

“Bravery comes in numbers, it’s true. The higher the numbers, the braver you are.”

—Aled Evansq <ELITE>

Prologue

Galactic Communiqué: 6141337695

Coded Priority: Red

Origination: Admiral Z.E. Etnam

Recipient: Grand High Inquisitor Adalric Cessius Brandl

RE: Guild Information

With the recent rash of insurgent activity in the core systems and the insurrections within the Outer Rim, the Imperial High Command cannot commit any further Imperial personnel to your cause, Inquisitor Brandl. This is deeply regrettable as your Nharquis’I Protectorate is well-known and highly respected among key military officials within the Empire. Your loyalty to Emperor Palpatine and the cause have been duly noted, marking you as a much trusted and most treasured ally. Thus, you are granted access to the following excerpt of classified information

from a recent field report in the Wanderhome sector. Access to it is meant for only the highest ranking Imperial officials:

There are a number of active Imperial cells, known as guilds, scattered throughout the galaxy that may serve our will and our purpose. These loyal cells vary in reputation, skill level, leadership, and numbers. Some specialize in crafting, bio-engineering, tailoring, even the arts of dancing and music. Others find their niche in strategic combat, conventional military tactics, or the traditional martial arts of hand-to-hand. Still other cells are an amalgam of various types. They are loyal, impassioned Imperials, who are devoted to the cause, willing to commit their resources and their lives in the name of the Emperor.

However, the Rebels also possess their own guild organizations. To our peril, they appear to be well-coordinated, well-connected, and are thriving. Our Imperial cells are disorganized, oppositional among their own faction, and are greatly outnumbered by the Alliance; regardless, the Emperor's wishes prevail in the hearts and minds of a noble few. In spite of these unbalanced odds, a small number of Imperial cells fight on without proper personnel or equipment. Some of these beleaguered guilds have joined forces with others to redouble their powers and resources. Regretfully, despite their many successes against the Rebels, they also remain somewhat disorderly, segmented, and without true leadership. Even if they were united, it would take a tremendous miracle of leadership to seal the bond and maintain it, without shattering the fragility of its existence.

There you have it, Lord Brandl. You now know as much as I do; perhaps more, as thespians are more apt to read beneath the lines and between the illusions of words. The one and only suggestion I can provide you with is this, my friend. There is a viper within the midst of this galactic storm that is brewing. Seek it out. Find it. Bind it to you; and you may discover a miracle that would solidly unite the Imperial cells under one, glorious banner. With such a tiny thread, you may well yoke the more powerful guilds into line.

I greatly enjoyed your last stage production and wish you well in your current endeavors. As you and yours are apt to say, "May the Dark Side prevail."

“Brave misdeeds are often times the result of naive courage flailing against the injustices of righteousness.”

—Lord Adalric Cessius Brandl, actor (from Holonet Report: What Makes a Successful Tragic Persona)

Chapter 01:

What is the definition of bravery?

Sitting in the midst of swaying meadow grass that was tall as her waist, Soelle Khiss kept vigil on a nondescript knoll. She rested her chin on her drawn-up knees and peered from that safe distance down into the city of Battlefront on the planet Talus. An ill-forgotten sister of its more popular system mate, the planet Corellia, Talus maintained a subtle balance between a few sprawling metropolises, fertile flatlands, and unexplored mountains and wilderness. The adopted home of the Aa’kuans, confirmed anarchists and religious zealots, the planet remained mostly untouched, unfettered by any rampant development or societal upheaval. However, that reality was swiftly changing, as the name of the city below would suggest.

A placid breeze rolled out of the southwest, bringing with it the pungent scent of distant

ocean brine, intermingled with the aroma of fresh water. The scent was pleasant enough, but faint, filtered through the modified rebreather built into her scout trooper helmet. Made to be more flexible than the standard assault armor issued to stormtroopers, the armor was lightweight, close fitting at the joints, and designed to move with her like a second skin. Regardless, like all armor, it was designed for protection, not comfort. Nor was it especially tailored to be worn by females, Human or otherwise.

Beneath the tight-fitting neckline of the armor, Soelle wore a leather slave collar. It was nearly two centimeters wide. Weathered thin by age and exposure, it itched unmercifully, especially where the clamp pinched her skin. Thus annoyed, she stretched her neck to the left side, then to the right, relieving her irritated skin by chafing it against the rubber interior of the custom-made environmental suit. As a result of the strain, her neck cracked audibly and she yelped in unexpected pain. Regardless, she harbored no ill thoughts about the armor's snug fit or the strange accoutrement from her former life. The armor, like the collar, was a part of her being. Without them, she felt vulnerable, naked, and incomplete.

A petite figure, Soelle stood out in sharp contrast against the undulating green meadows and moderate hills of Talus. Pulling her knees against her chest, she rocked slightly to and fro to a rhythm that existed only within her head. Below her, on the outskirts of the aptly named Rebel town of Battlefront, a small war was finally winding down. On the northern flank of the city, built on a particularly flat section of verdant grassland, near the curving profile of a wide river, the burned out ruins of three Rebel bases smoked as an inferno of heat and flames licked at the remains of crumbled duracrete and other debris. Shrouded in a thick blanket of smoke, corpses littered the ground. Both Rebel and Imperial, the dead lay in erratic paths alongside the destroyed bases, telling the tale of the battle that had been waged: on one side to fiercely defend

the bases and on the other, the fierce battle to destroy them. On this day, the destroyers prevailed.

One base remained standing among the rubble. Soelle glanced at the datapad strapped to her left wrist. Three minutes left. By the end of those three minutes, the final base would detonate and explode, joining its fellows in the realm of fiery nonexistence. As it should be with all Rebel bases, Soelle thought with a proud grin. Her handiwork led to the bases being destroyed. She was a Special Forces operative, an Operations Protocol Officer, more aptly known as a base-buster—a specifically trained Imperial soldier whose sole purpose was to get into a Rebel base, find each of its five control terminals, and wire them for self-destruction. Skill was a valued commodity among base-busters, while longevity in the profession was lacking. The more efficient the skill, the faster the base could be brought down. A faster time meant less chance of discovery and greater chances of survival for the team.

Excelling in both her training at the Academy and in the final conduit into her profession, Soelle possessed such proficiency. The training of a base-buster was a carefully orchestrated medley of bounty hunting techniques, bioengineering matrices, old-fashion smuggling, commando tactics, and squad leader protocols. The slicing skills were already well-known to her, having been raised among smugglers and pirates on her homeworld Socorro. Her shadowy talents propelled her into the forefront of her class. Only six weeks after graduation from the elite Imperial Academy; and she was responsible for the destruction of well over 300 bases. To her credit, a hundred of those were laid to waste a week before she even graduated with her official papers. That distinction earned her valedictorian status and a medal, the Bronze Cluster of Service, a first for an Academy cadet. An added reward was an elevated rank: Master Sergeant.

Soelle's smile deepened with great pride. She greatly enjoyed the daring adventure of risking Rebel ire to puzzle over the base defense systems, only to circumvent security, strip the power source, and succeed in tipping the headquarters terminal to self-destruct. The entire operation made her giddy. However, and she sighed with discontentment, busting bases was the nature of her training, not combat. Though listed on the military roster as a soldier, she did not really feel like one.

Rebel bases were heavily defended by genuine combat soldiers with heavy weapons, turrets that could kill in one salvo, and elite soldiers—citizens who when warned of the attack were apt to answer the call for reinforcements—as was the case today. Regardless of their loyalty to their bases or the reinforcement from their allies, Battlefront's militia was not enough in number, presence, or ability to save these bases. Dominating the battlefield, the Imperial militia known as <VIPER> was in full force, wiping up the remnants of the Rebels' defenses with surprising simplicity. Soelle proudly glanced at the guild insignia at her shoulder. Her guild was her family, as busting bases was her purpose; and she took great pleasure in working with her family to wound the Rebel infrastructure, if only in this small way.

Colonel Lomm Ka'Sol, <VIPER>'s guildleader, stood at the mouth of the remaining base with nothing more in her hands than a silver vibro-knuckler. The weapon was inscribed with her name, which in Coynite meant 'freedom from the cradle law.' Though she was a full-blooded Zabrak, she possessed a great deal of the ferocity and strength that made the Coynites a much feared race in the galaxy. To such warriors, death was welcomed over any dishonor, no matter how infinitesimal. Dressed in blue and silver trimmed composite armor, the Zabrak spun about in an explosion of motion and kicked out, taking down three attackers simultaneously as they sought to rush her. Only one of them got back up. Initially keeping her arms and hands locked

tightly at her sides, Lomm pivoted on her back heel to avoid a crushing blow to the head.

