understand the invitation. Fortunately, anyone as business-minded as Cradosk would comprehend Basic even if his anatomy wasn't well-disposed to speaking it.

She squinted at the reptilian silhouette. "Guildmaster, forgive me but I expected to meet with the council."

"Instead, you meet with me. Perhaps you are disappointed, *Risk*," he hissed. Her name stood out among the grunts and hisses of Dosh. She could see well enough to catch the light glistening from an antique dagger in Cradosk's hands. He was engrossed in the task of cleaning what must have been a prized family heirloom. She wondered, grimly, how many beings it had slain over the generations.

"I've yet to decide. But I am grateful that I don't have to keep up the charade," she lied. Her stolen credentials had been one of her few comforts.

"We allow for poachers. Do you know why?" Cradosk stood up and began slowly stalking towards Risk. He didn't bother to sheathe the knife.

"They make real bounty hunters look good and they take the jobs you don't want," she offered, head held high like a student called upon in class. The Trandoshan nodded approvingly and stopped a couple of meters away from her.

“Very good. The council wants me to gut you from here,” he pointed the knife at her stomach, “to here.” He brought the blade up to point at her neck. “Again, Do you know why?”

Risk squared her shoulders and answered as dispassionately as she would have answered an instructor at Relco. The vicious threat was transparent, familiar and easy enough to deal with. It also frightened her, a little. She stamped out that little fear, smothering it as she would smother any errant thought of her own mortality. “Because I’m better than a poacher.”

Cradosk narrowed his orange eyes and blinked. His eyelids closed lazily, like a sleepy crocodile napping as it waits for its prey. He spat out a laugh and sheathed his dagger. “You must be. But you are wrong; that is not why they want you dead.”

Risk allowed herself a breath, a fluttering diversion from the tension saturating her body. For an instant, she had been so certain that she’d won him over with her bravery. Though, she had to wonder if she’d correctly understood that sudden phrase in Dosh; she spoke so rarely to Trandosians. Risk’s focus shifted, and she found herself reminded of Zeraina’s treacherous feints in their sparring matches, the way the Miraluka could play Risk’s own expectations against her. “Then what’s the problem?”

He closed the gap between them with a single, long step. Risk clenched down on her urge to retreat, to reach for a lightsaber that wasn’t resting in her belt. He sniffed the air around her, mouth slightly agape. “You ruin our reputation. You let bounties go. You killed three licensed hunters.” He added, after a moment, “The Wookiee survived.”

She studied Cradosk for a long moment. “Why don’t *you* want

to kill me?”

“The Scorekeeper teaches many things. She says we must not waste. Gutting you is a waste of a good hunter.” He circled her once and made his way back to a chair behind a simple, curved desk. Sharp claws on his bare, clawed feet clicked on the hard flooring. “The ones you killed were not good hunters.”

Now that her eyes had adjusted to the room, and her attention was free to wander, Risk noticed that rope nets hung from the ceiling, full of dessicated trophies. The walls were covered with ancient weapons, most of which had been restored to their former, gleaming glory. A few camouflage and flight suits stood near the door, immaculate and ready for use. He gestured for Risk to take a seat opposite his desk. She obliged and gave his hunters’ regalia an appreciative nod as she sat.

“So we can forget this bounty and you’ll let me join the guild.”

“You could have joined the guild any time—before you made us angry.”

“Then, I don’t understand....”

“You killed three licensed hunters on Nal Koska. You let the prey go free. That is unacceptable. You will make amends.”

Risk leaned forward in her seat. “And how am I supposed to do that?”

“You are not sworn to the Creed. You cannot break an oath you have not sworn.”

The Guildmaster fell silent, then, as if he expected her to parse out his logic from such a vague statement. Indeed, Risk’s mind

was working through the possibilities. What business could be too problematic for Cradosk to take on himself? It couldn't be a matter solvable by violence, or petty intimidation. Something personal? Political? Risk was accustomed to thinking fast, but the Guildmaster had her pride held hostage. Every time her thoughts grazed something encouraging, the idea skittered away before she could grasp it.

The leather of his chair creaked as he leaned forward. A soft, clicking hiss signalled his impatience. He must have grown tired of watching her think.

Risk surrendered. She wouldn't gain the upper hand with cleverness, so she settled for humility. "...go on?"

Cradosk slid a picture, printed on flimsy, across his desk. In the photo, a well-groomed man with a tidy goatee was frozen in the act of adjusting an expensive crimson jacket. "Fore Prion has broken the Creed many times. But the council does not believe that he could disappoint them. They dismiss the evidence. They like him. He has hurt acquisitions that should have been protected. He always cuts on them. Every body is missing pieces. The Gamorreans are unrecognizable. The last one was missing half his ribcage." Cradosk shook his head. "Unnecessary."

Risk winced; she couldn't help but think of Bythar Kull—a man whose depravity warranted his timely death. The two certainly had a sadistic streak in common. "Then, you do have proof. Just let them see it."

"He is an oily man. His smile covers up the truth and our council believes that the damage is just part of his work. It is a great dishonor to the guild."

“And you want me to restore your honor.”

Cradossk smiled with rows of perfectly conical teeth. “Thank you for the offer. I accept.”

Risk collected the rest of the necessary information, all of it covered in caveats and oaths to secrecy. She left the Bounty Hunters’ Guild headquarters steeled for her first guild-sanctioned hunt.

Risk preferred to rent convertible airspeeders. They cost more, and they could be seen as more vulnerable in a firefight. But, they were well worth the freedom and the ability to easily access the backseat.

She had the top down as she piloted her way to the high-rent district bordering on the Hutts’ Pleasure Sector. These penthouses were far enough away to avoid the light pollution, but close enough that they could enjoy the Huttese conveniences on a whim.

Jormund was having a fit in her ear.

“—which is exactly how Cradossk is going to screw you!” He had spent the past twenty minutes finding new and colorful reasons that Risk should give up on this deal and maybe move to some exoplanet casino somewhere.

“He’s an honorable man. It’s a good arrangement, where everybody wins but Fore.”

“Fore Prion is practically a Guild Council member, you do realize that. He’s got his own legion of hunters who report to

him rather than the guild. If any of them spot you... just wait for me and we'll take care of this together."

"We've been over this. You're responsible to the creed. I'm not. It's the advantage of being a poacher. It's the only reason Cradosk didn't just shoot me when I arrived."

"I don't like this. You know I don't like this."

"I know." She closed the channel and threw the comm into the back seat. Jormund wouldn't have anything new to say and she was about to arrive at Blueshift Towers.

The speeder's cloth roof stretched back into place as Risk piloted the vehicle into the valet garage. She pulled up the hood of her dark grey robes to cover her primary distinguishing feature. Her life as a fugitive might have been simpler if she dyed her hair black or brown, but where was the fun in that?

"Welcome to Blueshift Towers, ma'am," said the valet who ran up to greet her. The adolescent Nikto's horns hadn't completely come in yet, and he looked as shy and embarrassed as an acned human teenager. "I'm a-afraid that our security regulations require all visitors to check in and allow our scanners to—"

"I'm not a visitor. You just haven't seen me before," Risk asserted as she eased back her hood just enough to make eye contact with the boy. She kept her back turned to the cameras for good measure.

"You're not a visitor. I just haven't seen you before." The Nikto stepped aside to let her pass.

Risk tossed him the speeder's access card along with a

credcoin and continued on her way toward the parking level's expensive, transparisteel elevator.

Inside, she attached one of Bina's more ingenious inventions to the elevator's console. Risk didn't exactly understand the technological genius behind it, but the device worked like a mind trick for machinery. Risk could select any private floor she wanted, so long as the blocky little device was attached correctly.

The short ride to Prion's penthouse offered her an excellent nighttime view of some of Nar Shaddaa's most garish casinos and highest-class gentleman's clubs. Their dancing plasma displays were just distant enough to blur into a scintillating field of color and light. She couldn't make out a single effigy of gyrating dancers or pirouetting credit-signs, but Risk knew they were out there.

The elevator chimed twice, giving her just enough time to remove Bina's device and tuck it away for later use. If Risk left it behind, she'd never hear the end of it. Bina's attachment to her technology bordered on the pathological.

Risk stepped into the marble-lined salon of Prion's penthouse. She cringed as soon as her feet met the polished floor. The dark side hung in the air, like a pervasive, moldy odor that clung to buildings rotting from within. Risk's lip curled in disgust. She'd encountered brushes of darkness in Nar Shaddaa, but this penthouse housed a gloom that belonged on Byss. Or a tomb.

There was no sign of Prion, or his staff. In fact, none of the interior lights were on. Risk took a moment to look around the dim space, to get her bearings. The floor, the walls, the ceiling

were sheathed in polished white marble. Curvaceous vases, expertly-carved busts and masterful paintings filled every sculpted alcove. The entire place spoke of Old Republic nobility and Risk had to admit, Fore had taste.

A polished, state-of-the-art protocol droid arrived in the salon to greet Fore's visitor. The feminine model's plating had been painstakingly customized so that she looked like an animated statue wrought by a late Alderaanian master. Before the droid could even activate her vocabulator to greet Risk, the former Jedi held up her hand and gently flipped the droid's primary control switch.

Risk wouldn't destroy a work of art, even one commissioned by someone as indulgent and cruel as Prion, if she didn't have to. The lights in the droid's eyes went dark, her spine slumped and she fell still. Risk had to credit the designer; the droid stayed on her feet while deactivated and managed to look even more statuesque than before.

Unannounced, Risk was free to collect herself and search the Force. Fore mustn't have kept living servants, as she could only sense a single, dark presence nearby.

The scents and muted sounds of cooking drew her onward through the spacious penthouse, searching for the kitchen. More priceless works of art adorned his living room, which had another spectacular view of Nar Shaddaa. Risk would have forgiven anyone for believing these were senatorial quarters on Coruscant, rather than a glorified murderer's home.

That careless thought stopped her short. Who was the murderer here? Prion, or the assassin sneaking around his apartment in the dark? If the Jedi Council were still around, they

would be disgusted beyond words. Shame tried to take hold of her feet, to turn her back to the elevator and to make her forget this entire despicable enterprise. Instead, her thoughts turned back to the mangled bodies, the suspicious behavior. Prion wasn't an innocent man; Cradosk had provided her more than enough evidence to convince her that he defied the guild's few laws, defied basic decency. Maybe she could give him a chance to prove his innocence—or guilt—and her conscience would *shut up for once*.

She pressed on and found a sliver of light escaping around the cracks of a door near the formal dining room. The door presented another anachronism of Alderaanian nobility: it swung on hinges. Risk eased the door open, just enough to peer inside with one eye.

The kitchen matched the rest of Prion's decor perfectly; it was enormous and packed with every appliance and tool on the market. A large island filled the center of the space, covered in cut vegetables and a half rack of ribs. She watched as Prion brought a large chef's knife down, hard, as he finished separating the different cuts of meat. His every movement was practiced and natural, as befitting a man who took pride in his culinary skills. But there was a stuttering shakiness in his muscles that Risk couldn't quite explain.

Prion wiped his bloody hands on his utilitarian white apron and turned to the mostly shut door. "Do come in! I am always eager to share meals and yet so rarely have the company."

Risk's blood drained to her feet, regrouped and rushed back to darken her cheeks with surprise and embarrassment. She obliged her "host" and stepped inside.

He beamed at her, though his eyes narrowed as he studied the cloaked figure that stood in his kitchen. She threw back her hood, the disguise useless at this point. Either the man would die by her hand and tell no tales, or live and she would have to explain the whole mess anyway.

“You are brilliant. Absolutely radiant, my dear.” His oily compliments slid through the air and made her desperately crave a sanisteam. “Come, sit. I have a very fine steak finishing under the broiler. You must eat with me.”

A cold draft brushed against Risk’s neck, out of place in the perfectly-maintained penthouse. “I’m not hungry, thank you all the same.”

“That i-is a pity,” he stuttered. He retrieved a pot holder and in turn, used it to retrieve the aforementioned steak. It looked more like a white meat to Risk’s eye. The scent was the wrong kind of buttery and turned the edges of her stomach. “I hope you don’t mind if I...?”

Her brow furrowed as she nodded an uneasy assent. “You *are* Fore Prion, aren’t you?”

“Well, of course. I should hope you know that, given that you are trespassing in my penthouse,” he replied, matter-of-factly. He plated himself a meal, with an expert presentation of vegetables and a reduction sauce. The cleaned rack of ribs waited patiently on the butcher’s block, bloodied knife laying nearby. Without an eye to the charnel mess less than a meter away, Prion sat down to enjoy his dinner.

“And that doesn’t bother you?”

“Well, no. In one sense, you are saving me some trouble. In another, as I said, I rarely get to enjoy the company of others for very long. Especially one as bright as yourself. You really should have something to eat...” Another chilling draft caressed her cheek and sent an unpleasant tingling around the back of her neck. He took a bite of steak and made a show of enjoying the morsel.

“I’m fine, thank you.” Risk wasn’t sure how to segue into the assassination, and so she sat awkwardly as her victim-to-be savored his last meal.

“It’s been years since I’ve seen anyone as bright as you. Even then, only at a distance. Does it hurt? Hurts my eyes.”

“What?” She was baffled beyond hope, now.

Prion slammed his hands onto the sturdy island, apparently choking. He gagged, shuddered, and Risk saw muscles twitching all over his body. Fore stilled the seizure with great effort, but a pathological laugh escaped before he could crush it.

Risk stood back, eager to get some distance from a man so possessed. He turned a sheet-white face up at her and grinned. “Don’t be frightened; I feel *fantastic*.” He sat up straight, adjusted his clothing, and the color returned to his skin. This time, a gust of cold wind swirled into the room, strong enough that Risk couldn’t dismiss it as a quirk of the heating system. Her hair hadn’t been disturbed in the slightest, but her senses had. Prion wasn’t just a locus of dark side energy. “You’re using it. You know exactly what you’re doing.”

His smile faded. “Do you?”

Risk's saber ignited and cast her hair in a pink hue. She swung the red blade in a wide arc, aimed at Prion's neck.

He ducked and threw back his chair as he leapt backwards, far faster than any civilian—even a bounty hunter—should have.

No one had ever dodged her! No one outside of the Jedi or Sith should have been able to keep up. Risk's mind swam, unprepared for these bizarre revelations.

Prion laughed again, an uncontrollable and mirthless sound better suited to a coughing fit. The dirty chef's knife flew towards Risk, though she hadn't seen him throw it. Before she could react, it had lodged itself deep in her thigh, straight through to the hilt.

Risk cried out and sent her free hand to the wound. When she looked up, she was alone in the kitchen, the door swinging wildly on its hinges.

She staggered after Prion, knowing better than to remove the knife and unstopper the blood in her veins. The wound was off-center in her leg and that gave her hope that it hadn't damaged an artery.

The rest of the penthouse was still dark and her eyes had to adjust to the dim light provided by the cityscape outside. All around her, Risk heard that horrible, convulsive laughter. She couldn't pin down the source and stood as best she could, saber at the ready.