The Rebel rallied in his successful advance, gripped his rifle in both hands as if it were a polearm, and charged headlong at her. In response, Lomm lunged forward, and then came to a sudden stop—her right hand buried in the Rebel's chest. The head of the vibro-knuckler flashed momentarily in the sunlight, despite the smear of blood and gore as the weapon emerged from between his shoulder blades. Lomm straightened and disentangled her hand from the corpse.

Soelle winced, her mouth watering distastefully. She took a moment to observe a Corellian butterfly that had alighted on the tip of her boot. When she dared look up again, the Rebel was lying on the ground, unmoving. Lomm stood over him, shaking the blood from her vibro-knuckler and hand.

Protecting the left flank of the perimeter were FrozenShadow and Trick Baby, both powerful swordsmen wielding their weapons with devastating results. Rykk Blade in hand, its wickedly curved edge splayed with blood, Trick Baby wasted no time in slicing her opponent down low at the ankles. As he fell, she dropped down on top of him with a venomous war cry, leading with all her weight. The sword penetrated the corpse with enough force to pin him to the fertile ground. Trick rolled to her feet, reclaiming her weapon with a vicious twist before moving on to the next target.

Wildly spinning an NK-Executor sword above his head and then level with his shoulders, FrozenShadow brought the unusually light blade down diagonally across another Rebel's torso and thrust forward, nearly cutting the large man in half. Dressed in no more than a pair of blue pantaloons, sandals, and the skin he was born with, his deeply tanned and muscled figure was a sharp contrast to Trick who wore a full suit of stormtrooper assault armor. The two were an odd sight, who enjoyed working in tandem. As unusual as the dancing rancor Soelle had once seen

on parade in Coronet.

However, there was nothing stranger than the persistent and peculiar humming that reechoed between the burned out walls of the bases. The noise rose defiantly above every explosion, blaster bolt, or grenade discharge, only to interrupt itself with random high-pitched hisses and shrieks of raw energy meeting resistance. Occasionally, a flash of red or gold light erupted from above the charred walls, accompanied by a scream of pain, the audible thud of a body falling to the ground, and then silence. Soelle watched, mesmerized as the only two Dark Jedi among them ran from Rebel to Rebel, cutting them down where they stood.

Though they were to be properly known as Sith, there was much dissent regarding the esteemed title. Sith, Dark Jedi, the old Corellian word she knew was ke'dem. Soelle was too afraid to ask which of the titles such individuals preferred. Not unlike base-busting, it was more to her advantage to keep a low profile and stay well out of harm's way, particularly when it came to the Sith. But like most things that were immoral, illegal, or fattening, she was drawn to them with a dark fascination. Such interests would be her undoing, she surmised.

<VIPER> had few Jedi, but those they had within the guild were potent. Inviolable in their furies and seemingly indestructible, they moved like a plague through the Rebel ranks. Dressed in crafter's pants and an apron, remnants of his days as a weaponsmith, Taduc charged into a crowd of Rebels with a double-bladed lightsaber of radiant gold. A wild mane of curled blond hair bounced and leapt at his shoulders as he initiated a ballestra and jumped forward, lunging through his opponent's defense. At his back was Eimi, who deftly moved into the fray from beneath his warding arm, leading into a forward recovery that brought both Jedi within striking range.

The Rebel did not have long to contemplate what remained of his military career. Soft-

spoken and quietly mischievous, Eimi harbored a ferocity that at times stunned Soelle. Formerly a bounty hunter, the Sith wore her red locks closely shorn, lending a boyish countenance to her face. She spoke little to anyone and at times appeared to avoid confrontation—the opposite of Taduc, whose infamous cantina brawls had become legendary in Theed. It was a deadly deception, as Eimi was a Sith and given to their moods and their quick sense of justice.

As fascinated as Soelle was by the potency of Sith, it was difficult to watch the slaughter unfolding before her. She found herself wishing the Rebels would simply retreat, rather than risk certain death. The Alliance soldiers were badly outnumbered; and it was clear that the remaining soldiers were no more than raw, bootstrap recruits. Taduc was not known for his mercy to the rival faction, no matter what their station in life. The only good Rebel was a dead Rebel, he liked to say.

On the rear of the operation perimeter there was a massive explosion, followed by another, then several more in rapid succession. The ground shook violently as mammoth goutts of flame and black smoke erupted from the back corner of the remaining Rebel base. Three minutes had passed and the core systems began self-destructing. Above the din, a baritone screech of raucous laughter reverberated over the thunderous sounds of the blast concussions. Soelle recognized the throaty chortle of the Trandoshan tracer, Kadem.

Where the smoke grew thin from an swelling breeze, she saw his tall, heavily armored figure moving among the blast-charred buildings. In his wake, a swath of flame, more black smoke, and grenade blasts ensued. At one point, an eruption of electrical energy ruptured a power cell behind the base. Soelle shook her head sadly, all too familiar with the distinct signature of a lightning cannon on maximum payload. It was the Trandoshan's most revered and cherished weapon. He was rarely seen without it at his shoulder. A bounty hunter by vocation,

Kadem greatly adored his work, the killing Jedi Knights for million-credit payouts. Light or Dark, he hunted them all, until joining <VIPER> and settling for the deaths of only Rebel Jedi. Between missions, he enjoyed base-busting and took great care in reducing every standing wall or support to smoldering ash, long after the personnel were dispatched.

Behind him, a T-21 cradled in the crook of his arm, Weolo Aleback, checked for signs of life among the fallen Imperial personnel. A much sought after scientist, known for the potency of his enhancement pharmaceuticals, the Mon Calamari was a Master Doctor, as well as an accomplished rifleman. Rarely a combatant, he observed war as a byproduct of science and used each opportunity to increase his already extensive knowledge of wounds and injury care. Nevertheless, he was not above taking a shot at an enemy soldier, such as the injured Rebel taking aim at Kadem's back. The Trandoshan was distracted with choosing an appropriate weapon from the small arsenal he carried with him to blow out the communications array on top of the base. Bringing the T-21 onto his arm with the dexterity of a highly skilled dancer, Weolo took quick aim and fired. He disabled the Rebel's blaster with surgical precision, thus disarming him. Alerted to the danger, Kadem bellowed a Trandoshan curse that brought a blush to Soelle's cheeks, then charged the soldier, clubbing him to death with the butt of the lightning cannon.

<VIPER>. They were a small militia, not well known for their strength in numbers or their prowess in battle or their resources. In fact, they were a ragtag band of shadow merchants, crafters, commandos, bounty hunters, creature handlers—misfits and the occasional miscreant, who lived for the occasional chance to mix it up with the Rebel Alliance or anyone who did not count their loyalties to the Galactic Empire and its Emperor. Without them leading the way for her, Soelle would not have been capable of even getting close to the perimeters of the smallest Rebel base. With them spearheading the attack, they were nigh invincible, or so she believed.

Despite the growing Rebel presence on Talus, over the course of two months, the planet remained firmly under Imperial dominion due mostly in part to their efforts and their efforts alone.

Such success did not come without penalty. Among the dead was an entire squadron of Imperial soldiers, most barely out of boot camp themselves. They had been attached to the guild at the last moment from the neighboring Imperial Garrison. It was a chilling reminder of her own vulnerability. As OPO, Soelle rarely got the chance to watch or participate in the battle's final aftermath. Once her terminals were done and the base rigged for detonation, her sole orders then were to escape the scene by running to any number of hidden safehouses in the area, where she was to await further operation instructions. For as valuable as she was to her guild and its leader, she was as equally valuable to the Rebels—dead, of course. Being the vital tool required for base-busting as well as the weakest member of the team, she was a constant target. The Rebels would risk death if only for one telling blow that would end her life and her career.

That realization brought her back to the moment and her question: What is the definition of bravery?

“Soelle.”

The base-buster jumped suddenly, startled at the sound of her name spoken in such close proximity to her person. So deep was she into her reverie that some lucky Rebel might have scored an easy kill. Standing behind her, Lomm angrily glared down at Soelle. Even though the Zabrak still wore her composite helmet, with the tinted visor in place, Soelle could feel the penetrating gaze and flushed beneath the anonymity of her own helm.

A warrior was never to remove her helmet, except in the complete safety of her sanctuary. A lesson Soelle had learned by example. During a recent base operation, a Master

Rifleman on the Rebel side took a lead on a reckless Imperial corporal, who was serving as her escort. Within moments of removing his helmet, he lost his head. Well, most of it. Even at long range, Soelle recognized the handiwork of a Dawnsorrow Rifle. She vowed that day to never make the same mistake.

“Colonel,” Soelle gushed innocently, “you spooked me.”

“You shouldn’t even be here,” the Zabrak said in her native tongue. There was no emotion or flexion in her voice. “Your orders are to—

“I know, Colonel, but just this once...” Soelle sighed dejectedly and bowed her head in shame. “Just this once I wanted to watch the base blow without being stuck in the bottom of another base, hiding, or running for cover.”

“You are very good at what you do, Soelle. Invaluable to me. What a boon it would be to the Alliance if you were killed, idly sitting here while your defense team was mopping up, unable to defend you.”

There was no arguing with that logic. Soelle had felt the burn of a blaster bolt through a suit of Ubese armor that a guildmate had lent to her upon her return from the Academy. Designed to absorb kinetic damage, the Ubese was little protection from the energy bolt and Soelle spent that day with her arm in a bacta tank to accelerate the healing. The wound marked her first true battle scar, but it would not be the last. On the morning of the next day, Victorr Wolfe, Taduc’s brother and the guild’s resident armorsmith, brought her a gift—a full and proper suit of scout trooper armor, the shoulders emblazoned with the guild’s tag, a striking viper.

“What are your orders, Master Sergeant? Or should I say Private?”

Soelle flinched at the veiled threat of demotion. She recited the rehearsed litany of orders. “After detonation is confirmed, with no other targets, I am to proceed to the safehouse

and prep information for the next operation or head directly home without delay.”

“Are there anymore bases to bust tonight, Master Sergeant Khiss?”

“No, Colonel,” Soelle mumbled, stifling her sorrow.

“Then follow your orders or be buried with them.” Lomm’s voice was menacing with restrained fury. “Report to the Snake Pit. Tell Kesi we’re coming home.”

“Yes, Colonel.”

Soelle kept her eyes downcast, not daring to meet the Zabrak’s hidden gaze. Eye contact among Zabraks was a sign of defiance if the perceived parties were not equals. Soelle was hardly Lomm’s equal, not even on a bad day. The base-buster wasted no time escaping her guildleader’s wrath. She sprinted from the hilltop to a dense copse of foliage where her BARC Speeder was well-hidden among several swoops and the trees. Mounting up, Soelle gunned the repulsorlift engines and drove off into the open meadows at high speed.

Located quite a distance from the now-beleaguered Battlefront, <VIPER>’s home city of Kor Bha’lir sat along the sculpted shores of a winding river. The guild fondly referred to it as Rithe Byd, river of blood. Though many visitors took exception to the name, they became more accepting when the Old Corellian word byd was given its proper Socorran definition, family. The name Kor Bha’lir, itself, was Old Corellian, meaning dark strength. There was no description more befitting the metropolis and its residing denizens.

Situated within sight and support of an Imperial garrison, the only one on Talus, the city was heavily fortified with military bases of all sizes and functions. Forward Outposts, Field Hospitals, and Tactical Centers dotted the perimeter; and a Special Forces Detachment Headquarters sat nestled within the very heart of the metropolis itself, within sight of the city hall.

Rather than risk a shuttle ride from Battlefront's now tattered shuttleport, Soelle drove the distance home to ensure her arrival. The BARC Speeder, a gift from Lomm for graduating valedictorian from the Academy, was one of the fastest vehicles known, a match for the swift AV-21. Unless, she ran into an ambush of Rebels tracking her on foot, doubtless, she was safe from any attacks. Regardless, even within the borders of Kor Bha'lir, she was not necessarily safe. It was not uncommon for Rebels to retaliate for the loss of their bases by attacking the city or bringing their Jedi to wage war in the streets. Soelle doubted there would be any retribution for their attack at Battlefront. Like <VIPER>, <GA> was a small, maturing guild with few allies to call upon in times of turmoil.

Even in the secure shadow of city hall, the tallest structure in the city, Soelle could not feel completely safe. But then, and she felt the mindful itch of her slave collar, she rarely felt completely safe anywhere. An unrepentant, nagging sense of helplessness plagued her, causing the young soldier to often question her bravery—to question the very definition of bravery itself. Veering past the Kor Bha'lir shuttleport put her in an area that was perhaps the most protected section in the entire city. The shuttleport was within sight of not one, but two, Imperial Detachment Headquarters, the largest known bases of their kind. They were well-defended with troops, officer personnel, AT-STs, and five towering turrets, ten in total, that kept the path between the shuttle and the Snake Pit Cantina free and clear of unwanted Rebels.

Soelle quickly stabled her BARC in the nearby garage and at a brisk walk, made her way to the cantina. Depressurizing the seal of her armor, she removed the scout trooper helmet and stepped inside the establishment. There was a shimmering of air and energy as the force field at the entrance momentarily became visible. It was an ingenious device that registered an individual's DNA signature. Had she been a member of any one of a dozen or so actively known

Rebel guilds, she would not have been granted entry. Only <VIPER> and its allies were permitted to cross the threshold to the rooms inside. This was how the guild kept their people safe during raids, particularly their less powerful padawans, who were so often the repeated targets of greedy bounty hunters.

Bounty hunters. Bal'frei mor'bai or rather blood money bankers. That was the Socorran terminology used for those who made their living from collecting money for the blood of others. Tracers were really no better than slavers. Lomm resented bounty hunters, even those within the guild; yet, she recognized the need for culling the Jedi population. So long as the resident bounty hunters within the guild killed only Rebel Jedi, she tolerated them with quiet disdain. She was decidedly peculiar in her ways; but Soelle never openly questioned the Zabrak out of fear and a profound respect. Despite her own idiosyncrasies, Soelle shared one common trait with <VIPER>'s reigning matriarch. It was a secret, or rather a whispered anecdote, that Soelle had confirmed with Memcha Badawzi, the guild's chief Master Bioengineer and Creature Handler. Lomm had once been a slave, too, captured by bounty hunters, trained in the Teras Kazi arts, and then used like a common slicehound to hunt down Jedi. When anyone questioned Soelle too intimately about the slave collar she devotedly wore, it was Lomm who would silence them by reminding them to keep to their own affairs.

So why do you still wear it?

Soelle paused in the darkened interior of the cantina, listening to the voice of uncertainty within her head. Just below the din of raucous laughter, excited voices, and loud music, the soft whir of the dual droid detection devices in the front entrance could be heard. The complex machines guarded against the snooping droids of bounty hunters and deterred their destructive bomb-bots from even entering the place. It was a feat that the security force field could not

manage, because droids did not possess a DNA signature.

Absently, Soelle tugged at the leather collar. Stolen from her homeworld to become property, only to escape back to Socorro where such travesties were not permitted, she remained a servant. Until that point in her life, the collar was the only constant in her life. She could not be certain of her exact age. Such things were not important to servants; but she believed that she was about twenty standard years old. That meant she had been a servant all her life, except for the three years, when she had left her homeworld with Memcha and come to live on Talus as part of <VIPER>. She never acted to remove the collar and remained fearful of doing so, despite the fact there was no master to punish her for the act.

Even after enrolling and being accepted at the Academy, she had refused to remove it. The insubordination nearly resulted in an expulsion. Lomm had settled all of that, fiercely defending Soelle and threatening to take the case before a higher authority, even to the Emperor himself if necessary. Lomm was that bold. Soelle wished to be. The insubordination charges were dropped; the demerits dismissed; and the matter dropped without further comment. However, the incident made her time at the Academy much more difficult than most students. At the time, Soelle had not noticed. The difficulties paled in comparison to the bittersweet path of a servant; a path she knew well.

In many ways, the collar was a gentle reminder that she was still a servant of sorts, a servant to the Galactic Civil War. Thus, the collar became a glaring reminder that she and her colleagues would never be safe, nor truly free, until the galaxy was cleansed of the Rebel menace. Soelle nodded, having answered the voice of uncertainty with a very certain response. These were the reasons she continued to wear the leather band, even three years after servitude—to remind her of her place when her thoughts went astray, like today when she ignored orders

and put herself at risk.

Soelle's shoulders, now tall with reaffirmed pride, slumped with that recollection. Somewhat of a perfectionist, the pain of disobeying Lomm's orders stung deeply. She resolved never to be disobedient again. She had seen enough bases explode, watched Rebels died, and seen the majesty of what a lightsaber can do in the accomplished hands of a Sith. There was no reason to remain behind and watch, a sadist voyeur, as the team mopped up.

"Woot!" As Soelle stepped into the main room of the cantina, the shout came from the main floor, and then was redoubled with new voices from the adjoining alcoves, the booth near the stage, and the crowded bar.

"Heads up, you vagabonds! <VIPER>'s finest base-buster has arrived!"