"Everyone's heard the stories. Eat the dead and gain their strength. They're missing the most—" laughter overtook him "—vital part. Eat what you kill, you see? That is what all other,

honorable hunters do.”

Risk heard the light tapping of footsteps behind her, rushing toward her. She reversed her grip on the hilt and jabbed it into the darkness at her back. The blade clashed against a pliant weight and she heard a body hit the marble floor.

She used the light of her saber to investigate the crumpled body. Prion’s previously cordial expression was drawn and startled in death, eyes wide open. Risk took a shuffling, painful step backward only to find her ankle caught in his tight grip.

Prion grinned at her again and whispered, “Eat what you kill....”

She put her lightsaber through his neck.

The bandage around Risk’s thigh was red and wet, soaked through to the point of uselessness. She would worry about that later. Prion’s body lay across her airspeeder’s back seat, wrapped in one of his bedsheets. She was worried about that now: she wanted as far away from this demon as possible. Even dead, he reeked of evil.

Ahead, a few unfortunately rib-like beams jutted out of the skeletal remains of a long-abandoned shipyard. Risk brought the speeder down through the collapsed roof and came to a stop in a small tempest of dust.

Cradosk’s clawed foot stepped from a murky shadow into a rare shaft of light. He watched as the speeder’s convertible roof rolled back to reveal the shrouded body within. “You work fast. The Scorekeeper smiles on you today, Risk.”

She wanted to hop out of the driver's seat with catlike grace. Instead, she hid her bloodied leg within her robe and took great effort to strike a nonchalant pose next to the speeder. "You were right about him. He was... doing terrible things. Darkness like that, Cradosk, like him..." She couldn't finish the thought.

Cradosk reached into the backseat and lifted the sheet. Fore Prion's dead eyes were still open, still staring out with that hungry look. She shuddered and pulled her cloak tightly around her shoulders. Risk hadn't wanted to touch him, and thanks to her knack with the Force, she hadn't had to.

The Trandoshan took a few slow, purposeful steps towards her. He must have detected the lie in her posture or a shadow of anxiousness on her face; his movements were methodical and gentle, as if he were working with a frightened animal. "It is done now. My honor is restored. Your reputation is restored." He handed her a crisp ID card featuring her image and her alias, and a listing of the preferred territories for her contracts.

Risk's nerves were still shaken and she felt woozy from the loss of blood. Vertigo threatened her every movement. Even so, she smiled in spite of all the little agonies and pocketed her hard-won legitimacy. She nodded and climbed back into the speeder, taking great pains not to reveal her injured leg.

Cradosk tossed a roll of bandages into her passenger seat and waved his goodbye.

Hutt Space. Y'toub System. Star Destroyer Arbalest.

One of the stormtroopers had a poor grip on the body. The

former captain's feet slammed into the floor. They were better marksmen than pallbearers. Sly Moore glared at them from her newly acquired desk as they awkwardly hustled the black body bag out of the room.

Her hatred for the Y'toub system was still running strong. The *Arbalest* had been lurking just beyond the asteroid cloud for nearly a galactic standard year now. The crew had strong doubts about her ongoing mission to hunt down Relco's only graduate; doubts given to them by the traitorous Captain who would no longer be a problem.

Moore had absolutely no intention of skulking out of Hutt Space in defeat. Relco Training Facility hummed on, as she had placed competent instructors in her office back on Byss. Sly Moore's only concern was the retrieval mission—which was not going well at all.

Even with Zeraina Holl's eager searching, they hadn't seen a good lead in three months. Her own call to the bounty hunter had turned up nothing. She considered paying him another visit; this time, she could make use of fear and perhaps even pain. Enticement to greed hadn't gotten her anywhere.

Lord Vader would no doubt demand results soon. That was the only timetable Moore cared about. Darth Sidious had a fondness for the broken man that the Jedi Council had called the Chosen One; Moore had to concede that he did have some impressive capabilities. But Vader was shortsighted, and not only because of the restrictions on his body due to that regrettable life-support suit. Moore preferred to think in the long term.

And there she is, returning like a headache.

Zeraina Holl pushed her way through the crowded hall outside the former captain's office. She barreled through the door, clutching a thin datapad. Moore noticed an energy in Zeraina's Force Aura, something that went beyond her hungry pride and desire to serve. Zeraina had an eager alertness, the energetic satisfaction of a spider who has just sensed a vibration on one of the silken strings of her web.

"Ma'am, you'll want to see this."

Part 15: Warrior Concerto

“So, anyway... I was thinking, it’s just ridiculous that we’re each paying for our own apartments,” Jormund ventured. He was looking at her out of the corner of his eye.

“As opposed to what?” Risk felt she should have understood the deeper meaning in his prompt, that he was leading into something. Except that she didn’t *want* to understand.

Jormund shrank into the passenger seat of their airspeeder. “Well, there are other arrangements we could—”

Risk’s comm chimed. She retrieved it a little too abruptly. “Hold that thought,” she said, tapping the device into her ear. “Hey, Dafna.”

“How’s it going, Risky Lady?” The male voice on the other end of the line was genial, overly familiar, and unwelcome. “Dafna’s busy.”

Her expression soured. “Vin, why are you calling me?”

“You and Dafna have an understanding about contracts, I know, I know. Look, we got an urgent flag here and you lucked out. It’s in one of your territories and you’re the first one to answer the call. Mess in the Lower Warehouse District, big Hutt payout.”

“Hey, maybe you’re not such a waste of desk space in that office after all, Vin,” she teased.

“You say the sweetest things,” he shot back at her dully. “I’m

sending the details to your datapad. Good hunting.”

Risk removed the comm from her ear and smiled at Jormund, “There’s a priority contract in the Lower Warehouse. Shall we?”

He forced a hollow smile; this wasn’t the conversation he’d wanted, but it was better than nothing. “I’ve got nowhere else to be. How’s your leg?”

“It healed up months ago. It’s fine.” She didn’t tell him that it was still stiff most days and ached on the tired ones.

“I’m just saying, I don’t think I’ve seen anyone bleed quite that much.”

She shrugged and took the speeder down into the darker levels of the City of Anarchy. “It could have been worse. At least he wasn’t an Imp.”

A chipper jingle heralded the arrival of the contract details on Risk’s datapad. Jormund skimmed over the summary. “Apparently, one of Damrok’s shipments got hijacked. They have a tracking beacon on the cargo. Looks like the goods are valuable and the targets are amateurs. Should be easy.”

“Any idea how many we’re dealing with?”

“Doesn’t say.”

Risk set the speeder down a few abandoned intersections away from the derelict warehouse. The air on this level was heavy with humidity. Halos circled flickering lamps as their intermittent light diffused through the thick air.

The building was mostly intact, save for the windows, which were always the first to go after the tenants and owners fled.

Jormund snuck around the perimeter of the warehouse looking for signs of life, evidence of booby traps on doors, anything that might give them an edge. Risk kept an eye on the main entrance: a wide loading door that could easily accommodate the largest speeder trucks. For the moment, the door was shut, but that could change at any time. She didn't see anyone come or go, save for Jormund.

"I saw some footprints outside, and the tracks led both ways. Whoever these people are, they're really sloppy and have way too much faith in their hiding spot. Unless... you think it's a dead drop?"

Risk shook her head. "If the shipment's so valuable, I don't believe they'd just abandon it here without a damn good reason. Or supervision." She looked around at the nearby towers, in the vain hope she'd spot a sniper-barrel hanging out a window. She only saw peeling advertisements and more broken windows than she could count.

"We're going in, then?"

Risk crossed her arms over her chest. "So long as we both agree that either they're stupid or we are."

"Oh, that's not in dispute," Jormund said with a wink before beginning to ready his blaster.

She nodded and followed him through the side entrance of the warehouse. The oppressive atmosphere was even thicker inside the building, thanks to a penetrating odor of mildew. A handful of hanging lamps spilled cones of light onto the warehouse floor, where a single speeder truck hovered.

Risk approached the vehicle, senses on high alert. She couldn't

detect a single pulse outside of their own nervous auras in the Force. Jormund watched her back, and Risk found that she couldn't quite dismiss that feeling of being watched by someone... else. She hoped that living on Nar Shaddaa had simply made her paranoid.

The speeder truck waited patiently in the center of the room. Risk tossed her multitool at the vehicle's rear door, watching for sparks or any evidence of traps. Again, nothing. The handle turned easily—it wasn't even locked.

She threw her hands in the air, exclaiming "It's empty! What in Blazes is going on here?"

The searing heat of a blaster bolt burned the air as it raced past her nose. Risk dodged at the last second and took cover behind the truck. She was soon joined by a breathless Jormund.

"I think this makes **us** the stupid ones!" he declared, as he fired a few blind shots around the truck. "They're shooting in through the windows. I couldn't see them!"

Dusky light from the streets fell across the warehouse floor as the main door opened. Risk poked her head out of cover long enough to get a head count. When she turned back, her knees buckled.

A battalion of Stormtroopers marched in through the wide door, ahead of a pair of compact walkers—newer, better-maintained versions of the mechanoid monstrosity that they'd seen at the Black Sun compound.

"Risk? It's probably just some mercs! We've handled—" Jormund's reassuring words turned to ash in his mouth as he went for a look of his own. "What's the Empire doing here?!"

Before she could begin to explain, laser cannon fire blew out the speeder truck's engines. It collapsed from its hover and caught on fire.

Jormund grabbed the still-stunned Mirialan by the hand and *ran*.

This warehouse, like so many others, featured a loft level with an office. Someone had gone to the trouble of pouring permacrete reinforcements, a priceless feature in their present situation. They raced up the stairs and found cover behind the thick railing.

The short run brought Risk back to her senses. She popped an ion grenade from her belt and tossed it underneath one of the walkers with perfect, Force-enhanced aim. Blue-white lightning skittered over its metallic body, scrambling its systems and rendering the machine useless.

Jormund occupied himself by picking off Stormtroopers one-by-one as they tried to rush the upper level. Fortunately for the both of them, he was a good shot so long as he had time to aim. White-armored bodies began to pile up at the foot of the stairs.

Risk's ion blaster was rendered useless at this range, which forced her to use the second of her three grenades to take out the other walker. Miraculously, the tactic worked again.

More Stormtroopers poured in, ready to replace their fallen comrades. Jormund let a few of them scale the stairs, giving Risk a chance to use her ion blaster and clog the stairs with even more disabled troopers.

The new troopers were far better shots. Permacrete splintered

from the ceiling beams and came showering down on their heads. Some of the grit landed in Jormund's eye and forced him to take cover long enough to dislodge it. "Risk, I get the feeling you know what's going on here."

"You wanted to know why I didn't want a guild card. This is why. This is it!" She caught one of the troopers in the knee with a well-placed ion bolt. He screamed and fell backward down the stairs.

Jormund glared at Risk and dove behind her. She looked back, thinking a grenade had landed between them. Instead, Jormund popped open the compartment at the small of her back and retrieved her lightsaber.

He waved the hilt at her accusingly.

"You think I didn't know? Stang, Risk, I'm not that stupid. You practically told me when you said you were Grand Army." He tossed the lightsaber at her.

"You've been playing dumb this whole time?" Discovering that the Empire was closing in on her had been awful, but the look of disappointment in Jormund's eyes was nearly lethal.

"I wanted you to trust me enough to tell me openly. But instead, here I am, stuck in another one of your messes, and I still haven't earned the right to a little honesty." He fired a few businesslike shots out onto the warehouse floor.

She looked down at her saber, then back to her partner. "I'm sorry, but—"

"I'm busy here, Risk." He kept his eye on the targets, all twenty of them.

The Stormtroopers must have tired of their slow attrition; one of them threw a well-timed grenade just a meter away from Risk. It delivered a single-use catastrophe. When the permacrete and dust and shredded flimsy cleared, Risk was trying to pry herself off of the floor. Her ears rang and head swam. She looked up and found Jormund kneeling over her, trying to help her upright. His lips were moving and he looked unhurt. She smiled at him, temporarily deaf.

A blinding light swung by the windows behind them and forced Risk to throw up her arm to shield her eyes. A volley of blaster fire followed, pelting them with a fresh shower of permacrete. Outside, an assault flyer drifted back and forth, trying to get a clear shot through the windows.

Risk's hearing began to return, enough that she could hear Jormund begging her to get up.

"We've got to move, that thing is going to take us apart!" He hooked an arm beneath hers and began to lift. Risk's thoughts stilled and clung onto the idea of taking apart, pulling apart... *dismantling*. She waved Jormund away, much to his confusion and frustration.

Risk raised her shaking hands and stared down the flyer. Its matte black windows swallowed any light that dared to touch them, its repulsorlift disk pulsing and humming as its pilot maneuvered back and forth. Risk's addled mind called out to the Force as she bore down upon the flyer with all her concentration.

Another volley of shots landed all around her, forcing Jormund to scramble back for cover.

Both her arms tightened, shivering with effort as she tensed

each muscle; her fingers locked into place around an unseen object and clutched it with all her strength.

The flyer hung in the air, perfectly still. Its cannons fell silent as it started to shake. A few screws popped out of place along the fuselage, then a few pieces of armor plating.

In one sudden, explosive gasp, the flyer ripped into two mangled halves and fell into the lower levels below.

Jormund cheered and crawled back over to Risk, just in time to see the Storm Commando strike her unconscious with the butt of his blaster rifle.

The world went black for both of them.

Part 16: Siren Song

Everything hurt.

Pain blossomed between Risk's shoulder blades, arched upwards along her spine and grabbed her around the throat. With every breath, it hurt again. Sudden and gripping and it made her skin prickle with sweat. The pain was new and old all at once; a hurt that had been there longer than she could remember, and yet it hadn't been there a moment before. She hadn't been awake a moment before.

She heard someone groan. It sounded distant and pained. Soon, she recognized the voice as her own. Her head hurt the worst, with little lances of pain flashing between her temples, jaw and shoulders. Her far away voice was too loud, its lingering echoes making her skull throb.

She tried to raise her head, which hung slack over her chest.

Her head hurt too much and lifting it only hurt more. She opened her lungs for a deep breath but her ribs begged her to stop. She took in a shallow pull of air and sent it back again, unsatisfied.

Fingers tangled in her hair. Her head knocked against a hard surface—a chair back belonging to a seat that she didn't know she'd been sitting in. The hand was strong and it held her hair too tightly. She whimpered a complaint. This time she recognized her own voice immediately. The room was too bright. Any light was too bright for her eyes.

Risk felt a brush of Darkness at the back of her neck. The sensation erased all her pain and grogginess, replacing them with anxiety and alertness. She gasped, sharp and awake. Her newly focused eyes took in the room for the first time.

For a vertiginous instant, she saw only the maw of space yawn before her. Her head swam until she realized that it was only a window which spanned the wall in front of her. The rest of the room was austere, every surface a glossy black or white that matched the starfield outside the window. A single chair sat empty in front of her.

Sly Moore crossed into Risk's field of view, a grey ghost against the black night outside. The Imperial Aide wore the same severe expression that Risk had known so well on Byss. Moore's pinprick pupils fixed on her captive, though she did not condescend to speak.

Risk broke her gaze away from those fearsome eyes. Telepath or not, she could feel Sly Moore's will; a cold slippery darkness, reaching into her mind. Risk's own Force abilities required a line of sight to the target. She could rarely reach out to anyone who

or anything that she couldn't see. She broke eye contact in the vain hope that Moore's abilities depended on sight as well.

"You should kill me and get this over with." Risk sounded hoarse from the battle she probably shouldn't have survived.

Any proper villain would have smiled at the apparent surrender in that demand. Moore crossed her arms and continued prodding at Risk's psyche. Still, Moore said nothing.

"I'm not going to beg or plead."

Silence.

Risk became aware of the tight restraints holding her down. Metal cuffs bound her to the chair by her wrists and ankles. Fortunately, her neck wasn't also encircled in the cold steel. She was too tired to feel much of anything, save for an ever-present loathing for the Empire.

Fear had long since fled, as had anger. Risk was exhausted and numb, and distantly grateful for that fact.

Moore's iconic robe hardly moved as she glided toward Risk on silent footsteps. The Umbaran sank down on one knee before her captive's chair and watched her. The gesture was confusing enough to interest Risk and for a brief moment, she forgot her determination not to meet her captor's gaze.

Cold began to run down her spine like icy rain down a loose collar as Moore's will soaked through Risk's mind. She had just enough warning to break away again.

Moore's clammy ashen hand shot out and took hold of Risk's chin in a grip that suited a Wookiee better than this near-human

woman. Moore's thumb pressed into the soft underside of Risk's jaw, the long fingernail drawing a line of red blood from her tender green flesh.

Risk fought the grip longer than her body wanted to; the thought of frustrating Moore was enough to make her endure the pain. Alarms sounded in the most ancient parts of her brain, which had a keen awareness of the threat posed to her vulnerable neck. She ignored them for the chance of causing even the slightest annoyance to the Emperor's dog.

When Moore finally spoke, her breath was moist and smelled of a strong caff habit. "You killed Bythar Kull. You will tell me how."

Moore couldn't have expected Risk to speak her answer, not with that persistent grip. Confusion, then dread, knitted Risk's eyebrows together. She struggled to twist her head away, each movement hurting more than the last. She wasn't about to let Moore into her mind.

The grey hand dug in its nails even deeper and sent blood running down Risk's neck in fine rivers. She sneered and managed to spit at Moore's uncomfortably-close face.

Her captor leapt to her feet and brushed the spittle from the bridge of her nose. It had been a damn good shot. Moore let out a dry sound that Risk couldn't recognize until a horrible expression followed it. Moore's grin was as hollow as an empty casket.

She was laughing. Sly Moore was laughing at her.

Moore raised her hands in a blur of speed. A jolt of lightning struck Risk and grounded itself through her. She convulsed as

she screamed. The bolt was brief, only long enough to remind her of the despicable sensation associated so closely with Relco Training Facility. It had been nearly two years since she'd felt that particular white-hot pain, *so why not now?* Risk indulged in the bitter idea that she was overdue for such vicious ministrations.

Risk tossed her white hair from her eyes with a flick of her head. She glared at Moore. "You already know I killed him. Why bother with the interrogation?" she said in a fierce, dry whisper that sounded to her as though it should have come from someone else's throat. Risk's breath was labored as she spoke; the pain catching up with her.

Moore came in close, and her quicksilver gaze drilled into Risk's mind once more. "I'm doing this for your sake. Consider it a form of charity, Vosk. You need to recognize just how flawed your lies have become. Your lies are keeping me from seeing your true potential. You don't want that."

The Mirialan fugitive scoffed and turned her attention to a corner of the room. She longed for dust, a bit of grime, a damn houseplant, *anything* normal to distract her from the insanity of the dark side. The entire room was filling up with darkness; a bleak smog that called to her and strangled her at the same time.

Moore took hold of Risk's neck, still sticky with blood. "How did you kill him? Did you make sure he hurt, just as he hurt you? Did you make him feel all the textures of pain that we taught you?" Moore's lips brushed the edge of her ear; the adept's tone eerily warm and inviting. It was encouraging, nearly seductive, and it made Risk want to say anything just to hear another word or two.

"I... I made him hurt, yes...." Risk whispered, tentatively.

"That's right. He deserved it, didn't he?" The hold on Risk's neck eased.

"He needed to die," she intoned, braver now. Her mind was wrapped in gauze; thoughts didn't move with the snappy clarity that they should have.

"He was weak. You did the right thing, killing him." Moore's long fingertips stroked Risk's neck, assaulting it with dry, soothing caresses.

You did the right thing, killing him. The phrase echoed in her head piercing the veil of Moore's now-obvious influence. Risk had to remember that Moore was using the Force to cloud her mind, manipulating her just as she had manipulated everyone in the Senate who'd stood in Supreme Chancellor Palpatine's way.

Risk's fingers gripped the cold metal of the chair's arms, white-knuckled and angry at the manipulation. "Killing him was right, and killing you would be just as right. Your word doesn't make me a Sith any more than one promise could make me a Jedi! *I won't follow you.*" She spat out the last, bitter as venom.

Moore's eyes narrowed in disgust. Her hand fell away as she stood back. "You are still wrapped up in your own lies. Let us see what kind of woman you truly are, Renuka Vosk." Her cajoling, kind tone had evaporated, usurped by desiccated analysis.

She reached out to Risk, as if imploring her to understand some unspoken entreaty. Then her hand tensed into a claw, as if she

were about to strangle her victim. Instead of a flattened airway, Risk felt a pressure building behind her eyes, not unlike a headache. It grew rapidly, becoming a screaming migraine that threatened to make her vomit on the spot. She cried out in agony, which only encouraged Moore further.

Then, the flashes started. It was as if she were standing inside a holoemitter, watching the world from within the glowing figure it produced. Strange geometric patterns took over half of her field of view and filled it with twitching shapes and lines in far too many colors.

Traditional Mirialan designs leapt into existence and flickered away again. Light convulsed senselessly over her vision. Her hearing, too, was similarly overwhelmed by unintelligible noises and snatches of long-forgotten music.

The pain reached a crescendo that would have pushed her into unconsciousness if it had lasted even a split-second longer. Instead of finding static oblivion, Risk realized that the room on the Imperial ship was gone; erased from her senses.

She could smell fresh, freezing air that dried out the inside of her nose with each breath. Her identity was lost for a frightening moment but returned in a flash: *Renuka Vosk, of course*. She lived on Byss, with her teachers. In fact, her teacher was standing right there, with her.

Bythar Kull's constant indulgence in the dark side gave him a sallow, pale complexion, but it was the monstrous look in his eyes that bothered Renuka the most. There was something inhuman lurking there, scratching away at him from the inside. He gave the appearance of control, but she knew that his decisions were consuming him from within.

She hated him. That was exactly what he wanted and she couldn't help but give it to him.

They were standing on a snowy slope of Mount Signis, locked in a staring contest. Renuka wasn't cold yet and she wouldn't be cold until Kull was already shivering and on the verge of frostbite. She had her Mirialan heritage to thank for that. She hoped that they would be out here long enough that she could watch him suffer in the oncoming storm. The vindictive thought disgusted her and she unleashed the better angels of her nature against it. They had a lot of work to do.

"You're wasting my time, *Instructor*." Her deference was exceedingly false and she made certain that Bythar could hear it.

"It's my time to waste, Vosk. Or do you forget that I own you?" He grinned, baring a set of yellowing teeth.

She broke her gaze away in revulsion and involuntary submission. She loathed him, but her jaw still ached from the last time he'd struck her. If it dislocated again, she was worried the damage would be permanent.

"Until the day you earn the right to be considered a being again, I own you." He turned away, his great black cloak caught by the alpine wind as he took a few paces up to rockier ground. "Perhaps you can manage that today."

Renuka watched him with a wary eye. As she followed after him she crunched her own trail of footprints into the thin crust of snow. "Why are we here?" She wasn't about to address whether or not she cared if he considered her a person; she considered him a monster.

"I am giving you a gift today, Vosk," he purred at her through those awful teeth.

She set her feet on an outcropping of black, jagged stone and waited for him to explain. Foreboding curiosity turned her ear to hear him better over the rising wind.

"Our overseer has her doubts about your supposed conversion last year. She believes that your inability to follow my orders to the letter is a sign of defiance. I am inclined to agree."

Renuka tossed a dark brown lock of hair out of her eyes. It was caught by the wind and fluttered back over her nose. She didn't bother with it again.

"But, you see, I spoil you with opportunity after opportunity to prove yourself. You have so much potential, yet your failures only compound with every chance I give you. And, I know you think I don't notice when you find your little mercies and dole them out. You even interfere with the other initiates' work."

She shifted her weight and wrapped her arms over her chest. Bythar's speeches always went on too long.

He took a sudden step forward and Renuka was unfortunately downwind and caught the malodor of his necrotic breath. She tried not to offer him the satisfaction of a cringe. She failed. He locked a pair of possessive, bloodshot eyes on her. No doubt studying her tattoos and her scar yet again. Kull's scrutiny left her feeling violated.

"It could be that what they wrote about you was right. You shouldn't have been a Jedi. You would have never made the cut," he paused, breaking into a teasing melody, "but they had

to keep an eye on you."

She could feel contempt and anger starting to rise in her veins. She gritted her teeth against the bitterness, determined to deny him the pleasures of his handiwork.

"Yes, there it is. You do have anger in you, but it's surrounded by your fear. You've got so much potential and yet you keep it in chains. The council saw your anger, Vosk. They knew you could never be a Jedi Knight but I'm giving you the chance to become what you were meant to be."

She bit her lip, hard. He must have dug up some old report, some worthless pile of script. *I won't give him the satisfaction.*

"You were born of Jedi stock, and that only poisoned them against you. Oh, you're surprised? You didn't think we knew that? They kept a dossier on you and that part *wasn't even restricted.*" He spoke each word with such relish, tasting every syllable and every drop of misery that welled up in her. "It was public knowledge that you are a living taboo."

Renuka's nails curled into her palms as she tried in vain to crush the growing rage in her mind. He was pulling at threads that were worn to the point of snapping.

"You were meant for the power of the dark side, Vosk. You are a product of passion and the Jedi *raised* you to hate them and their backward philosophies. They didn't understand, but I do. I know what you really are and it is time you admit that to yourself."

"You don't know me! You have no idea!" she screamed. She raised her hand to call upon the Force—but she let it fall before

her will could manifest. Renuka wanted to hurt him, to destroy him—anything to *make him stop*. Once again, her better angels stayed her hand, but their grip was waning.

"I know you better than you know yourself. You want to tear me apart," he sneered at her. "Jedi don't get angry, Vosk. You've never been a Jedi. You never had a chance. But with me, you'll have the recognition you always deserved."

"I don't want recognition, I don't want your banthashit power, and I sure as Blazes don't belong to you." She advanced a single defiant pace into his sphere. Close enough to throttle him with her bare hands. "Your Empire killed everyone I cared about! If you think you can talk me into joining you, you're severely mistaken." Again she raised her hand. Behind Kull, a boulder began rumbling from its rest.

In a blur, Renuka landed in the snow, her jaw popped—though the joint mercifully stayed in its socket, this time. Her ear throbbed and her cheek burned. She rose unsteadily as soon as the wave of surprise passed.

"Oh, I don't need to *talk*, Vosk." Bythar loomed over the shorter Mirialan. Flurries of snow had just begun to fall and the light, delicate flakes obliterated themselves on the red plasma of his newly-ignited lightsaber. He continued, "You don't believe their prattle about an emotionless life devoid of passion. You *feel*, Vosk, and you would never give that up. You love the power of your emotions. That makes you one of us. Admit it!"

Renuka felt hot tears rolling down her windburnt cheeks; unbidden and unwanted. She backpedaled down the mountain, nearly tripping over the exposed rock. "No, no, no..." rolled from her lips in a tormented litany.

"You already have that darkness inside you. That is how you survived here for three years. You have potential. Will you die here just to maintain a lie?" He pointed the lightsaber at her heart. Hisses of wispy steam rose from the snow-assaulted blade.

She screamed—a horrible, anguished sound that exhausted her breath and threw her to her knees. Any trace of youthful defiance left her eyes. Her hands shook and the proud lines of her face contorted into an expression of feral rage. Renuka became a cornered nexu, all teeth and claws, who would no longer be restrained.

Bythar's surprise gave way to an insidious pleasure that played across his dry, cracked lips. Satisfaction lit his septic eyes.

"Your hatred is your power, embrace it!"

Renuka's hands shot forward, tense and clawed. She snarled and let loose a primal rage.

Sparks leapt from her hands. Lances of electricity cut through the air and sought Bythar Kull's heart.

The shock gripped him before he could react and sent his lightsaber flying uselessly from his grasp. He fell to his knees with a hideous cry. His muscles convulsed, tossing his limbs about.

Renuka felt an overwhelming joy at seeing this hated man suffer as she had suffered on so many occasions during his visits to her cruel little cell, and every day in training. Another crack of lightning danced from her palms. She delivered attack after attack long after her instructor had stopped screaming. The smell of electrocuted flesh rose with the smoke from his

clothing.

She was panting, desperate for air, and her hands *burned*. Blisters boiled up from her skin. It was incredible. It was awful. Renuka was lost in the blur of adrenaline and action, and unknown to her, her caff-colored hair had been bleached white by the use of the corruptive lightning technique. She regained her nerve after a few heavy breaths and soon she was searching the soothing, cold snow around his corpse, desperate to find the dead man's lightsaber.

A blizzard of blinding snow and deafening wind swirled around her. Her senses were again overloaded, consumed in white noise. The world spun.

She was in a chair in a strange room.

The stars sparkled outside the window.

She was on a ship.

What's Sly Moore doing here?

Nothing made sense.

Why was her neck cold—was it wet? Was she crying?

“The effect is not unlike a seizure, from what I’ve been told. Do you know where you are?”

“No.” The single syllable fell from Renuka’s lips; a flat, empty note that rang of defeat, of surrender.

“What do you remember?”

“Mount Signis.”

“What did you do on Mount Signis?”

“I killed my Master.”

“That’s right. Do you know what happens now?”

The Mirialan paused, her entire being lifted, and then discarded, by a quick wave of vertigo. She responded calmly, “You kill me.”

“No, Renuka, you get your reward. You destroyed the weak and purged it from our ranks. We need you.”

Risk was so tired, nothing made sense. Sly Moore was here and she knew she should have been afraid. But she couldn’t bring herself to fear the skeletal woman any more than she could fear the stars outside the window. Both were simple facts of reality; undeniable and immutable.

Maybe this state, this bone-deep apathy was freedom. Freedom from emotion, from passion, from feeling anything at all. She didn’t care what happened next.

Memories of the Temple’s great marble halls flashed through her mind. Her lids drooped, and she relaxed into the bonds holding her to the chair. Renuka embraced the peace.