The loudest of the voices came from the smallest of Kor Bha'lir's denizens, a Rodian bounty hunter, who went by the call name, Tokkan. Long ago, he ceased to use his last name. An act that made his profession as a bounty hunter easier, he claimed, and allowed him to live an anonymous life. Dressed in casual pants and a muscle shirt, blue so as to match his blue scales, the diminutive Rodian stood up on the chair and toasted her with a bottle of Mandalorian wine in one hand and a bottle of Jawa Beer in the other. Across the room, seated at another table, the Wookiee Ralrolow joined the toast, raising a bottle of Socorran Raava in a fervent salute to Soelle. A Ranger by profession, the painfully thin Wookiee was also a Creature Handler. His favorite pet, a Dathomirian baznitch, hopped up and down excitedly on the floor beside him.

Kesi McKenna, Master Dancer and Master Doctor in her own right, ceased her provocative gyrations and hopped down from the stage. "Soelle! Welcome home!" The taller woman embraced Soelle warmly, and then kissed her affectionately on the cheek. Kesi's long red hair curled in ample waves across her slender shoulders and left a floral fragrance when she

brushed it over her shoulder. As beautiful as she was intelligent, she was scantily clad in a creamy-orange colored halter-top and the revealing skirt that accompanied it. The daughter of Corellian smugglers, raised on Socorro, Kesi came to the guild through Memcha. Her aptitude at science and charming bedside manner made her the perfect candidate for medical school. The guild spared no expense in having her educated and trained in the finest medical schools in the galaxy. Her internship was completed under Weolo. However, while Lomm was physically powerful and intimidating, a true commander of men; Kesi remained soft, radiant, and beautiful, commanding a different kind of attention from men. Soelle yearned to know the secrets of the latter for her own usage.

Left behind on the stage, Kesi's entertainment droid, R2-B1 squealed and whistled with great excitement. The droid's compressor unit had failed once in its long lifetime of service and caused an irreparable glitch that when he got overly stimulated, an unusual pit-pit-pit noise emitted from the damaged component. Thus, his owner and the cantina patrons gave him the nickname Pit-Pit. Just before Soelle's entrance, the droid had spread a low-lying smoke on the stage floor and cast a spotlight on Kesi. Now in his excitement, the droid's focused centerlight splintered into a multi-colored array that pulsated through the front audience, blinding them until the little R2 unit managed to shut it off.

"Take ten, Pit-Pit." Kesi brushed a hand through Soelle's tangled braids. "How did it go?"

"Eight bases. Poof." Soelle held her hands up to dramatically imitate the blast. "There are some very unhappy Rebels in Battlefront tonight."

"Oh well," Tokkan sniffed disdainfully. "They'll get over it. If they build any more bases on our planet, we'll bust them, too." From across the way, Ralrolow roared his sentiments

in Shyriiwook. Everyone in the crowded establishment concurred.

“Where are the others?” Kesi asked, a hint of worry edging her voice.

“On their way. Lomm sent me on ahead of them to tell you.”

No sooner had Soelle replied then the whine of repulsor engines roared distantly at the garage near the shuttleport. A tendril of smoke rose from the area, a telltale sign that Coto Jest’s swoop had returned home. The Mon Calamari was so busy with his own affairs and the guild’s that he rarely took the time to keep the craft in good repair. Lomm once joked that the Rebels only need watch the skies above their cities to know if <VIPER> was on the way, because Coto’s vehicle would herald their approach.

Kesi smiled, clapping her hands excitedly. “Eight bases. Well done. Anyone hurt seriously?”

“Well,” the base-buster said slowly, searching for the right words. “None of the support crew will be returning tonight.”

“Bootstraps again?” Kesi frowned, her attractive features darkened. “When is the garrison commander going to learn that numbers do not win battles, competence does?”

Soelle shrugged. “No one in the guild was badly hurt; though Weolo saved Kadem from being shot.” She reached over the slim dancer and grabbed a handful of Rishi honeystix from the bar and a morsel of Blob candy, nodding her appreciation to the bartender droid that had placed them within reach. “The bases were lightly defended and with the exception of a few elite soldiers, it seemed no one was home.”

“That is cause for celebration!” Tokkan blared. “G9, still got that case of Breath of Heaven?”

“Affirmative, Master Tokkan.” The protocol droid paused while polishing a goblet, his

black metallic skin absorbing the dim light, making him appear darker. “Shall I prepare a round for the house?”

“You read my mind again, tin-face. The first round of drinks is on me. Then the second and the third. Until it’s spent. Then it’s Ralrolow’s turn.”

Breath of Heaven was sweet upon first meeting the palate, but after reaching the throat, it had a sharp, biting kick that Soelle just could not learn to appreciate. No matter how sophisticated Kesi claimed it to be, the draught was not Soelle’s drink of choice. Her favorite beverage was Socorran Raava, the sweet, intoxicating homebrew of the smugglers of Socorro that tasted more like a tea than what it was in truth. Its deceptive sweetness had a bite to it, even she had to admit, but when mixed with fruit juice or milk, it was hardly noticeable.

Head spinning, Soelle stumbled from the Snake Pit cantina and tumbled into the tall grass at the base of the porch. Narrowly missing an impact with the mission terminals stationed there, she sat up against the stone porch and waited until the night skies stopped spinning. The celebration continued inside, as lively as it began, and would continue long into the night. It would be well into the dawn before the quiet town of Kor Bha’lir slept again. A night breeze skimmed across the river. Soelle struggled to her knees, lured by the pungent scent. Finally free of the spice cigar smoke and loud banter, she stood up, leaned against the façade of the cantina’s porch, and took a deep breath to clear her throbbing head. She was exhausted, but sleep was the last thing on her mind.

Quietly, she slipped into the night, using the colossal shadow of the <VIPER> guildhall as a city guide. Beyond the structure, on the edge of the river, was the conservatory where she spent most of her nights and days, when a base bust was not called for on the roster. There she assisted Memcha in the care of the Twi'lek's many animals and her experiments with DNA strands for cloning. Slipping into the back of the main stable, she paused on the narrow catwalk. Barely half a meter wide and 50-meters long, the makeshift walkway formed a corridor between the top scaffolding above the rancor pits on either side of the passage. Stirred by her intrusion, one of the bull rancor awoke and grunted from the bottom of the man-made trench. Soelle quickly punched in the access code at the security terminal and waited until the force fields powered up and slid into place over the rancor pits on both sides.

There were six bull rancor kept in the pits at any one time. Normally, they were content to lounge in their reconstructed habitat, which was complete with genuine Dathomirian rocks and foliage, a dismantled X-wing's fuselage, and the shredded wing of a Z-95. The latter was a favorite toy brought home by Memcha's prized bull, Kurgan, who had decimated the Rebel ship before its pilot could get away. Any foolhardy intruder who did not know to enter the access code within 20 seconds of entry was in for a nasty shock, one they were certain not to survive when the force fields did not activate, keeping the rancor in their pits. Controlling a fully-grown bull rancor, safely, was the domain of a Master-certified Creature Handler. While Soelle struggled to master the techniques to direct such beasts, the best she could manage to control were a few of the more timid, mountable beasts in the stables and some of the younger cats.

Soelle walked the narrow walkway as the rancor followed her hungrily with their eyes. In the main stable area, she quietly slipped into the second stall to the left. A large shadow greeted her with a water-soaked muzzle, leaving a trail of slime across her cheeks and the chest

plate of her armor. She embraced the sleepy falumpaset, who grunted impatiently at her for disturbing its slumber. Brushing by her to check its feed bucket, the creature turned away disappointed to find it empty. He promptly returned to sniff her hands aggressively for a treat. Soelle giggled, letting the furry muzzle tickle her face as she gave up the hidden honeystix to her favorite mount, Rosebud.

The falumpaset earned his name when he escaped from the stable and made quick and easy work of Weolo's prized Corellian rose bushes. Soelle remembered the day she found the young falumpaset up to his knees in the rosebushes, his fur tangled in the thorns. Barely broken to the bridle, he munched and crunched each rosebud within his reach as Soelle struggled to pull him away. Fortunately, Weolo was not known for his temper. When the meticulous Mon Calamari saw the ruin of his bushes and Soelle trying desperately to remove the falumpaset, her clothing torn to shreds by the thorns, he laughed so hard tears streamed from his large bulbous eyes. He even refused to accept payment for the roses, which Soelle offered from her own funds.