Sly Moore must have noticed the change, for she was watching the prisoner with her arms folded over her chest and a dispassionate look of concern. “Wake up, Vosk,” she rasped. “Do you understand what I’ve told you? You are to be an Inquisitor.”

Renuka's chin had fallen to her chest, but she managed to nod her head. "Yes, I understand. I have work to do."

Moore reclined in her own chair in front of the window and steepled her fingers. "You have a long and promising career before you, Vosk. But there is one thing I will need from you first."

Every muscle felt heavy, as though an instant of hyperspeed acceleration never stopped. The universe was careening ahead without her permission. One more thing and then she could rest, hit the braking thrusters. Her head ached as she lifted it to look at Moore. "One thing?" she asked, drowsily.

"I need your commitment. You turned your back on us once. How can I trust you?"

Risk's mouth was dry and her lips stuck together when she spoke. *So irritating.* "I ended Kull. What else do I have to do?"

"Prove to me this flight habit of yours is extinguished. Eliminate Kye."

"Who?"

Moore pressed an imposing red button on the console of her chair. Within seconds, a wild-eyed, blond human was hauled in through the door behind Renuka, half-wrestled and half-carried by a pair of armored guards. He was yelling all sorts of things and the racket made her head hurt even worse.

The Umbaran released Renuka's restraints with a flick of her wrist and a pulse of Force energy. Cuffs of raw, worn skin ringed each of Renuka's arms, but she couldn't be bothered to soothe them. She merely surveyed the damage.

The human kept yelling about risks and Renuka wanted him quiet. She could hardly stay awake now. “Shut up, human.” Her voice sounded as shaky as the rest of her.

“Risk! What are you doing?! Kill her and let’s get out of here. Do that thing with your brain! Come on!”

“Shut up!” she snapped at him and turned her attention to Moore, the woman who had the answers. “What do I need to do?”

“Kill him. He betrayed you.”

“Betrayed me?” Renuka tried to recall this upstart human, but found no memory of him. The idea that he could have been able to betray her without her knowing him in the first place—well, it made about as much sense as anything, she supposed.

The man looked as though he was about to be sick. He caught her gaze. “Risk. I didn’t. She tried to pay me and I didn’t turn you in.” He broke away, imploring the stars with an incredulous laugh. “I turned down a hundred thousand credits for *you!*”

“My name is Renuka Vosk.”

“Not since I’ve known you! Not for almost a year!”

“Don’t let him plant lies in your head, Vosk. He did that before, and I had to stop him. *I shouldn’t have to protect you.* Eliminate him now.”

“I’ve known you for a year?” She didn’t like the idea of missing so much time, yet before she could ask the Umbaran to explain, Moore looked askance at her and threw her the lightsaber from her dream.

“Cut him down. Or are you too weak?”

As Renuka gripped the foreign lightsaber hilt, it met the contours of her palm with easy familiarity. This man, Kye, she did know him. She knew him well, save for the fact that she couldn't remember him at all. She pressed her eyes shut for a moment, the contradictions in her mind clashing against each other and throwing off sparks.

She refused to act out of ignorance and Sly Moore wasn't giving answers; only orders. Renuka hated taking orders from Moore. She always had. In fact, she had always hated Moore. Why was she listening to the witch?

The human, though: she did know him, didn't she? And he was telling the truth. She always knew when he was telling the truth.

“Too strong,” Risk answered.

Renuka looked at the saber in her hand and made a decision.

The Umbaran lunged before she could commit thought to action. The jade-skinned woman glared at her captor, eyes full of indignant rage. She could feel the cold tendrils of Sly's manipulative will on her mind, and she turned the Dark Force against its user.

Renuka threw the full weight of years of bitterness, loathing, and the fresh anger she felt toward Moore right back into the woman's bald skull. The Mirialan unleashed a scream in the Force that would have shattered all but the most resilient Masters. Moore fell to her knees, unprepared for the telepathic assault, and a keening wail tore from her raspy lungs. The telepath's mind had been rent, her every sense burning under

mental napalm. She clawed at the air, desperate for relief.

Fully free from the dark adept's influence, Risk's hand shot up toward the ceiling, clutched at the empty air, and *pulled*.

Above Moore, something large and metallic groaned, then snapped. A plasma conduit split open just as the Umbaran looked up to see what had gone wrong. A brilliant flash of light swallowed the room. Risk, expecting the light, had shielded her eyes.

Moore took the worst of it; her Umbaran eyes had evolved to thrive in perpetual twilight and could only withstand the light of day after much training. The conduit's rupture left her in a blind agony.

Risk tore at the ceiling once more, this time bringing a weighty—and probably vital—piece of equipment down onto Moore with a heavy crash. Another scream echoed through the room, full of dark rage.

Taking advantage of the chaos, Jormund fought against his guards, who had been shielded from the flash by their helmets' smoky eyepieces. They were torn between restraining the human and stopping the rampaging ex-Jedi. One resolved to fumble for his blaster while the other kept hold of Jormund's arms. Risk threw the troublesome blaster to the corner of the room with a flick of her hand. She gave the guard a pointed look that said, "*Do you really want to do this?*"

He didn't.

He ran, and she tripped him for good measure, accelerating his fall just enough to lay him out for an hour so. Jormund had

overpowered the other suit of armor, which let out a feminine cry when Risk tossed her against the window.

Risk held out a hand to Jormund, who took the offer without a moment's hesitation. He dipped back down to retrieve a blaster for himself and they ran from the observation room together.

"I didn't sell you out!"

"I know!"

Stingy, otherwise known as efficient, crew compliments left Star Destroyers with an overabundance of empty halls even with thousands of white-armored troopers on board. That gave the fugitives a good lead until someone found the mayhem in the observation deck. Given Moore's love of interruptions, they had an hour at most.

Risk, as she now remembered calling herself, and Jormund ran through the decks with desperate purpose but no direction. She was still sorely disoriented from Moore's telepathic manipulation and Jormund's gut was tied into too many knots to offer him any advice.

What mattered to Risk was that Sly Moore was behind them. Even so, she did toy with the idea of going back to slit the hated woman's throat, for certainty's sake.

Jormund, despite his nausea, had put the scene behind him and was keeping pace with Risk. That was, until he began to slow from a run to a jog and finally came to a stop. Risk outpaced him in an instant and was forced to double back to find out why in *Blazes he wasn't running*.

"Nine Corellian hells, right?" she asked.

“What?” He was as prepared for that question as he would have been for a request for his mother’s stew recipe.

“There are nine Corellian hells, aren’t there, Jormund?”

“Yes, but—”

“I’m pretty sure we’re standing in the lowest one of them. Let’s go.”

“Where?”

“What?”

“Where are we going, Risk? We can’t exactly just keep doing laps until they decide to let us go.”

She crossed her arms and reluctantly admitted, “You have a point.”

“Damn right I do! Now—”

She grabbed him by the collar and pulled him into an alcove just before a squad of troopers rounded the corner. They passed, oblivious to the couple. “I lied about that auditory implant,” she explained.

“What about the hangar?” Jormund was unimpressed by her Force-enhanced senses, and his insistence on staying on task made that clear to her.

“Steal a ship? They’ll shoot us down in an instant.”

“Escape pods?”

“Less maneuverable—shot down in half an instant.”

He glared at her. “Then why don’t you use the Force to find us a way out of here?”

She met his glare with one of her own. “It doesn’t work like that.”

“Sure it does! It can make you forget you ever *met* me,” he seethed.

“It didn’t stick—anyway, you can yell at me about *that* all you want once we’re out of here. But we really don’t have time for a petty fight. And I didn’t kill you!”

“Don’t do me any favors, Jedi.”

Risk held up a finger to silence him, causing Jormund’s jaw to drop in sheer indignation. She took a deep, calming breath and tried to reach out for a shred of guidance that might actually see them out of the Star Destroyer alive.

Part 17: Can’t Kill Us

Thario had spent the past half hour tearing apart his freighter, tossing clothes and food wrappers from one end of his confined space to the other. He had made his way to the shoulder-wide hallway where he and that green lady had played so many hands of sabacc that he’d nearly got tired of the game. If such a thing were possible—which it wasn’t. A pang of deep regret washed over him as he realized he should have suggested strip sabacc. Why hadn’t he suggested strip sabacc? *So many regrets....*

He turned over a pile of flimsy magazines and hollered. He’d

found it, he'd finally found the damn thing! The agony would end, here and now.

Thario pried open the lid of his box of toothpicks as he lumbered back to the cockpit. Finally, he could get that seed out of his teeth and—

“Oh damn,” he moaned when he caught sight of the enormous ship outside his viewport. He had no idea what a Star Destroyer was doing near Nar Shaddaa, but he wanted nothing to do with it.

He expended most of his willpower to keep from pulling the sublight engine lever with all his strength. The rest he spent concentrating as he calmly keyed in a short hyperspeed jump to *anywhere but here oh Blazes get out of here.*

Risk led Jormund through the gleaming plasteel corridors, weaving between pulses of guards. She managed to keep them unseen on the ship with a crew ten times larger than most Outer Rim settlements.

“You ever been on a ship like this before?”

“I have a plan,” she reassured him.

“Wasn't my question.” Jormund was obviously on edge and his talkative coping mechanisms were starting to tamper with Risk's preference for *quiet* problem solving.

“Once,” she admitted, and braced herself for the next, inevitable question. Half of her mind was engrossed in the task of scanning the Force for living presences. Living in an

ecumenopolis had given her plenty of experience with tracking beings in three dimensions, and the *Arbalest* was much roomier than most sectors of Nar Shaddaa.

“Was that before or after you joined the Villainous Rulers of the Galaxy Association?”

“After.” She gestured for him to take the lead into the next room, saying, “In here.”

“Empty?”

She gave him an exasperated look. She wondered if untrained Force-sensitives ever got used to the constant second-guessing.

Jormund unholstered his blaster and triggered the doors. They revealed a room filled with consoles, monitors, and a multitude of handy access and hardware terminals. Satisfied that they weren’t about to be met with a shower of hot plasma, he put the gun away.

“Huh. And here I was, just hoping for a place to sit,” said Risk. She shrugged and threw herself into a wheeled chair with just enough momentum to send herself rolling over to a promising console.

“Wait, I thought you said you knew what was in here.” Jormund opened a cabinet, rifled through a pile of flimsies and shut it despondently. The Empire was too tidy for his tastes.

“All right. It’s time for a quick crash course in the Force. Part one: unless it’s connected to life or something that was alive, or I’m Miraluka—which I’m not so don’t ask—I can’t sense it that way. Mostly. Tons of exceptions to that, but we don’t have time

for those. Part two: my guesses are usually going to be better than yours. We'll do the rest later." She turned her attention to the monitor, which was helpfully flipping through local sector data.

"Thanks for dispelling that nasty rumor that the Jedi were a bunch of holier-than-thou, conceited jerks." Jormund found a chair of his own and rolled from one monitor to the next. He skimmed each of the readings before moving on to the next. Before long, he'd completed a circuit of the room, poring over the data as he went.

His use of the past-tense should have bothered Risk; she knew it should have. But the Order was gone, extinct, with her alone as the only unfaithful dropout to speak for it.

"Hey. That monitor isn't going to blink, you know!"

She'd been staring into a sector radar screen during her ill-timed meditation. Jormund's words brought the present moment back into sharp relief. Risk's eyes refocused on the display. "We conceited jerks have to at least try to win the staring contest." She tossed him a quick wink over her shoulder.

He scoffed and tried to make sense of a ream of flimsy spilling out of a bank of computers in the corner of the room. The whole thing was encrypted. "I hate to be a pessimist, but there's nothing here."

An array of points crawled across her screen, each neatly labelled with transponder codes. At the center of the radar spider web, the *Arbalest* loomed large. None of the other ships dared come within a hundred kilometers of it. A few were brazen enough to reroute around her imagined nest.

Risk scanned over the ships' codes aimlessly, letting her mind wander just enough to search for those threads in the Force. She'd take any guidance she could get. Jormund's restless prattle behind her didn't help her concentration, but after his too-apt comment about the Order, she didn't want to snipe at him for the sake of putting her hokey religion to use. She'd just have to tap into the Force in spite of the distractions.

Her attention kept wandering back to the ships, their alphanumeric codes drifting by the upper atmosphere of her intellect. She knew they were meaningless, and that no ship would ever rescue a pair of bounty hunters from a Star Destroyer.

Except *that* one.

Risk sent her chair speeding across the immaculate durasteel floor and dove for the nearest transmitter.

"Just dump your cargo!"

"Lady, do you specialize in surprising me with things *I do not want to do*?" Thario dabbed a rag across his hairless head as he talked to Risk over her encrypted channel.

Five minutes ago, the Twi'lek had felt all the blood drain from his headtails when the *Arbalest* hailed him. Then, when the voice addressed him by name, he was already too sticky with sweat to sweat any harder. In fact, he was probably dehydrated.

"Are our lives really worth less than whatever you're hauling?"

“My opinion on that doesn’t matter, Risk. See, my client believes *my* life is worth much, much less than the cargo. And the Empire wouldn’t like my cargo, either. And this is all banthashit because I’m not going anywhere near that capital ship!” He slammed his heavy, sulfur-yellow fist down on a smooth patch of console. The transmission fizzled, then recovered.

“We’ll pay you triple what the cargo’s worth. Right, Jormund?”

A deep, male voice chimed in. This poor chump sounded uncertain, even nervous; she was probably playing him, too. The new guy stammered a bit, with an air of confusion that Thario could appreciate, given that they still didn’t know how much his haul was worth.

“Um. Yea, sure, triple—Did you hear that? I think I heard someone outside....” The new guy’s voice trailed off, as if he were wandering away from the mic.

Risk chimed in again: “Are you in or out, Thario? Our time’s up.” He heard a scuffling noise and the new guy was shouting behind her.

“Triple **and** you pay my tab at the Wallowing Hutt!” Her sense of urgency moved him, and he had a fondness for the sharp green woman, but Thario was determined to get himself decent hazard pay for this insanity.

“Deal! Two hours, wait for us!”

Now Thario had to figure out how to loiter in the vicinity of a Star Destroyer without attracting attention.

Risk knew their luck couldn't hold.

Jormund was right; the next shift was reporting for duty. He took cover behind a console while Risk destroyed any evidence of their conversation with Thario. She finished just in time to see the opening door reveal a trim technician and two stormtroopers.

She didn't give them time to assess their situation. Risk took hold of them through the Force and pulled the trio into the room. They landed in a pile between two blocky banks of consoles, stunned. Jormund must have grown accustomed to working with a Jedi, given that he didn't flinch at her casual display of telekinesis. Instead, he fixed his gun on the mess of tangled Imps.

They were, unfortunately, all conscious. Risk hadn't thrown them nearly hard enough. The first stormtrooper to regain his wits extricated himself from the pile and froze upon finding himself staring down the barrel of Jormund's blaster. A man perfectly willing to kill in self-defense yet hesitant to dispatch another being unless he had to, the bounty hunter wore a grim expression. Jormund looked to Risk. "Now what?"

The other two, the remaining trooper and the technician, had shaken off their surprise. The stormtrooper pulled his blaster as he rose, and engaged Jormund in an armed standoff. His swift movements made the others bolder; the prone technician slipped his hand into a pocket, searching for his comm.

Jormund backpedaled a few steps. His aim frantically danced across the three hostages. No one had shouted, there hadn't been any sufficiently suspicious sounds to draw attention to the monitoring station, and he didn't want to bring a patrol running

with a warning shot.

Risk sent another wave of Force energy crashing into them, pinning them back against the wall. Now that their attention had returned to the woman who could strangle them at a whim, she spoke.

“Sleep,” she commanded. The imperative was laden with Force energy, a soft-spoken loudness that only reached the ears she intended. She knew that Jormund, standing behind her, could clearly hear the word but not the order.

Their hostages went slack as if all three had taken in a lungful of anesthetic gas. Risk carefully lifted the technician and moved to deposit him beneath one of the consoles as she spoke. “They’re out; just don’t do anything loud or drop them.”

“So we could strip them, then?”

Risk paused in the midst of hauling one of the stormtroopers to a console. “You know I love a good prank, Jormund, but—”

“Dammit, Risk, I’m talking about wearing the trooper uniforms,” he snapped. “Not all good ideas come from the Force. We mundane civilians can actually think for ourselves.”

“I didn’t mean—” she started, surprised and apologetic.

He tossed her a white-plated gauntlet. “Yeah, I know.”

Within a few minutes, both stormtroopers were plucked clean and stowed out of sight behind consoles. The technician was curled up beneath the sensor panel, a spot just out of sight from the door.

The two fugitives were clad in armor that almost fit, a problem that bothered Risk more than Jormund. The awkward gaps and constrictions in her disguise didn't prevent Risk from projecting the confidence of a veteran clone trooper. Even so, her feminine gait betrayed her as anything but a male Mandalorian clone. Jormund jogged after her, grinning beneath his shiny white helmet.

"We might not die. I love it!" The helmet transformed his voice into grainy and muffled clone of every other trooper Risk had ever spoken to. Even so, the filters couldn't repress his enthusiastic, boyish tone.

She slowed her stride to give him an encouraging pat on the shoulder before a patrol rounded the corner. "Might want to think like a clone; you sound like you're having too much fun. They aren't allowed to have fun." Her hand immediately went back to supporting the blaster hanging from its strap, as any good trooper would do.

"Aye, aye." Jormund's curt response had about as much personality as permacrete, and so was perfect.

They marched toward the bow of the ship, fully confident in their disguises. Patrols clattered by, a few even parted around them, completely oblivious to the intruders in armor. Risk resented the limited field of view through the black lenses of her helmet. She was now suffering from the same lack of peripheral vision as the rest of the trooper corps and it made her feel even more vulnerable. Jormund, on the other hand, oozed excitement and confidence into the Force, though that was the only sign he was enjoying every minute of his anonymity.

They made their way through the maze of drab, regulation

corridors. Officers in their black uniforms, technicians clad in grey, all hurried by, apparently without a second thought for the footsoldiers on the ship. Glistening protocol droids, ambulatory repair units, even gossiping mouse droids ignored them, much to Risk's relief.

Her thoughts kept turning to the Umbaran back on the observation deck. Sly Moore, like all adherents to the dark side, no doubt, would have a talent for survival rivaling Nar Shaddaa's roaches. She wished, yet again, that she had slit Moore's throat.

The spacious ship seemed busier as they approached its pointed bow. A large elevator, doors wide enough to easily disgorge an entire platoon of troopers onto the deck, opened and let out a small clutch of kitchen staff. Risk and Jormund darted inside before the doors had a chance to close again. The space was large but the privacy made it feel close and intimate. Risk resisted the temptation to remove the claustrophobic helmet to steal a breath of cool air.

"We'll have to split up once we get amidships," Risk said through the tinny helmet radio, as if planning their escape were appropriate elevator banter.

Jormund barked a laugh. "You're crazy, Lady. I think that witch got into your head, if you're having ideas like that," he said, tapping her helmet's forehead. She swatted his hand away and their armor plates met with a hollow clack.

"We're trying to survive an escape from a capital ship. It's the situation that's crazy, not me." She rolled her neck, felt the vertebrae crack in three places, and found some relief. "We have five targeting systems to disable; they've each got

independent sensors so they all have to be down at once.”

“This is how your buddy is going to avoid getting shot out of the sky, isn’t it?”

“It’s better than just hoping we can drift far enough away in an escape pod before they catch us.”

“Right.”

The elevator opened onto a deck identical to the one they’d left. Only the indicator panel’s reading had changed.

“You take the starboard, I’ll take—” Risk’s plans came apart as Jormund started down the hallway to her left. “What happened to listening to reason!” she muttered fiercely into the helmet’s unsympathetic UI.

“You started talking about splitting up and I made an executive decision. I know better than to split us up when there’s an entire ship full of people ready to kill us.”

“I... guess I’m just accustomed to working alone.” Her first instinct had been to snap back at him about not being competent on his own, but she couldn’t bring herself to play into the Jedi stereotype more than she already had. And she really *wasn’t* used to having a partner yet.

“Well, you’re not alone. And you sure as Blazes need someone watching your back.” Jormund had probably winked after that last, but the mannerism was lost in his disguise. She filled in the missing gesture and smiled her response in the secrecy of her helmet. After all, if he hadn’t winked, who was to know that she smiled?

They made their way to the port Ion-Cannon targeting systems, almost precisely midships. Star Destroyers were always at the ready to fire, being capital ships and more than willing to demonstrate the might of the Empire at any moment. The *Arbalest* was in a heightened state of readiness, not due to any external threat, but due to the internal pressure of Sly Moore's presence. Her wonderful trait of making everyone uncomfortable seemed to have no limits. That heightened state included a healthy crew at the Ion-Cannon targeting systems, with half a dozen technicians and four stormtroopers to support them.

Risk and Jormund took a lap past the open bay where the consoles and equipment were attended by a dozen technicians; a bit of scouting to her mind, thief's casing to his. Vocabulary aside, the results were the same: both of them completed the lap tenser than they'd started. The pair found a nook well beyond earshot of any of the concerned parties.

"There's no way this is going to work," Jormund hissed at her. He slouched as if trying to blend into a Nar Shaddaa street. An officer passed by, giving him just enough of a reminder to cut the bounty hunter act and straighten his spine.

"It has to. We just need to disable the system, then move on to the starboard cannon. The turbolasers are a threat too, so we'll need to disable their targeting systems before we get to the escape pod."

"We just need to... how did you expect me to handle one of these stations on my own?" Jormund sounded more than upset. He sincerely wanted to know.

Risk shrugged. "I guess I thought we'd just know when we got

there.” All of her plans ended with “and then the Force kicks in.” Only now was she realizing that none of his ever had.

Jormund nodded slowly and brought his hand to his head. “You are a piece of work.” His shoulders slumped as the weight of their situation settled upon him.

She started suddenly when he clapped his hands together and danced a quick jig. She cut a look to one of the passing platoons. “Good personnel review—he just got promoted,” she offered as a skeptical technician passed them. Her thumbs-up only earned a reproachful scowl.

Jormund stopped and pulled Risk further out of view. “Listen, I still have one of Bina’s datachits. She always keeps a few extra viruses handy. Won’t let me leave without making sure I’ve got a couple with me.”

“Will it work on an Imp computer?”

“Will it work on an Imp computer,” he echoed, incredulously. “I’ve got this.”

Jormund pulled the datachit from his belt, along with one of Bina’s smaller datapads. He combined the two and used the pad to make a few crucial changes to her code. “Best sister in the galaxy!” he said as he stowed the equipment once more.

Risk nodded appreciatively, though by virtue of being a single, illegal child, she had no concept of siblings. Of course, that meant she had no dispute with the claim, either.

He strode back toward the bay, filling out his armor with a puffed chest and rakish confidence. She kept back, taking up an imaginary guard post just within sight of the unfolding scene

of the crime.

He sauntered up to one of the techs and handed her the datachit. “Minor software upgrade. Just transmitted it half an hour ago,” Jormund assured her.

The tech squinted at the stick. “That’s not regulation. This looks like some cheap aftermarket equipment.”

“Right, aftermarket. From Byss. Sure,” he said, loudly enough for everyone in the targeting bay to hear. “Look, if you don’t want to install it, that’s fine by me. I’ll just let our *honored guest* know that her tech doesn’t meet *your* standards.”

The other personnel shifted in their seats. One of them cut his eyes to Jormund’s hapless tech and shook his head ever so slightly. She dared another look at the stick and swallowed, hard. The datachit’s “upgrade” was already installed and back in his pocket before he’d left the bay.

Jormund returned from the tech’s station with a lightness in his gait. Though she couldn’t see it, when he spoke Risk could hear the grin in his voice, a voice now giddy with a liar’s high. “And that’s how you convince an Imp to disable their own ship! How about you take the next one?”

Risk eagerly agreed and threw in a bit of praise for good measure. They took off toward the starboard targeting systems, Risk was ready to weave her own web of lies for the technicians there.

They were halfway across the ship when she spotted the gaping hole in their plan. She decided to play it off as a mere curiosity rather than an emergent disaster.

“So, that virus, it’s going to tear apart the system, right?” Risk said, as casually as she could, to Jormund.

“Completely disable it with a bunch of junk data and torn up machine code, yeah.”

“Why would they let us keep installing the virus if that system goes down? They’re going to figure it out, fast.”

Jormund chuckled; he was ready for this question. “I set a delay on it. We’ve got an hour and then everything goes down all at once, synched to the ship’s clock.”

Air coursed through her lungs with a new ease and Risk nodded her relief. “Then we’d better get going.”

Both teams of technicians at the Ion-Cannon targeting systems had taken their upgrade with a dose of skepticism, but no alarms had been tripped.

Risk and Jormund each found a bit of solace in moving about the ship with a clear purpose and a dishonest exit strategy. Unfortunately, this calm gave Jormund enough breathing room to get thoughtful.

"If being a Jedi is such a bad deal, why don't you just go pick up some other religion?" Jormund asked Risk, and then muttered to himself, "...doesn't seem like such a bad deal to me."

"Jormund." She did not want to discuss philosophy with him. He was supposed to be blissfully ignorant and practical; a refuge against the depths of meaning and destiny.

"No, really, I'm trying to understand this." Jormund's honest curiosity came through clearly, in spite of the helmet robbing his voice of its proper timbre.

"And you want to discuss it now?" Risk hadn't spent much time with civilians outside the Temple before the Empire, and afterward she had adhered to absolute secrecy about her participation in the Order. Talking about the intricacies of the Force *here* on the *Arbalest* felt wrong.

"Hey, I'm relying on your faith as much as you're relying on my sister's tech. Not fair if only you get to know how both systems work."

Risk had to admit, he had her there. "Well. When you're trained, you have an awareness of the ebb and flow of the universe. And with that comes the responsibility of using it. You can't just discard that knowledge, or ignore it. It's too important."

"So you see the galaxy differently from everyone else."

"Right."

"And that gives you the power to, what? Subdue anyone who doesn't see things that way?"

"Only because they're outmatched." Risk hated the sound of her own words and tried to restore the intent of her statement. "Wait— I didn't mean it that way."

"It's okay. I get the feeling you don't know any better."

"Thanks," she said, grimly.

The bow of the ship was full of vital systems, and the hallways

were tighter to save on space in the final design. Risk couldn't help but notice that she was seeing fewer and fewer personnel the farther they went.

“Should be just down this corridor—” Risk took a sharp turn and nearly walked directly into a blast door. Jormund stopped short right on her heels, just before careening into her. Risk set a gloved hand on the seam of the door, as if testing for an illusion.

The door was unforgiving brushed-durasteel and offered her a shimmering, ghostly reflection of herself. “Not a problem. I can open it and we'll be at the last turbolasers in less than a minute.”

“If we come from a direction that was sealed a minute ago, they're going to ask even more questions. Especially if someone sees you open the door with your brain.” Jormund had his datapad out, flipping through the ship's schematics to find them a new route. His faith in her navigational intuition had run dry.

“You're right, but we've got, what? Half an hour to take out three targeting systems? We can't afford a long detour.” Risk wouldn't stop pondering the blast door. Why would they restrict access to an important area of the ship? Especially when there weren't any other alarms? She also couldn't help but agree with Jormund—blithely circumventing the door would raise too many suspicions. With Thario waiting out there, and as jumpy as the Twi'lek smuggler seemed in their call, Risk wanted off the ship more and more with every passing moment.

“There's a munitions hold this way. We might be able to cut through there and get back on track.” Jormund already had his

datapad hidden away and was a few meters down the corridor as he spoke. She followed after him without protest.

According to the indicator panel, the munitions store was unlocked. Risk adjusted her armor with a few tugs and twists before she reached for the control panel. Jormund gestured for her to wait. "I've got a bad feeling about this," and he probably gave her a meaningful look, somewhere behind the empty eyes of his helmet.

"We'll be fine. It's a storage closet. The storage just happens to be a bunch of weapons and explosives. Don't think about it too much and they won't go off." She shrugged off his concerns and led the way into the hold.

The hold must have been at least three decks high, stacked with boxes and crisscrossed with catwalks at each level. Many of the most enormous containers were held down with netting, a holdover from the days before reliable inertial dampening on capital ships. A few boxes had been opened recently, and the netting had been left off. Smaller boxes of grenades, blaster ammo, and other commonly accessed supplies were stacked around the perimeter of the room.

The forest of supplies obscured Risk's view of the exit, but she assumed it was opposite their entrance and began to weave her way between the containers. As she and Jormund left the range of the door's motion sensors, it hissed shut just as every other door had.

Except that, this time, a loud mechanical *click* followed the routine hiss of a pressurized seal.

They both shot a look at the closed door, then at each other.

Risk felt her throat tighten up as her danger sense kicked in too late.

A long, satisfied sigh came to them from somewhere out of sight. “Vosk,” a female voice purred, oozing with pleasure, “I am so *very happy you’re here.*”

Risk’s gut recognized the self-indulgent tone immediately, and informed the rest of her by seizing up into heavy permacrete. “Good to... hear from you, Zeraina,” Risk’s tense voice rising through the stacks.

The room felt a few degrees colder as their host declined to respond. Loud, clattering footsteps, presumably Zeraina’s, came bounding from the catwalks above. The sound bounced strangely and left the listeners to believe the noise came from everywhere at once. Still, there was no sight of their host.

The technique was a new one to Risk, but she had no doubt that Zeraina was manipulating their perception with the Force.

Risk bristled at the thought of dealing with her former inmate. She tore off her helmet and threw it aside—its protection was less than worthless against a lightsaber and the limited vision would likely get her killed.

“Oh, and you brought a *pet!*”

Jormund’s teeth ground audibly. Zeraina had found his sore spot with record speed. Risk turned to him with hopes of soothing his ego; hopes that were instantly dashed when she got a good look at him.