Stabled next door to Rosebud was AT-ST. Not the Imperial personnel transport, but a more reliable means of transportation, or so Memcha would say of the brackaset. He was an immense creature, natural born, towering over Rosebud. Memcha had captured him as a baby on the dreaded planet of Dathomir. The plated monstrosity was as fierce as any rancor and nearly as powerful. Soelle moved quietly to the side of its stall, hoping to get a glimpse of the creature. In the darkness, two yellow eyes opened from their slumbers and peered at her from the darkness. With a snort, the creature rushed the stall divider, stopping short of smashing the duracrete wall. Soelle jumped backward in fear, stumbled over Rosebud's hind legs, and fell in the plush straw bedding. Fortunate for her, Memcha had obviously cleaned the stalls that evening.

Rosebud, still searching for treats, took advantage of his mistress' helpless position.

Unmoved by the brackaset's noisy threats at the wall, he checked every nook and cranny of her armor and found the last remaining honeystick that she had been hiding inside the sleeve of her glove. Crunching nosily, he looked down at her and snorted, then turned his tail to the leering brackaset and passed wind.

“Lovely. Some help you are,” Soelle said, sitting up. She grabbed a handful of chest fur to pull herself to her feet. “Somebody here loves me, but it's not you.”

She slipped out of the stall, double locking the stall mechanism. Though there were no more Corellian roses to be found in Kor Bha'lir, Rosebud was known for his late night excursions in the grain room.

Farther into the stable, where the laboratories began, Soelle heard the sublime music of purring and mewling. With a smile, she walked into the dimness and laid down on a plush mat beside a large Razor Cat. Grizzled and scarred, the old cat growled a warm greeting to her and took a moment to lick her forehead, before turning back to his meal. Tearing a piece of meat from a humbaba femur, he used his nose to push the meat toward her in deference.

“Never in our twenty-year relationship has that cat offered me part of his meal,” said Memcha. “I wonder? Who truly is the Master Creature Handler here?”

Soelle stretched out lazily on the mat, avoiding the bloody meat. Absently, she fingered the gold hoop earring at her right ear and yawned. “That would be you, Memcha. E'yor only shared his dinner because he thinks I'm his cub. He's taking care of me, just like you take care of him.”

“Ahh, so I see.”

The Twi'lek, dressed in her dirty laboratory coat, bent over a microscope to examine a strand of DNA to ascertain the quality. Her blue skin and its slight pink markings appeared all

white in the harsh light. Soelle convinced herself that too much Raava was affecting her vision.

Memcha Badawzi was royalty. Royalty of a different sort. Her father Abdi-Badawzi was perhaps one of the most well known crimelords in the galaxy. Though his reign was a tenuous triad with the smuggler guild, the Black Bha'rir, and the mysterious Saadoon-Kauldi, he ruled Socorro every bit as fiercely as Jabba the Hutt, himself, ruled over Tatooine. Like Kesi, she was as beautiful as she was brilliant, though not many would take the time to know it. Memcha always wore a pair of faded pink goggles, hiding her sparkling eyes behind the lenses. She was rarely seen clothed in anything more than her Ubese armor and a lab coat, having no sense of fashion, not like Kesi. But then, Memcha never cared much for sentient company, or rather humanoid company; thus, such things never mattered.

The Twi'lek was more comfortable in the presence of her cats and rancor and other pets. Her favorite being the Razor Cat E'yor, with whom she had risen through the ranks to the title of Master Creature Handler. Not to be excluded, she had cloned a pair of narglatch twins raised from a particularly excellent strand of rancor DNA.

"Where are the twins?" Soelle asked. Exhaustion and drink were swiftly overcoming her. She could have gotten a blanket and curled up right there on the floor with E'yor as her pillow.

"Falling Snow is out hunting, I believe; and Smores is somewhere on the lower floor, probably asleep on my pillow." She laughed, her blue skin unsullied under the fluorescent lights of her lab. Her lekku twitched lethargically. A tireless worker, who once on the scent of a discovery, was not apt to stop until she had her answers; she was exhausted. It was late in the night, even for Memcha.

"How many bases today?"

"Eight."

“Eight! Impressive! You’re going to make quite a name for yourself, Soelle, and the guild. There aren’t many soldiers who specialize in what you do. Nor any who do it so well. Like the rancor of Dathomir, you fill an important niche. Just as these cubs will one day grow to fill their niche as hunting cats.” Leaving the microscope and its sample to answer three pitiful mews from the cages beside her chair, the Twi’lek, picked up one of the three Razor Cats inside the pen and a small bottle. His cries of hunger answered, the cub began to feed nosily. “I should like to take these three to the park in Theed to make their first kill. I’ve been working with them; and they all show promise. I could use your assistance.”

“It would be my pleasure, if Lomm loosens my leash.”

“Lomm Ka’Sol is no fool. I’d keep you close at my side, too, were I the guildleader. She worries about you, as I do.” She returned the first cub to the pen and picked up the second one. “Speaking of worry...anymore of those bad dreams?”

“No.” It was a feeble lie, and a chill washed through her. “Not anymore than usual.”

“I have some humbaba milk, freshly procured this afternoon. I could mix a few herbs with it to help you sleep.”

Soelle buried her face in the E’yor’s muscled shoulder, her head spinning from the Raava. “I don’t think that’s going to be a problem tonight.”

Memcha laughed, knowing that her young charge was more than a bit drunk. As the cub sucked greedily at the emptied bottle, she returned it to the pen and reached for the third, which was mewling anxiously.

“Memcha, may I ask you a question?”

“You’ve never hesitated before.”

“What is the definition of bravery? How does someone know if they are brave?”

Memcha paused with an absorbed expression coming to her face. “Now that is quite a loaded question. One that bears great thought before giving voice to any reply.” She adjusted the awkward cub in her lap and stroked its neck in deep thought. “A most perplexing inquiry, Soelle. One I am not certain I can answer as I am not a soldier like you.”

“Am I brave?”

Memcha scoffed, laughing as she nuzzled the cub against her nose and cheek, a peculiar show of affection. “You are indeed one of the bravest people I know, running off with the likes of Lomm and that mad Trandoshan Kadem. Pushing your way into the Rebels’ courtyards and destroying their bases right under their noses. That is indeed brave.”

“But it’s no less brave than what you do—sneaking up on creatures like the bull rancor and sampling their DNA,” Soelle argued, “without killing the creature, risking your life if discovered.”

“A swallow of Jawa beer is excellent for shielding one’s scent, isn’t it. Takes a week to get the scent out of your clothes.”

“Just going to Dathomir is scary, I think.”

“Bravery is a peculiar measure, Soelle. The standards by which bravery are judged changes for each of us. Does that help?”

When there was no answer, Memcha strained her neck so as not to compromise her or the feeding cub’s precarious position. With a smile and a gentle laugh, she found Soelle fast asleep, pillowed against the old Razor Cat. Putting the cub back into the pen with its siblings, she took an old blanket from a nearby chair. Memcha paused to examine Soelle’s peaceful face, and then covered the slumbering base-buster, tucking the corners beneath her chin. She stretched her aching back and then dimmed the laboratory lights for the night.

“Look after her, E’yor. Such innocence is always in need of our protection.” Memcha closed the laboratory door and proceeded down a dark stairway toward her room and her bed.

“Conflict is just life’s little way of asking if we are paying attention.”

—Reek <ELITE>

Chapter 02:

There was a familiar disturbance in the Force.

Small tremors of recollection and faded fragments of unpleasant memory converged in a sinister whirlwind rampaging within his mind. El-Diablos braced himself mentally against the uninvited buffeting of raw, violent emotion. He wanted to release the primordial furies gathering within him into the night. He longed to unleash the full potency of the Dark Side in order to efface the disturbance; but so reckless an act would not have sat well with his master, Emperor Palpatine, nor his current host, the man who had summoned him, Grand High Inquisitor Adalric Cessius Brandl. Such a poor emanation of power moved against his strict conventions—

conventions drilled into him by his mentor, Lord Brandl. It was unconscionable to attack an ally, even a tenuous ally, whom he once considered a dear friend.

There were few men who could stir even the remotest undisciplined ripple in the unfathomable pool that was El-Diablos' dark soul. Daemen Irath was one of them. Formerly a highly decorated military officer, the soldier served as a top-ranking pilot in the legendary Veerpal Squadron and even acted as wingman to Darth Vader, simultaneously rising to power among the guilds as the iron-willed leader of <ELITE>. As a military man, Daemen unwittingly discovered his dark gifts while blasting Rebel pilots to oblivion; and the Zabrak surrendered, without compromise, to the Dark Side. Unlike many soldiers who found the transition from blaster to lightsaber difficult, Daemen never hesitated to take up the thin, tattered robes of a padawan. He bore no regrets and never looked back on that past life. This allowed him to dedicate himself fully to the path of becoming a Sith, as well as making him El-Diablos' undisputed rival.