Part 18: Our Demons

Jormund's hair was a tousled mess now that he'd also discarded his helmet, and his eyes were bright with anger. He backed toward a defensible corner with his blaster at the ready, sparing Risk only the most fleeting of rage-filled glances.

They heard another round of rapid, staccato footsteps; louder and closer. Risk wet her lips and shifted her feet into a defensive stance. Jormund watched as her hand eased toward the compartment holding her lightsaber. She retrieved the weapon with practiced stealth and held the inert hilt as if it were already throwing plasma.

Now he understood the gravity of his situation. He wasn't only trapped in a Star Destroyer, racing against a countdown of his own devising. That, insane as it was, was manageable. No, he was about to enter a fight where he was already written off by both sides, including his own. He'd seen the look in Risk's eyes, the pity, the way she couldn't help but patronize him. In that gaze, he saw himself as an unfortunate casualty, a sad footnote, in a battle between beings that completely and utterly—*no*. An icy feeling seized his stomach just before he forced his attention elsewhere.

Whoever this Zeraina was, she was enough of a threat that Risk believed her own blaster was useless. Maybe she even believed he was useless. He looked down at the gun in his hands, reconsidering its value.

Everyone bleeds; even Jedi, Jormund thought, and resolved to keep the weapon close.

Ahead of him, Risk was stalking deeper into the maze of containers. She set down every step with careful precision, as if she were avoiding an unseen web of tripwires. And yet, her

attention stayed on the catwalks; what little was visible between the stacks of containers.

He moved to follow her, with silent grace borne of a rough Nar Shaddaa childhood. Risk waved him back to his corner without even turning to look at him. Jormund followed the instruction, grudgingly.

He tried to imagine just how he'd tear into Risk for telling him to stay put, but he couldn't focus on her. With every attempt, he found that his mind kept slipping. He wasn't able to concentrate on what Risk was doing, even though it was probably important. It had to be important. They were about to die, after all.

The munitions hold had nowhere near the immense capacity that the *Arbalest* no doubt required; it must have been a secondary ammo dump for the troopers. Jormund tried to concentrate on finding other exits, maybe somewhere he could hide. After all, Risk was abandoning—**had** abandoned him.

She had evaporated somewhere among the containers. She'd left him alone in a room with an evil Jedi bent on murder. Jormund's anger flared again, and his temples throbbed with the force of his clenched jaw.

He refused to be some inconvenient... *pet left behind, like some kind of helpless child, no better than a vole*. Metaphors clambered over each other in a stampede, all of them petulant and angry and eager to serve Jormund's bitter purposes.

In the end, he should have been paying more attention.

A wash of vertigo slowed time to a halt as it lifted him off his feet. He gasped for air, or he intended to, but no breath came to

his lungs. He tried again. *No air!*

Jormund saw a woman jump down from the catwalk just above his head. She was wearing a black veil over her eyes—*Miraluka, stang, they're creepy!*—and shiny synthleather robes.

An iris of darkness cut his vision into a tunnel as his blood pounded in his skull. She held her hand high, as if she were hauling him up with her own strength rather than her Force sorcery.

“You should take better care of your *things*, Vo—” A weighty metal box struck Zeraina’s chest and stopped her lecture short. The crate escorted her into the wall, where she threw it aside as she scrambled back to her feet.

Jormund fell to his knees now that her concentration was broken. He took deep, greedy breaths of air, his hand at his throat to soothe the panicked airway.

Risk stood firm atop one of the largest containers; proud and unyielding. She held out her saber at her side and ignited it in a plume of scarlet plasma. Her sharp blue eyes were fixed on the Miraluka, her features chiseled by determination.

“You’re still shortsighted as ever, Zeraina. So easy to bait.”

Risk leapt down to the deck, her saber cutting a wide arc down toward her opponent.

Zeraina hissed her anger at the interruption. The Miraluka swept her arm in a broad gesture and tossed her opponent backwards while she was still in the vulnerability of free-fall. The unexpected blow sent Risk into a pile of unsecured boxes labeled “flash grenades.”

Risk recovered immediately and struck at Zeraina, just in time to clash against the Miraluka's freshly ignited saber.

The two red blades crackled and hissed as they locked with one another. Zeraina kicked backward, giving Risk the opportunity to press her advantage with a set of rapid blows.

They wove their way between the stacks of containers. Zeraina backpedaled as Risk's superior strength empowered her strikes. Each blow landed harder than the last. Zeraina's mouth carved out a grimace of fear just below the black hem of her veil.

Unwilling to let them out of his sight, Jormund forced himself to his feet. He managed to stay out of melee range while keeping an eye on the battle. The combat was moving too quickly and his line of sight was interrupted again and again by inconvenient ammo boxes. Even so, he didn't dare get closer.

Risk was doing well enough on her own that he didn't see the need to fire into the melee and take the chance of shooting the wrong Jedi.

An oversized container of mobile ion cannon battery packs obscured his view longer than he would have liked. In those vital seconds, he heard a sound that made absolutely no sense.

In an instant of subconscious thought, Jormund first identified the noise as "loud," then as "loud static," then finally as "a loud electrical noise."

He heard Risk scream.

By the time he could see the Jedi again, Risk's advantage had crumbled. She had fallen against a taut slope of cargo netting,

her saber extinguished. The vital hilt was nowhere to be seen. Zeraina had his friend pinned down beneath the molten tip of her saber. Risk's labored breath pulled through lips still contorted with the echoes of torture. A whiff of ozone made Jormund think of an electrical short, or the lightning he'd seen in Nal Koska's deserts.

A curl of smoke rose from Risk's stormtrooper armor, which had been seared black a mere centimeter or two from the saber's blistering point. An array of smaller burns pitted her formerly pristine chestplate. They didn't match the black, sooty blossom from the saber's onslaught, and Jormund couldn't be sure where they'd come from.

Zeraina rolled her neck side to side as she addressed her victim. "Such a *fool*, Vosk. How could they want something as pathetic as you?"

Risk began to roll her weight onto the palm of one hand and was met by a sudden, biting saber strike to her offending arm. Not enough to cut, but enough to blacken armor and blister skin.

"*Coward*. You threw away a gift you didn't even deserve." Zeraina leaned in and pressed the hot blade close enough to tear a fresh grimace from Risk.

"You had a soul, once, Zeraina! Now you're—you're an empty husk. They corrupted you and you're *grateful* for it," Risk shouted with an anger befitting a wronged sister, a cry tinged with hurt and betrayal. She might have been an only child, but Jormund recognized a sibling's disappointment and pain when he heard it.

“You can’t corrupt rotten values,” Zeraina retorted. “We both know the Order was decaying from the inside. I see the truth in the power the Empire has to offer. Power that terrified the Council. Let me show you.” Zeraina burned her victim again. And again. She left Risk no escape, no reprieve, no breath to argue.

Risk gave up arguing. She dispensed with resistance. Risk’s tense form slackened and Jormund couldn’t believe she looked so calm in the midst of that apparent agony. *Was that a smile?*

Contempt tugged at the corner of Zeraina’s lip. “Go on, Vosk, numb yourself. Feeling is *dangerous*. All the good little nerfs at the Agri-Corps Outpost didn’t feel a thing.” She raised the blade, ready to bring it down on Risk’s neck.

A brief volley of blaster fire burned the stale, recirculated air.

Zeraina’s saber listed downward in an awkward, graceless path, and carving a trough in Risk’s armor. The Mirialan threw her hand protectively over the smoking plastoid wreckage while the Miraluka’s lightsaber hilt skipped across the deck plates and died moments after it left her hand.

Zeraina herself was crumpled on the floor; a shallow crater smoldered on her back.

Jormund arrived at Risk’s side in a blur of panic. He tore at the clasps of her armor. “Blazes! Just—I’ve almost got it—”

Risk’s fingers wrapped around his wrist and held it fast. He was so lost in his fear that he continued to struggle toward the last few releases. “Stop,” she said, calmly.

He looked at her then, struck cold with grim certainty. He was

too late.

If I hadn't fired, she'd be fine....

Risk offered him a wry smile. "It's just a scratch, I'm fine. Stop trying to get my clothes off and let's disable those last cannons."

Jormund sat back on his heels and ran his fingers through his wild blond hair. He remembered how to breathe when the dizziness set in.

He chuckled his relief, exhilarated that they'd survived, not one, but two crazed Jedi—or whatever they called themselves. He offered her a hand up. The pair stood in unison, pulling against and supporting each other as they rose.

Risk winced as she straightened up. Jormund hovered over her, until she waved him off with a swat to his shoulder. "Thanks. I wish I knew why I couldn't ever bring myself to kill her. I never really knew her before—but I didn't want her to...."

"Hey," Jormund stopped her with the tender, insistent tone of the simple word. He leaned forward to catch her gaze, to let Risk know that she didn't need to explain anything. She didn't have to walk the perimeter of her pain—he understood it as clearly as if it were his own. His smile was a kind offer to leave the hurt behind. "We don't have a lot of time before we've got to get out of here. No more killer Jedi, though."

"She wasn't a Jedi. Not anymore."

"You know what I mean, Risk."

She understood far too well and felt the heartsickness of regret

that he'd ever learned of her Jedi upbringing.

Jormund had to address the remaining targeting installations on his own. Risk's ruined armor would have brought up too many questions and they couldn't afford the attention. The pair had only fifteen minutes before Thario left them without a chance in any of the nine Corellian hells to escape.

For his part, Jormund was in rare form as he led the technicians into their urgent, virus-laden updates. He had never been accused of planning in his life; he thrived under pressure. The greater the concern, and the less time to resolve it, the finer a performance he could provide for any audience.

Meanwhile, Risk made her way to the aft bow escape pod, alone, only because it was the closest option and they didn't have the time to be picky. She ducked into empty rooms as squads passed.

The paneling rocked to a stop on the floor, where Risk had discarded it. She was busy tugging at wires with her right hand and patting around her uniform with her left. Her normally quick fingers weren't as compliant as she would have liked and she had to sacrifice her subtle, extended senses for concentration.

Imperial wiring, like everything else, was built according to strict regulations. This proved to be an excellent advantage for the engineers and maintenance crews who had to keep up the ever-growing Navy in fine, invading form.

Risk, for the first time, was grateful for their obsession with protocol, procedures and guidelines. She only had to look at the tidy nest of wires to find the select few that connected to the

ejection alarm system. Identifying the alarm was as simple as reading the label. These were emergency life support systems, not classified tactical weaponry.

Risk tore a sharp-enough metal clip from her armor and pressed it into the pliable insulation around her chosen wire. The edge bit in and she snapped the wire itself with a quick tug. The escape pod wouldn't be notifying—

“Who are you and what do you think you're doing?”

No time. Risk thought.

A pulse of kinetic Force energy knocked the interrogator backward into the wall. Risk heard the clatter of a handheld comm sliding across the floor. She hadn't bothered to wear her helmet; there was no room for subterfuge in her ruined uniform. Now, she was looking into the sheet-white face of an Imperial officer pinned under her knee.

“I really didn't want to kill anyone else today. But I'd rather live with small regrets, you know?”

“...this is an off-limits... area?” he ventured, weakly. He clung to his script for dear life. Risk could only respond with a pitying look. The hilt of her lightsaber struck him in the temple with merciful precision. He relaxed into a convenient unconsciousness as Risk returned to her work.

She had just finished rerouting the escape pod's status wire, a delicate procedure, when Jormund sped around the corner. He had to jump to avoid tripping over the sleeping Imperial officer.

“Whoa, we're not taking hostages, are we?”

Risk shot him a tired glance. “No problems?”

“We’re good to go. The virus kicked in about a minute ago.” He gestured in the ever-chivalrous manner to say that Risk should go ahead of him. Risk obliged and jumped into the pod, feet first. Jormund landed beside her and began a reflexive preflight check. Risk slammed her fist into the large, red launch button without a second thought.

The inner door of the escape pod locked into place instantaneously. The outer door of the pod’s bay smashed shut, simultaneously severing the pod’s last few connections to the *Arbalest* as dark, naked space yawned before them. A planet crossed over Y’toub in a lazy eclipse, blocking the system’s sun for a heartbeat.

Nothing moved.

The escape pod’s systems were completely inert.

The planet, probably Nal Koska, wandered on and let the unfiltered sunlight spill onto their faces once more. Jormund’s eyes rounded as he looked to Risk. The pod offered no answers and neither did she.

Risk was stone-faced and silent as she clicked her seat belt into place.

The solid-fuel engines kicked in with a sudden jolt that almost threw Jormund from his densely padded seat. Not that he would have had far to go in the breathing-room-only pod.

“Shouldn’t we have let your friend know about the launch?” he called over the roar of the burning fuel.

“He knows now!”

Outside the rear window, the white wedge of the *Arbalest* spun

away into the black firmament of space.

The escape pod jolted once, then twice more. Their receding point of reference was still spinning outside the window, but it had stopped growing smaller. Thario's voice broke through their tinny comm system. "I should have known they'd rifle the damn things! If I didn't enjoy flying so much I'd probably be sick right about now. You two all right in there?"

"Never been better, Thario! Have I told you you're a fine scoundrel?"

"Not nearly as often as you should, lady!"

The fugitives exchanged wide, exhausted smiles and the tightest embraces they could manage while still buckled into their seats. Thario's freighter set off for Nar Shaddaa as rapidly as Imperial suspicions would allow.

Part 19: Drive It Like You Stole It

The Jedi Temple was particularly beautiful at sunset. Risk walked down the shining marble hallways during that most golden hour, at every opportunity. The entire city was embraced with glowing light. Shadows formed long, graceful rivers at the feet of pillars, beneath pedestals and around the ankles of Jedi Masters as they made their way to the first setting of the evening meal. Renuka didn't concern herself with an early dinner, as she could be sustained by this brief window of perfect light at the end of each sun-touched day. For an hour, at least.

Renuka followed the course of every hallway on the sunward side of the Temple. It had become a never-ending path of brilliant colors, culminating in the deep indigo blues of twilight, before everything disappeared in the harsh glow of artificial lights.

Tonight, Renuka could very nearly see the way the Force manifested in every single one of the people at the Temple. Just as the masters had taught her, they were all truly luminous beings in the golden glow of the sunset.

More than any other evening, this light was so warm, so comforting and beautiful, Renuka thought the perfect hour would extend into eternity. She was filled with a profound sense of comfort, joy, even love for the life she was so blessed to have at the Temple. The sensation brought tears to her eyes and brought her heart to nearly bursting. She was in an unparalleled ecstasy, unlike anything she'd felt in her life.

Renuka

She could hear—no, not quite hear, more *feel* the voice calling to her in the Force. It chimed in her bones and carried the sweetest notes of compassion. It was coming from the room at the far end of the hallway. She picked up her speed. Her soft, light robes swished around her legs. Even that delicate sensation was fantastic. She felt as if she hadn't worn these clothes in years and every touch of the fabric was equally familiar and new.

Renuka

The voice came again and she was now jogging down the hall. No one was there to see her run, to see her excitement and impatience violate the sacred rules of conduct in the sacrosanct Temple.

Renuka

The hallway seemed to stretch out longer and longer the faster she ran. No matter how fast she moved, Renuka was destined to arrive at precisely the moment fate intended. She'd heard that maxim repeated time and time again by her teachers. She ran faster anyway.

Renuka

She was only a handful of meters away from the door now, and the voice was becoming so clear. It was deep, resonant, and wonderfully reassuring. Renuka finally recognized it as her father, a rare visitor at the Temple. He was a Jedi before her, and she had heard he served in the most honorable missions available—until she was born.

He wasn't a general anymore.

The golden glow of light shifted to a vibrant orange as the sun lit upon the very tops of Coruscant's skyscrapers. She had only moments left within the golden hour and she ran with all the urgency in the galaxy.

Renuka!

Her green fingers brushed against the polished metal of the door's handle and held fast. She threw her entire weight into swinging the great bulk aside. Inside, her father stood at the center of a room filled with fountains. Great green vines embraced the walls between cascades of water, and the room smelled of life and the cleanest air on Coruscant.

She bounded through the entrance, smiling so wide that she thought her cheeks would warp with joy. Her father was here!

"Renuka!" He called to her, falling to one knee with his arms spread wide, ready to embrace her. She leapt the final few meters—

The scene fractured, then shattered like ancient glass.

Her father was gone in a nebula of silvery light which dispersed in an instant. The vines and waterfalls crumbled into rubble as if they had been sculpted in stone.

She landed on slippered feet and skidded to a stop as her eyes adjusted to the new, dim scenery. She was at the center of a cavernous room, hundreds of meters high. There was just enough light to see shallow crypts carved into the walls. Everything bled darkness into the Force.

A new figure took the place of her father: this one looked ghostly white in the frigid midnight of this strange, terrifying space.

A pair of quicksilver eyes set in a grey, skeletal face locked on to her.

"You should have known better, Renuka Vosk."

Blood dripped from its long, pale fingers, dripped to the stone floor where a butchered body lay staring back at her. Jormund gurgled something from the ruins of his rent throat, and went still.

Risk sat up in the bed, gasping for air, shatteringly awake. Her heart was racing and she could feel her pulse in her throat. Her skin was clammy with chilled sweat. Light from speeder headlights raced over the floor and walls of the bedroom, reassuring her that the nightmare was far behind. She began the arduous task of catching her breath.

Jormund sat up beside her and rubbed his eyes. "You okay?"

"Yeah. Fine. Just a dream." Somehow, the panic didn't reach her voice.

"Good... that's... good." He sank back down into the pillows as he spoke.

Risk still felt cold, damp, and more than a little violated after her dream. She couldn't think of curling back up in the bed with Jormund now. As soon as his breathing slowed to the jagged snore she recognized as his deepest sleep, she eased herself out of the bed.

She dressed in the dark and took herself to the nearest cafe. The location didn't matter, only that it was well-lit and even better populated. She wanted to be in the company of others without the need for conversation.

There were plenty of seats open at the bar, while the booths around the rundown little cafe were pleasantly full of chattering Nar Shaddaa denizens. Risk appreciated this particular restaurant for its neutrality in the goings-on of the Smuggler's Moon. No one was here for shady conversations or business deals. They were here to share meals, and at least in a place like this, that truce was sacred.

Risk ordered a cup of caff, a habit she had picked up in her adventures with Jormund. She'd given up on trying to sleep tonight, so she settled into her seat at the counter. The cushion was too firm to be really comforting but too soft to be called truly uninviting. The caff was similarly mediocre, but it had a stimulating flavor that reassured her. This stuff would guarantee she wouldn't be dreaming for at least ten hours.

The dream.

Sly Moore had haunted her for months. That woman could still terrify the part of Risk that responded to Renuka. She had wrapped that bit of her psyche in so many layers of freedom-loving Risk that she was shocked to find that vulnerable Jedi dropout was still renting space in her mind. Hadn't she become someone new?

She was a bounty hunter now, the kind of person respectable, clean-cut Jedi were supposed to emotionlessly disdain. She drank. She danced, sometimes, with Jormund. She was in a **relationship** with Jormund, a concept so abhorrent to the

Temple that her own father had lost his standing for the crime of her conception.

At the same time, her habits weren't so stained with cruelty that the trainers at Relco would have approved. She often sought out contracts whenever the acquisition looked to have a decent chance being of innocent, and she always got them off the Smugglers' Moon in exchange for some convenient false evidence of their demise. Sure, she still killed when she had to, usually in self-defense and usually when Jormund wasn't around. With him, it was two-against-one and the acquisitions caved the instant that his butterfly knife came out.

She had a life here, built out of bounty contracts and gambling—and a relationship. Hell, she even had paperwork to prove the bounty hunter bit.

If she'd really, truly gone native, why did Sly Moore still scare her so much? The Umbaran was probably still recovering on Byss; nowhere nearby.

Should have killed her.

Risk knew the answers to all her questions couldn't be drowned in caff or brandy. And, certainly not in sickly sweet Coruscant Sunrise cocktails.

That dream wasn't just some debris kicked up by her subconscious. It had resonated with all the depth, meaning, and destiny that signified a vision. Something awful was coming back from her past and she had one chance to outrun it.

Jormund was a problem.

She truly enjoyed his company and his wit. But he knew her

true name, he knew that she was a wanted Jedi fugitive. He knew things that, in conjunction with his role as her—*stang*, *the word's even hard to think*—lover, that could get him killed. Probably would get him killed.

Worse still, he could be twisted into a liability in an instant.

Risk stared into the rich brown caff staining the sides of her half-empty cup. A swirling sheen of aromatic oils gave its surface a shimmering glaze of color that tinted the dark liquid beneath. Further justifications slid through her mind, all of them transparent, coloring the unthinkable fears of Jormund's death in more palatable hues.

Jormund had held her life in his hands, not out of some gallant heroism, but because it had fallen there and he was too decent to trade her for credits. But she *knew*, without a doubt, that everyone's decency has limits. He could turn on her, would turn on her, eventually, when the price was better or his generosity had worn thin.

She hated that idea more than she hated Sly Moore and her memories of her years lost on Byss.

There was only one thing she could do about it.

"It's the perfect solution!" Jormund couldn't have looked more pleased with himself as he opened his apartment door. "We can finally finish paying off Thario; he's been bugging you for months. And we have *plenty* of extra left *and* it's a con you've run at least a hundred times before."

"You're rounding up, Jormund. Way up."

“Nah, Bina sent me the notice. Temba’s offering a million credits to the winner! We just have to buy in with... the rest of our savings.”

“I’m talking about the con—stang, Jormund. Are you sure you want to mess with the Hutts? I don’t enjoy being broke.”

“It’s Arms-Wide Temba. He’s not the fattest Hutt on the Smuggler’s Moon, you know.”

“Still a Hutt.” Risk unclipped her holster and tossed it onto Jormund’s caff table. She worked the joints of her fingers and wrists, all of which ached after their latest acquisition in the Warehouse District. Satisfied that she’d popped every joint that would pop, she turned her attention to picking at one of the choicest scabs on her knuckles.

“Anyway, it’s easy money.” Jormund could have been accused of skipping his way into his bachelor-kitchen. There wasn’t much in the way of food, but the alcohol was well stocked. And then there was the multitude of condiments, all of which were half empty and well-crustered. Not that he had anything ready to put them on, save for some stale crackers.

He poured a pair of drinks, still grinning at his own genius.

“Anyone else would say it’s barvy money.” Risk countered. Her armor and boots landed in the only corner of the room that didn’t feature a pile of Jormund’s laundry. She threw herself onto a sofa and wiggled her liberated toes.

“But you wouldn’t, would you?”

“No. I just don’t like the idea of pulling you in on that old con. I ran it solo because I’m the only one who can do it.” Risk tipped

into the depression caused by Jormund's greater weight as he settled onto the overstuffed sofa beside her. He offered her one of the glasses of Corellian brandy with a rakish wink.

"It's not going to be the same old con. You do your thing, I'll win because I'm *good* at sabacc, and we'll meet up at the finalists' table. I fold out, transfer the pot to you, and—" he clapped his hands together "—we go home rich."

"Isn't this thing invitation-only?"

"Bina has that covered for us."

"Of course she does." She sipped her brandy and sank into the cushions.

Nal Hutta loomed large in the Nar Shadda sky; the sun's dull, yellowed doppelganger grinned up at its lucrative moon.

"You confident about this plan?" Risk asked.

"I'm so confident, I'm sweating. Sweating confidence." Jormund *did* look confident, though Risk was familiar enough to see just how twitchy this plan made him. She tossed him a kerchief to dab his forehead. A playful evening wind tousled their hair as they stood on the landing pad, clad in what passed for elegant attire on Nar Shaddaa.

Risk had flatly refused to wear the sequined dress Jormund bought for her, stating that it looked like a slave dancer's hand-me-down. Instead, she opted for a gunmetal grey synthleather jacket with appropriately elaborate stitching. The best feature, in her mind, was the way it hid her slimfit armor underneath. A few

concealed weapons pockets helped, too.

Jormund enjoyed dressing up. He reveled in the opportunity for showing off wealth he didn't have, and his choices included all the silk trimmings wherever possible. He kept to a formal black with colorful blue accents: an out-of-style pocket square and a beaded motif on his very conspicuous dress-holster. Risk found the get-up rather charming, though she'd told him that dressing up his gun was ridiculous. He'd only winked at her.

Risk couldn't decide if his outfit made him look like someone who didn't understand how to dress for the Senate floor, or like a man trying desperately to impress a woman well beyond his station. *A bit of both, really.*

Their black, high-class rental airspeeders pulled up to the landing pad. They each loaded into a separate vehicle which took off humming through the skylanes of the Luxury District. Immense yachts hung in the air just above the highest levels of the ecumenopolis; a sky full of golden leviathans floating through a sea of smog. Spotlights caressed the great ships, causing them to shine in lazy rhythms. Risk and Jormund's speeders arrived a few minutes apart.

The deck of Temba's yacht teemed with ambitious sabacc players. They clamored between the silken ropes that cordoned off secure areas as Temba's men vetted the invitations.

Most passed the examination, and those who were turned away were obvious frauds. The crowd grumbled as each of the rejected guests fought back through the mob to find a return taxi. One of the counterfeit ticket-holders flew into a rage at the Klatooinian bouncer. The party-crasher was given a remarkably generous warning before receiving a blaster-bolt to the gut for his trouble. The body was tossed overboard without ceremony.

After that, the line moved much, much faster. A few gamblers went for the taxis without even bothering the bouncer.

Bina's invitations were perfect forgeries; they even featured authentic typos in the overwrought Aurebesh script. She had also gone to the trouble of adding their names to The List, which would have been more than enough to guarantee access.

Jormund entered the line well ahead of Risk, as per their plan to remain unassociated until after the winnings were deposited into their accounts. Now that he was in the midst of the performance, he'd lost the twitchy cadence to his speech. The bouncer waved him on in.

Risk ratcheted through the line. Another two hopefuls were turned away, both of whom were genuinely shocked that their names had not been on The List. *So that's how Bina made room.*

When her turn came, the Klatooinian glanced over the invitation, keyed in her name and rolled his eyes when the datapad responded with a sullen buzz. "Why do you people have to waste my time?"

Risk's heart skipped a beat, but she kept her outward calm. "You mean my time. You probably put my name in wrong. What'd you put?"

"Rilk, just like it says on the invitation."

"That's RISK. With a *sen*th, not a leth."

He scoffed, but the bouncer did try the correct name. The datapad chimed and he gestured for her to pass. He didn't go so far as to apologize, though he was muttering about stupid

fancy letters after she'd gone by.

Risk was led to the gambling hall by signage so gilded that it was hardly legible beneath the sparkle. The signs offered poor guidance but they did do an excellent job of showing just how rich Temba thought he was. An embarrassment of riches seemed an appropriate description to Risk.

The crowd milled about in the center of the great gambling hall, which was a monument to controlled chaos. Sabacc tables filled the center of the room while one end was occupied by an alcove intended for a Hutt's mobile mattress-throne. The sluglike species didn't have legs, but if they had, they would have made a point of never using them.

For now, the throne was absent, as was the security detail who would accompany it.

Jewel-toned curtains lined the hall, covering the otherwise drab yacht walls. The curtains themselves were dripping with golden chains and baubles from every world unfortunate enough to enjoy trading relations with the Hutts.

The gamblers occupied themselves in stiff, clipped conversations. Some traded barbs intended to provoke a slip of emotion; anything to reveal a tell that could be used later. Twi'lek waitresses clad in traditional slave garb wove their way through the room, offering drinks and exotic foods to Temba's guests.

Risk was starting on her second Corellian brandy—a drink she was now willing to admit she liked—when the room went quiet.

Temba's corporeal self could be described as an enormous slug with immense, slitted eyes. Anyone familiar with the cartel

would identify him as a moderately large Hutt who wasn't nearly as fat as he'd like to be. Risk saw him for what he was: ambitious, craven, and presently lacking in Nar Shaddaa's infamous esteem.

While Damrok, a much larger Hutt in every sense, had a healthier share of the Moon's profits and a greater presence in the cartel, Temba would always be the runt of the organization. Damrok left him absolutely no room to grow, precisely because he had the greatest potential to do so. In a way, Risk pitied him.

The repulsorlift on his hovering dais must have been perfectly calibrated to keep him floating half a meter above the deck of the card hall. His uneven bulk shifted as he gestured wildly, waving and greeting his guests as if he were calling from an election day parade float.

His attendants hurried around the dais and locked it into place with tiny, wire anchors.

Temba's speech began with a rumbling laugh, which rolled out from his wobbling body and struck the crowd mute. "Welcome! Welcome everyone, to the Fourteenth Annual Nar Shaddaa Tournament of Sabacc!" He paused for the mandatory applause. "Every day, a gambler must lay down his bets. If a gambler does not place a wager, he could be walking around lucky and never know! Today, you will place many bets. Today, you shall have your skills, your guile, and your nerves tested. Today, most of you will lose. Badly. Today, ONE of you will be proven to be the greatest gambler on the Moon! Luck to all of you, but only one will be worthy of this...."

Temba gestured again, this time toward a Twi'lek girl in a dazzling garment that aspired to be a dress, one day. Her red hands drew back a silken curtain pull, revealing a mountain of

credchits. The show of wealth was absurd, given that any one of those chits could have held the entire sum of the tournament's winnings. One of those chits could have held the sum of the digital contents of the entire Moon's financial system, so long as it had the right internal certificates. Still, the sight of so many credsticks, each full of possibility, was exhilarating in ways that brought a touch of prickly shame to Risk's heart. She exulted in the electric feeling anyway.

Temba probably talked for a few more minutes. The gamblers' cheers died away to quiet awe and respect. But their respect was held by the spectacle of cold, hard credits. The Hutt who controlled the money could have said anything; they would have simply nodded along, hypnotized by the cash.