His brash antics and blunt, often brusque, disrespect of authority brought the young pilot to the attention of the Emperor and into the service of Adalric Brandl. Of all the men who served on council of Inquisitors, Brandl was a shrewd disciplinarian, well known for breaking the will, or the necks, of any difficult padawans who did not fall into line with his equally shrewd and punishing directives. El-Diablos had only been a padawan for three months when the unruly soldier arrived in shackles, brought to the theater courtyard on Trulalis under heavy guard, to begin his training under Brandl's demanding tutelage.

Daemen's fury was unprecedented, his devotion to the Dark Side much farther advanced than anyone might have surmised. There were rumors of his past, hearsay of a woman, a lost love killed in a skirmish between Rebel and Imperial Forces; an impending marriage that would

never be realized; and a mutinous time spent with anarchistic, Dark Side mercenaries, powerful and gifted with the Force, but resentful of any authority that dared attempt to bind them. It was even rumored that Daemen had killed the leader of the clan, claiming its seat of power for himself. This sacrificial death was the sole reason why he still breathed and had been welcomed back into the Emperor's good graces.

The stories were ambiguous, laced with fiction and fantasy. What was certain, however, was that Daemen had reason to embrace the Dark Side and possessed insights into its mysteries that only a man who had suffered grievously at the hand of fate would know. This insight allowed him swift achievements in his training and the early favor of Inquisitor Brandl, a man who well understood what it meant to fall out of the Emperor's favor, only to regain it with a self-damning sacrifice. Regardless, Daemen could not shirk what he had been before coming to Trulalis, an overconfident ace pilot, whose arrogance was often a shield for his reckless, headlong charge toward destruction, anyone's destruction, including his own demise.

Daemen's adeptness with the Dark Side made him a fierce fighter, nearly as skilled as El-Diablos. An incessant devotion with both ancient and conventional dueling stances, practiced in every waking moment, allowed the younger student to press his nemesis. Eventually, Daemen's sheer recklessness broke the balance making him El-Diablos' equal; and then within a few months, the superior Dark Jedi. In time, this recklessness prepared Daemen to be simply a leader of zealots with his warrior philosophy, while equipping El-Diablos to be a master of soldiers and stratagem.

Early in their studies as padawans, the two men were friends. In the aftermath of their newly acquired powers, that friendship withered. When brought together, they feigned civility out of mutual respect for that long yearned for past. The unbidden acknowledgement of that past

brought a pang of guilt to the surface, once again disturbing the smooth, dark pool of El-Diablos' soul. He regretted what had become of that friendship and suffered guilt for the loathing he harbored toward a once trusted friend.

It was night on Trulalis, celestially and culturally. A social hub of celebrated museums, concert halls, and theaters with an elaborate flare for the dramatic arts, the world was relatively abandoned during the winter season, except for the occasional stage production by budding actors and debutantes. Trulalis was the site of El-Diablos' greatest performance—his ascension to the rank of Dark Jedi Knight. The director of that performance, Adalric Brandl, a galaxy-renown actor, celebrated for his tragic personas, still resided in the shadows of this lonely world. A servant of the Empire, the Jedi Master moved to the whims of the Emperor as easily as he moved audiences with his soliloquies.

It was unusual for Brandl to call upon his former students, demanding a personal audience. The summons could not be for good reason. Pulling his dark robes more closely about him, El-Diablos bundled the thick fabric against him to ward off the chill. Though he wore a thick woolen shirt, black, with a leather jerkin vest and wool pants with leather boots and gloves, he felt the increasing presence of the cold about him.

Snagged on the small horns growing from his head, the hood fell across his forehead and completely veiled his red eyes. A Zabrak, like Daemen, his senses were acute, enhanced with the power of the Force. He did not need to see through the illusion of the night and the moon's illuminations. He knew the well-worn path from the landing field on the perimeter of town to the cobblestone streets leading to the theater by heart. He knew every rise and fall in the earthen road, every shifted cobblestone intimately familiar, leading him to the iron wrought gates of the theater's main courtyard.

Gazing up at the silhouetted bell tower above the theater, El-Diablos paused at the gate and rested his hands on the cold metal. He was again haunted by the whirlwind of distant memories: courtyard meditation in the winter sleet, lightsaber cadence in the slick, muddy hollows of the barrens to the north, the warmth of his robes freshly pressed and hot against his skin at the evening meals. The remembrances did much to calm the rapid pounding of his heart; thus, he did not resist as the presence of the Force reached out to him, seductively, subtly, brushing against him with the gentleness of a lover's kiss. Nor did he stir in reaction as Daemen sauntered up the same path toward the darkened courtyard. The soldier's arrogance was as tangible as the shadows about him. He carried the curved hilt of his lightsaber in left hand, as he usually did in El-Diablos' presence. It was a deception of style because Daemen could fight equally well with his left, as well as his right hand.

As was always the case, Daemen was bare-chested, taut muscles rippling across his firm shoulders, torso, and waist. He was wearing no more than black gloves, matching forearm bracers, a black rijani—a duelist's ankle-length skirt designed to hide a fighter's stances from his opponent's eyes during a contest—and sandals. A crowning of sharp horns glistened with night dew, a gauge to his arrogance as they stood erect from his baldhead. Dark brown skin, flawless and without scar, made him appear more silhouette than flesh, a decided contrast when compared to El-Diablos' smaller, gaunt figure and pale skin. Though El-Diablos bore the facial tattoo, as did all Zabrats, his stood out like a scar while Daemen's etching catered to the ferocity of his handsomely chiseled face.

The soldier turned and stared at El-Diablos, chuckling softly as if remembering a private joke. Potently, the Dark Side was thick about him, as if manifested in the folds of his clothing. "Lord El-Diablos?" he greeted.

“Expecting trouble, Lord Daemen?”

“Always. A good soldier stays alive by remaining vigilant against any unexpected attack.”

“Even within the company of his allies?”

“Preparation is never more key than when among one’s allies.”

The soldier’s arrogance was buffeting, his words biting, meant to provoke. Had Daemen been an actor like their mentor, he would have made a fine villain with his haughty air, good looks, and dramatics. El-Diablos would not be so provoked like some unwitting padawan. He calmed the swell of raw emotion swelling within him and silenced the violent noise rising in his mind. He resented Daemen’s casual conceit, regretted the slow demise of their friendship, but he was forced to respect the man’s power and devotion to the Dark Side as well their common cause—the destruction of the Rebel Alliance.

The true measure of each man was undecided, their futures obscure. Though both had long ago exchanged the robes of a padawan for knighthood, they still answered to their mentor, particularly when it came to attending his affairs while he was elsewhere in the galaxy, summoned by the Emperor. El-Diablos had lately sensed a mounting restlessness in Brandl, a yearning to be free of that yoke. A successor, named from one of the actor’s two greatest students, would gain the prestigious rank of Grand High Inquisitor. This troubled El-Diablos greatly. Unlike Daemen, he deserved the right to that succession. While Daemen’s victories could be counted by the corpses of his men—costly and ill-conceived—his own could be measured by the number of hardened veterans who still served under him, prepared to rally at his beckon call.

A king could not rule a kingdom without subjects. El-Diablos imagined himself a prince among loyal men who would die for him. Daemen was an executioner judge, presiding over a court of ghosts and shadows.

“You’re late again,” El-Diablos said. He opened the gate and stepped into the garden courtyard, never pausing as he followed the path to the main theater entrance. The sound of the gate slamming shut was evidence that Daemen followed behind him.

“One of my operatives got wind of a hole where the Hooded One might be hiding.” He walked beside El-Diablos, matched his stride, and grinned mischievously as the two men entered the darkened foyer. “I had hoped to make a gift of his head to our master.”

“Yet you are empty handed.”

Daemen did not respond. With satisfaction, El-Diablos noticed the tension of grit teeth pulling at his jaw line. The two men walked in silence through the spacious theater foyer and its winding corridor, where they had once stood shoulder to shoulder as friends. Observed by nothing more than alabaster busts of tragic protagonists and the generous patrons of the theater cast in tarnished, bronze, they made their way through the reception area, then down the center aisle. The main sound stage occupied the entire back wall of the complex with sweeping, extended platforms on each side, an enormous orchestra pit partially built beneath the stage itself, and flying balconies that jutted from the ceiling.

Celestial panoramas of ancient alien races adorned the sloped and domed ceilings, mingled with horrific scenes of battle and destruction. A story within a story unfolded for the audience before the true stage play could ever begin. Black curtains, lined with crimson flecks of lace, framed the dynamic stage, which was currently backlit in pale light. Opulently carved marbled columns lined the entire auditorium, like the ribs of a colossal creature, ending at the

sides of the raised stage platform. The placement of the columns and the tapestries draped between them, marked secret entrances to the inner recesses of the stage itself.