The spell wore off as Temba's wild hands clapped madly and the tournament officially began. A tall blue display showed the seating chart, which randomized the placements for the attending gamblers. Fortunately, Risk and Jormund were placed on opposite ends of the room.

Risk found herself at a table full of grim-looking men, with the exception of the redhaired human. He was an older, gregarious man with a long face and an unusually business-like manner. He insisted on shaking hands with everyone at the table, as if they were about to start negotiations on just who would be walking away with tonight's pot.

The other gamblers—a taciturn Barabel, a dark-skinned human, and a deep green Duro—eyed him with suspicion but accepted the handshake nonetheless. Risk decided that the redhead, who introduced himself as Tobin Prosper, wasn't worth her time. "Not interested in friendly competition, Miss? That's quite all right. No problem at all." His tone was genial, but betrayed

by the predatory look in his eyes. Risk wanted to wring every last chip out of him.

“So, how do you know our fine host—Arl, was it?” Prosper asked the twitchy human at his right.

Arl picked at his sideburns and fidgeted his way toward an answer. “Well, you see, I am in charge of accounts payable in one of Temba’s... um, new, er, subsidiaries. He bought the company last month and—”

“You’re an accountant! How legitimate! Careful everyone, we got a sharp one here!” Prosper clapped him on the back and nearly sent the smaller man crashing into the table. “We get all types on Nar Shaddaa. But Barabels, you guys are always a treat to conversate with.”

The Barabel narrowed his eyes at Prosper and rearranged the cards in his scaly hands. He let out a soft, barely-audible hiss as he pointedly upped the ante with a few chips.

Risk wrestled back a grin and intentionally threw the fight. She snickered in the uneasy silence, just to unsettle the other players, and called the Barabel’s bet. Her hand was promising; too promising to betray with a raise.

Prosper tried again with the Duro, Forten, whose nasal voice grated on everyone’s ears. He dropped the conversation rather abruptly, in favor of bragging about his own smuggling exploits. Risk was more interested in the Duro’s scrambler unit under the table, and only caught snippets of Prosper’s tale.

“And then, because of my *fine* crew’s ability to salvage that pirate’s navicomputer, we got the cargo delivered nearly a week early. See, this is why I tell people, problems are just

opportunities in disguise, if you use them correctly!”

Korda hung on the smuggler’s every word. His dark eyes were wide and strangely innocent for a Hutt accountant. “Do you work for Temba? It seems like you should!” He leaned in and whispered, “He *hates* losing cargo and you sound like a really professional courier.”

Risk shook her head as she placed a card in the interference field. Not everyone was here to play sabacc, it seemed. The banalities of business conversation bored her more than she ever could have dreamed, almost to the point of spoiling her fun. Risk entertained herself by switching Forten’s scrambler on and off every time Prosper used the word “*fine.*” The Duro folded after about ten minutes of Risk’s little game.

Several hands went by, chips circumnavigated the table as one would expect during the early game. Risk threw the game to her own favor in a few dramatic rounds. She had earned the easy win after enduring Prosper’s exhaustive stream of hot air.

She moved on to the next game, as did the still-unnamed Barabel who somehow managed to keep enough chips to maintain his standing in the tournament.

Risk harvested another table-worth of chips in a long, arduous game with small pots and subtle play. Afterward, the tournament paused for a gambler’s meal of sandwiches eaten while standing up. Temba could have afforded better, but none of the players would have wanted it. Most would have skipped the meal if it hadn’t been mandatory.

Jormund had progressed admirably through the first half of the tournament. He was in a higher bracket than Risk, through his

unaided skills, a fact that he would no doubt make certain Risk understood in every detail after the tournament was over. For her part, Risk didn't want to attract any extra attention through flashy wins.

The partners-in-crime avoided one another, choosing to mingle with anyone and everyone else during the lunch hour.

Fortunately for everyone, Temba wasn't interested in making another speech. He was too busy watching the complex choreography performed by silk-clad dancers just in front of his dais. All of them wore slave collars, which jangled in time with the music. The display sent Risk's stomach on a roll and she regretted her roast nerf sandwich.

She was looking forward to getting this disaster over with. Risk hated losing, even by choice.

Risk's pulse raced. It throbbed through the tight spaces between the tense muscles of her neck. The time had come to throw away the game.

The cards in her freshly-dealt hand were decent enough; almost acceptable if she'd intended to win. But, if she went along much longer with the plan, the loss of all those credits would be even more painful. Risk leaned back and let the game take its course. No interfering with the players who surrounded her, no convenient electrical shorts in her favor, just the game as it was meant to be played: by losing.

Without her tricks, she realized that sabacc was really profoundly uninteresting. *Tossed about by chance, odds stacked against you; that's life, not entertainment.*

Her cards randomized to a laughably bad set, worthless by any estimation. So, of course, she went all-in. She didn't need to mind her performance as her pile of chips went to the grey-haired human across the table. The grimace she wore was completely and utterly sincere.

Risk had let the hand go, but that couldn't make watching good money disappear any easier. She sighed, said her farewells to the group, and left the table, broke.

As she stood, she could feel Jormund's eyes boring into her from across the room. His confusion and fear shone out like a beacon in the Force; she had become too accustomed to his moods, reading them was second-nature now. She waved his attention away with a subtle gesture. The motion was small, but he'd understand her meaning well enough: *I have this under control.*

Risk stepped into the empty hallway that followed the circumference of the gaming hall. She took a spot between two ostentatious crimson curtains and flicked the switch on her comm.

"Bee, you there?" Risk whispered into the comm's microphone. She spoke on the very edge of its pick-up and no louder.

Bina responded, but only after an achingly long minute had elapsed. "Yeah. Kinda busy, though." Her answer had to be shouted over the racket of at least six different audio feeds playing in her data gathering center. The comm's speaker clipped, unable to cope with her noise.

"You're always busy. Bee, I need a quick favor—"

"You always need favors!" the info-broker interrupted. She

shared that streak of impatience with her brother. It shouldn't have been a surprise, given that combative Corellian blood ran in their veins. Risk eased the volume on her comm a little lower.

"Just a quick one. Nobody else can do it."

A few minutes later, Risk was parading over to Temba's dais, carrying her datapad and the sort of smirk that hides a secret. Jormund was still on high alert, unwittingly pinging her with the Force as he watched her every move. She offered her partner another little wave from behind her back as she stepped up to the Hutt's great, slimy recumbency. Temba's guards stood a bit straighter and tightened their grips on their myriad weapons.

"You're lucky that I lost today, Temba."

Orange eyes the size of nerf steaks appraised her every move. Arms-Wide Temba sent his immense, greasy tongue along the circuit of his lips before he spoke down to his guest in simplified Huttese.

"You lose, someone else wins, that is the way of Nar Shaddaa!" His small arms gesticulated wildly in his trademark gesture.

Risk cleared her throat. She spent much of her concentration trying not to laugh at his too-high voice. She continued in Basic, unwilling to trust the duplicitous homophones of Huttese. "Yes, but in this case, you could have lost everything, if I hadn't had the opportunity to read my messages in time."

The Hutt's pupils narrowed to slits. His jovial expression sobered just enough to let Risk know that she had his attention, without betraying his concern to the rest of the tournament. He invited her to continue.

"I have evidence that Damrok is preparing to launch an attack

on your holdings on Nal Hutta.”

Temba coughed up a guffaw from his wormy innards. Once he recovered from the fit, he reached into an ostentatious gold bowl. His grubby fingers strangled a live gorg and sent it down his throat. “You need to check your sources, Mirialan. I have surveillance on all my holdings. Everywhere. My men would tell me if they spotted a problem.”

“Which is why you should find the fact that your satellite feeds on Nal Hutta have been frozen to be a great concern. Especially when Damrok has just acquired a new fleet of fighters on behalf of the cartel.” She held up her datapad as proof.

Temba choked and spat out his half-chewed, still-living snack. His small arm flailed for a steward, who activated the repulsorlift on Temba’s dais. Risk took a few steps backward as he hovered by. “You owe me one, Temba!”

He was already retreating through his private, double-wide door and didn’t deign to respond.

Risk stood by, loudly expressing her frustration that he hadn’t paid her already. Then she stormed out into the hallway and took refuge between the curtains. She buried her Force Aura and made herself nearly invisible in the minds of passers-by.

She could hear the commotion caused by Temba’s hasty retreat. The entire tournament was in an uproar. Satisfied that her return would go unnoticed, she made her way back to the hall—and the credstick display.

As expected, the guards had been called away from the paltry sum of a million credits. Temba’s holdings on Nal Hutta were

worth hundreds of times that. His attentions were elsewhere. The gambling hall, on the other hand, was concerned about the Hutt's behavior. A publicly worried Hutt made for bad news for everyone. A few meters away from the table, Risk waited, arms crossed.

A Quarren female edged her way over to the display. She produced a collapsible bag from a pocket and began sweeping credsticks from the table. Risk was pleased to see that not only did her own presence remain unnoticed, but the Quarren was the only opportunist so far. The tentacled woman filled one bag, then another, and Risk couldn't help but smile at her own good fortune. The Quarren may have had many tentacles, but only the two hands. If both were busy carrying bags full of credsticks, well....

She wasn't brazen enough to try for a third bag. By Risk's estimate, the thief had a quarter of a million credits already.

The Quarren fled the hall, but not alone. Risk tailed her to an archaic stairwell between the pleasure yacht's decks.

"Pardon me, but I'm lost, can you point me to the tournament?" Risk called up after the Quarren, who'd already climbed one flight of stairs.

Her target glanced over her leathery shoulder. She assessed, then dismissed Risk in an instant, and resumed her flight at double-speed. Risk cursed silently and ran up after her. There were only five decks on the entire yacht and once the Quarren reached the open air, all bets were off.

Credsticks, despite being small, light items, can weigh a being down, given enough of them. These were set to denominations of a hundred credits each, which gave her over a thousand

credsticks in each bag. The Quarren must have been hauling fifty-five kilos of ready money.

Risk caught the thief at the top of the stairs and grabbed her by the shoulder. The Quarren spun, wielding one of the heavy bags as a bludgeon. Risk had just enough warning to brace herself in the stairwell and block the blow. She had the Quarren's attention now.

"You don't want those bags. They are too heavy." Risk tried her command in Basic, hoping that she wouldn't have to switch to Huttese. She'd never tried a mind trick in anything but her native language.

The Quarren replied in the aquatic tongue of Mon Cal, overlaid with the dull monotone that let Risk know her suggestion had landed properly. Two heavy thuds sounded as the bags hit the deck. The Quarren wandered off in the first direction that suited her. Without the urgency of escape, she'd lost any particular desire to hurry anywhere.

Risk took up the credsticks and concentrated on her escape. She could sense a growing chaos from the belly of the yacht. Temba's guests were going to get violent, and soon. Jormund would have to find his own way out.

Jormund's apartment smelled like his cheap cologne, starship grease, and stale dirty laundry. And the place was too quiet without him. Only the drone of the occasional speeder and the whirring of equipment in the walls kept the place from sterile silence.

The lights had been on when Risk had let herself in. Thanks to

Bina's unique skillset, Jormund could afford to keep the place lit at all hours. His native-born paranoia preferred coming home to a bright apartment without easy places for attackers to hide. After her encounters in Nar Shaddaa's undercity, Risk could respect his caution.

She readjusted the bags on his caff table for the tenth time. Anyone in their right mind wouldn't bother staging a display of stolen money just-so, or would they? She didn't know, just couldn't walk out yet. She wanted the credsticks to overflow in just the right, clichéd bank-heist sort of way. Of course, the bags were lighter by a few thousand credits, but she was going to need a per diem for a while.

Risk had to wrest herself away from her uncharacteristic perfectionism before Jormund got back. He would have too many questions she absolutely did not want to answer. On her way out, Risk paused by Jormund's desk. Her hand hovered over a blank sheet of flimsy. She must have reached for it three times. Each time, she resisted only to try again.

Sensibility won out. She shook her head and made for the door before sentimentality could take root any deeper.

The *Flame Skimmer* was unsupervised. It was always unsupervised. Risk approached the ship as one might approach a well-loved pack animal. Her hand slid down its slightly pitted hull wistfully. She even went so far as to pat the ship.

She flipped open a hidden keypad and used the very same passcode that Jormund had given her nearly a year ago. He could be such a creature of habit. The ship's hatch popped open with a pneumatic hiss and granted her entry. She tossed

her cloak out of the way of her legs and climbed aboard.

The hatch snapped shut behind her. Being in Jormund's ship without him felt wrong. But it had to be done. Risk's sense of nobility had frayed at the ends, and yet, compelled her to continue. She wanted to believe it was her nobility, at least. Not an overwhelming sentimentality; that wasn't it *at all*.

Her hand sailed over the controls, flipping switches and tapping at the terminals. She breezed through his often-overlooked checklist and soon the engines were roaring to life. Their powerful rumbling steeled her convictions all the more.

Risk transmitted a request to the hangar's control droids. They began the process of queueing her for departure. She wasn't the only pilot leaving at this early morning hour and ships sped past her viewscreen in the screaming acceleration of takeoff.

As she waited, Risk reached for a synthleather satchel at her feet. It wasn't much larger than an oversized datapad. In fact, that was precisely what it held. She flicked the thin screen to life and pored over its readout for the tenth time.

The bounty contract was largely standard. It stated a target, conditions for payout, but this one also gave her a deadline. She only had a standard week to capture, or destroy, this droid and return evidence of the kill. The client had even given her leads; the droid was expected on Ryloth within a day or so.

Risk had reviewed this information so many times in the past hour since she picked up the bounty that she could nearly recite it from memory. Normally, she would have checked the bounty once or twice and gone about her business. This contract bothered her.

Of course, that wouldn't stop her from claiming it.

Risk wasn't sure if she should be proud or concerned that the contract had requested her specifically to collect the bounty. Once the bounty on her own head had been resolved, she had gotten herself a license and increased her income by tenfold. It was good to be licensed. But that also put her in the database for potential clients. That meant she could be requested.

Being recognized by anyone made her stomach tense up. She hated it. Jormund had known her, or he thought he did, and even that intimacy made her uncomfortable. Knowing her was dangerous for him. Knowing her was potentially fatal. Sly Moore was still out there, and the Empire's standing Jedi bounty was still offering a healthy payout for her—so long as the hunter could identify her.

Through Jormund, they could.

The worst part was that she liked knowing him. She liked knowing him more than she hated being known. That had nearly kept her on Nar Shaddaa. But the nightmares were persistent now, and this new droid bounty was a sign that it was time to get off world.

Jormund was a good man. She cared about him, she really did. But she couldn't stay. Risk repeated that in her head whenever the doubts rose up and closed around her throat.

She couldn't stay.

The hangar droid transmitted a "good to go" alert which chimed on the *Flame Skimmer's* radio. Risk returned the datapad to its satchel and turned her attention back to piloting. The *Skimmer*

was pulling out of its stall, reorienting for takeoff and within seconds the engines shifted from a dull rumble to a true roar.

The *Flame Skimmer* tore through the hangar into Nar Shaddaa's smoggy morning sky.