Devoid of players, scenery, or props, there was but one furnishing that stood out on the empty canvas. Situated on a raised dais, at center stage, was a throne. It appeared ancient, carved from stone and primitive metal, yet it emanated with a resonating aura, despite being draped as it was in black furs, precious linens, and darkness. It was empty, but that was temporary. Its master had not yet decided to make his entrance.

Daemen led the way up the twisting, marble stairs, onto the voluminous stage, and knelt before the throne, head bowed deeply, as if in meditation. A smug smile was still firmly etched on his face. El-Diablos decided it was time to remove it. “So the Hooded One eluded you? Again.”

Betraying his disappointment and his annoyance, Daemen sighed. “The Alliance’s self-appointed savior was not there by the time I arrived; but I did manage to cut a bit of flesh from his brood, that whelp Durrlynn. I would have killed him, but another of Hoody’s whelps arrived to assist.”

El-Diablos took a place of obedience before the empty throne, choosing to go down on one knee, rather than both like his rival. “Craysom?” From the frown on Daemen’s face, El-Diablos needed no further answer to his inquiry. “He’s barely a month out of his padawan robes. Durrlynn is no better. They both managed to elude you?” When it came to instigation, El-Diablos took great pleasure in mocking risky exploits, especially failed exploits.

“Weren’t you listening? I said the Hooded One was not there. Upon learning that, I lost my taste for blood. Besides, after realizing they were no match for my lightsaber, Craysom and

Durryynn fled.” Daemen laughed softly, having enjoyed the chance to toy with the fledgling Jedi.

“You let them go?”

“What good is there in killing the cub when I would rather kill the sire? I prefer a challenge.”

“However,” said a voice from the inner recesses of the stage, “cubs mature into adults, dangerous adults, thereby becoming more troublesome to eliminate.”

An overpowering and dramatic figure, Adalric Brandl emerged from the darkness of stage left. As a king surveys his palace and his servants, he walked to stage front, halted as if on cue, and then regarded his favored pupils with an air of disdain. The Force was with him, in the flesh—an actual, tangible entity of the Dark Side that coalesced and pranced about him like some doting courtesan. Held up buoyantly by that fierce entity of emanating shadow, the black robes he wore barely moved at all. Brandl appeared to float smoothly across the polished stage floor to the foot of his throne, where he paused once more to capture the light.

A fierce streak of gray crowned each temple, dissipating into a closely cropped black mane. Not one hair was out of place or gave way to a curl or a wave. The darkness of his hairline granted a penetrating contrast to his too-pale, handsome face. It was a smooth, ageless, flawless face, except for the yellowed discoloration of a scar that viciously carved a path from his left temple inward toward his left eye. The eye itself was no more than an off-white orb, with no iris or sign of perceptible life.

“Lord Daemen, your abject hatred of these Rebels is commendable; but do not let your personal grudges misguide you. Whilst anger and hatred are the stimulates Sith call upon for their strength; without contemplation, that very strength may instead cloud your judgment.”

El-Diablos recognized the famous line from one of Brandl's more famous performances. He capitalized on that knowledge and finished the soliloquy. "Thus giving the advantage to our enemy and bandaging our ambition in certain defeat."

Brandl paused, his dark gaze dwelling on El-Diablos for a long moment. The Sith could not be certain if the High Inquisitor was pleased with his rendition of the verse or resented the uninvited intrusion. "Well spoken, El-Diablos. Can you name the play, the character, and the act?" Brandl challenged. "As well as recite the line that directly follows."

Daemen raised an eyebrow in anxious derision. To not answer to the challenge meant disgrace. A fate worse than death to his rival. He gave El-Diablos an impish grin.

"The line is from the production For Want of an Empire. It is spoken in Act Three by the Seneschal just before he is murdered by his much beloved apprentice. As he lies dying, the Seneschal says to his once trusted student, 'A painful death awaits the fool whose loyalty lay bared upon his tongue and not his heart.'"

Though he tried to conceal his reaction in the anonymity of the shadows, Brandl could not stifle the smile that came to his lips. His face flushed with unusual color, evidence of his pleasure. "Why Lord El-Diablos, I believe and have always believed you have the makings of a tragic actor." He bowed his head to the Sith in deference. Then smugly, Brandl turned his attention to Daemen, his expression darkening. "Your hatred of these two accursed foes, Durrynn and Craysom, should be no less virulent against any and all who dare stand against us. Would you spare any misguided soul this most deserved reward of death?"

Chided, Daemen bowed his head respectfully. "No, Master Brandl."

"And next time, Lord Daemen?"

"Next time I shall kill whomever I find and—"

“Next time,” Brandl raised his voice, drowning out Daemen’s. “You will open a comlink channel to your co-commander, El-Diablos, and together you shall kill our foes, whether it is the Hooded One or one of his hirelings.” His voice reverberated in a tumultuous vortex of wind and shadow that created a visible whirlwind of darkness behind his throne.

May the Dark Side prevail, El-Diablos thought in ecstatic delight as the ambiance of the Dark Side enveloped them. He could barely breathe with the rapture of its touch.

“This is not the time for personal heroics, Daemen. Or arrogant recklessness. The only lessons I wish to impart to these Rebels,” he spat the word with great disdain, “is a permanent lesson that will not need repeating. Is that understood?”

“Yes, Master Brandl.”

Brandl sat back in his throne, his head bowed for a moment before his stern gaze fell across the two men kneeling before him. “Report, gentlemen. What news do you bring of the Wanderhome sector?”

There was a strained silence as Brandl’s reprimand of Daemen kept an ominous vigil in the tumultuous air about the stage. El-Diablos took advantage of it. “<IIA> reports six bases destroyed on Tatooine and Corellia. These bases ranged in size from Forward Outposts to Field Hospitals, and two Tactical Centers. Unfortunately, the Rebels maintain firm control of those planets, including Naboo’s moon, Rori, and the planet Lok.”

Recovering from his admonition, Daemen raised his head to meet Brandl’s eyes, his confidence shaken, but evidently broken. “Despite the destruction of ten bases in the Outer Rim, the Rebels also maintain control of Naboo and Dantooine.”

Brandl’s reaction was swift and buffeting. “You mean to tell me Talus is the only planet under Imperial dominion? This is unacceptable. Intolerable.” A tangible vibration swept

through the air in a violent wave, a palatable menace so cold and malevolent that the hair on El-Diablos' forearms stood on end. His skin itched and crawled as though a swarm of biting insects marched across it. Lord Brandl rose from his throne, his eyes black with rage, his visage as savage as El-Diablos had ever seen in their history. Sweat beading at his forehead, El-Diablos felt his throat go dry and burn for lack of air. Invisible fingers pressed sadistically against his windpipe, almost crushing it; but he did not resist. Failure was a punishable offense; but it did not always mean death, especially for those repentant enough to wish to make amends. Beside him, Daemen gasped softly, struggling against the grip of the Dark Side choke. Powerless against it, he bowed his head, the practiced excuses dying in the back of his throat.

El-Diablos suppressed a smile, thinking that the punishment was appropriate for both of them. Their inability and aversion to communicate with each other, to coordinate their resources and personnel, had led to these dismal failures. There was no justified reason to give voice to any excuses. He calmly closed his eyes, slowed his breathing, and his heart so that his body would require little of the air it was being denied. Within moments, the unseen hand at his throat released him, and he could breathe freely again.

Swallowing with difficulty, Daemen took a slow deep breath to cool the fire in his throat. Muscles taut from tension, his chest glistened with sweat. Voice strained, he softly rasped, "I need those additional troops that Etnam promised. I don't have the personnel I need to complete these base-busting operations on the scale required to grant us a foothold over the Rebels. Surely you must know that we are hard-pressed, Master Brandl. The Rebels are united under Apathy's—"

"Apathy," Brandl sneered under his breath. "A name that is as familiar to me as the anguish of a parent who has lost a beloved, only child." He sighed, exhausted evidence of his

weariness. “The only personnel that I shall remand to you, Lord Daemen, are those sitting right beneath your nose. <ELITE> has spent so much time honing its fighting skills that you and they have become arrogant, isolationists who are no different than the dark-side anarchists you once claimed as kin. You do not appear to recognize the plethora of resources well within your grasp. If a simple farmer can be the undoing of a Death Star, think what a mild-mannered musician might do if you put the proper weapons in his hand and a cause in his heart.” He turned back to El-Diablos, that stern glare never fading. “The Imperial Intelligence Agency has performed no better. Tell me, gentlemen, are there no Imperial guilds who oppose the Rebels at every possible junction?”

“Yes, Master, there are,” Daemen replied thoughtfully.

“Are they not also pressed for supplies and resources?”

El-Diablos nodded, mulling over what the Inquisitor said. “They are.”

“Imagine what would happen if they could be united. You would have all the resources and personnel you need. Find a way. Stop this childish squabbling between you before its costs outstrip what your minds and bodies can pay. You are dismissed. Until the news you bear will illuminate these shadows that you have delivered unto me this evening, I do not wish to hear from either of you.”

Stiffly, El-Diablos stood up, as did Daemen, and in unison the two men bowed deeply. Never again meeting Brandl’s eyes, Daemen was the first to pivot on his heel and move back to the stairs and down into the theater’s center aisle. As El-Diablos turned to follow him, he felt a tugging at his shoulder. He turned to find Brandl watching him, standing well beyond arm’s reach; but the entity of darkness, his shadow, swirled at El-Diablos’ feet.

“Master?” El-Diablos whispered.

Daemen hesitated.

“Lord El-Diablos, you are to attend me in my private chambers,” Brandl said, turning to leave the stage. “You are free to go, Lord Daemen.”

The inner recesses of the stage were enormous, an entire world behind the heavy veil of curtains. As cavernous as the auditorium, where the man El-Diablos called mentor entertained and enthralled innumerable audiences, the backstage region doubled the size of the outer staging area. Crates of props, large and small, were stacked orderly to the sides so as not to trip or impose upon the inner, hidden workings behind the curtain. Swords, lances, ancient armors, as well as blast rifles and RIS helmets, were neatly ordered in the crates, waiting for the moment when their illusions of war and strife should be needed for a dramatic scene.

El-Diablos followed Brandl to the dressing area to a secluded corridor set aside as costume storage and changing rooms. The largest of these, reserved for the chief actor, was located at the end of the passage. It was the only chamber with a double door, accompanied by columns of black marble that framed the threshold. Without a Human touch, the doors swung open and Brandl proceeded to enter. El-Diablos continued at his mentor’s heels, as silent and observant as a newly arrived padawan. Black-flecked marble tiles covered the chamber floor, matching the interior chamber walls, which were draped in dark tapestries. An overpowering scent of roses, long dead roses, permeated the air with a stale perfume. Intoxicating, the aroma infused everything with it touched; and he surrendered to the alluring fragrance.

In the center of the dressing room was a small, oval table and two chairs. High-backed and ornately carved from Kashyyykian wood, each chair was cushioned in black satin and betrayed an antique wealth. Two simple glass bowls of steaming broth sat on opposite ends of the table, as if two guests had been anticipated and served.

“Sit,” Brandl said.

El-Diablos sat down in the nearest chair, his back to the door. As was Trulalis tradition, he picked up the bowl in one gloved hand, waved the aromatic fumes toward his nose, and waited until his master had seated himself and took up his own bowl. Brandl smiled, pleased that the tradition would be so fondly remembered, honored, and respected. With a nod, he drank from the bowl and El-Diablos reciprocated. The rich, thick flavor of the Trulalusian Rice broth soothed his throat and sent a pleasurable warmth throughout every limb in his body.

“Your thoughts, my young Sith? Right now,” Brandl said.

“Hmm,” El-Diablos exhaled, “cold, rainy days in the barrens, hard at saber practice, only to return to the theater dorms late in the evening to a hot bath and a bowl of this wondrous broth. I have missed this terribly, Master Brandl.” He put the bowl quietly back on the table, staring into the emptiness of it. “But I do not miss the enmity between Daemen and I that was born and nurtured here. It lives still, thriving within us like some pestilence. I have foreseen that it will only grow worse.” He dared to meet Brandl’s eyes when the Inquisitor did not respond. “Have I spoken too boldly?”

“No. Truth is a sword that cuts both the flesh upon its blade, as well as the hand upon the hilt.”

“Then, Master, why have you kept me? Is there a darker punishment awaiting me for these failures? Can there be any darker punishment than your disappointment?”

Brandl's shoulders sank slightly, his gaze softening, despite the shadows about him.

“With every passing day, the Rebel Alliance leaves its footprints within the pristine estate of the Galactic Empire. The Emperor grows ever more displeased. When he is displeased, he demands answers; answers that I no longer can keep supplied. All evidence that my age and my temperament have shifted into a less tolerate, less subservient hue.” He sighed, putting the bowl back on the table beside the other, and waved his hand in a dismissive gesture. The bowls suddenly vanished in shadow and darkness. When the darkness dissipated, nothing remained. “It eventually happens to all of us. Obeisance is the duty of younger men. In these recent months, I have grown weary of Palpatine's summons, even as you grow ever more eager for mine. I want nothing more than to return to the stage and do what I do best,” he extended his hands and arms wide, “perform. But before I can abdicate this responsibility, I need a worthy successor.”

“Master Brandl?” El-Diablos could hardly believe his ears.

“Until further notice, the Emperor will call upon you, El-Diablos, and you shall act in my name.”

“I am honored that you give me such a position of prominence.”

“It is not without its inherent risks, and this you must well know. Consider yourself duly cautioned. Nor is this endowment without a price.” Brandl reached into the folds of his robes and pushed a small datapad across the smooth surface of the table. “Read it and tell me what you make of this communiqué.”

El-Diablos activated the device and brought up the document it contained. “Code Red, of the highest priority,” he said absently. “Not since General Order 66 has there been a document of such importance.” He continued reading the communiqué. “Admiral Etnam is essentially

stating what you told Daemen and I tonight about the Imperial cells and uniting them under one banner in an effort to repel and crush the Alliance.” The Sith frowned, his brows fused in concentration. “Master Brandl, this is hardly worthy of such a high priority code.”

“I thought so as well. Keep reading.”

“This reference to a viper is unusual. Is it a line from one of your performances?”

“It is not.”

“I’m afraid that I don’t grasp the enigma.”

“Unite the Imperial guilds of Wanderhome at all costs, El-Diablos. Utilize Daemen’s charisma to assist you in this endeavor. Break the backs of the Rebels or at best break their will. As for this enigma, as you call it, it is yours to answer, if you wish to succeed me as Grand High Inquisitor. This is your priority. Do you understand what I am asking of you?”

El-Diablos did not answer, hesitant to ask any questions that might taint his loyalty.

“Your mind is troubled. Ask, if you have a query, and relieve yourself of this worry.”

“What of Daemen? How did he escape your notice?”

“Daemen lacks the etiquette of maturity. Recklessness has its place, but not before or above the necessities of strategy. This task must fall to you.”

“Does this task bear any importance to the Emperor?”

“It is a task you do for me and me alone.” Brandl held his gaze. “Why do you question this?”

“The Emperor commands my loyalty; but that loyalty belongs justly to one man, my true master.” El-Diablos stood up and bowed deeply before Brandl. He took the datapad, placing it in the folds of his robes. “I shall find this viper for you.”

“I have every faith that you will.”

Aboard his command carrier, the Imperial Star Destroyer Dark Precipice, El-Diablos stood at rigid attention, staring through the viewscreen in his private cabin. Though redoubled for strength and then redoubled again to enhance its defense structures, the transparisteel glass gave a perfectly unobstructed view of the planet Trulalis. Through the dense cloud formation over the world, he sensed the familiar connection with his old mentor, stronger than ever and lingered to avoid severing the intimate connection. Behind him, the elevator door to the command deck hissed open and then closed. Another familiar, comforting presence emerged. The Twi'lek followed the Dark Jedi's gaze to the blue and green world that so raptly held his attention.

“If only our wives could hold our gaze as alluringly as these globes floating in space,” the soldier said, offering a glass of Corellian Brandy to the Sith.

El-Diablos chuckled despite himself and his somber mood. “Slang, you don't have a wife, nor do I.”

“Ah,” the Twi'lek, “fortunate for them. I doubt that men such as we could keep a wife, when it's clear we can barely maintain our mistresses.”

Colonel Slang was a long and trusted friend; one of a very few that El-Diablos knew he could count on in times of distress. Dressed in an Imperial uniform, the front panel weighted with ribbons and decorations, the Twi'lek's red skin was a noteworthy contrast to the gray attire. The officer seemed out of place, his stance unusually casual, an attitude of comfort and solace

emanating from his tall, lean form. His yellow-spotted lekku, a characteristic of Twi'leks, laid draped across his shoulders, relaxed and immobile as his thoughts became verbal.

“What troubles you, El?” Slang asked. “I doubt I’ve ever seen you so disturbed. At least not recently. Was it your meeting with Brandl? Did Daemen have nothing but unkind words to share?”

“I’ve no stomach for riddles, Slang.”

“Have I spoken in riddles?”

“No, old friend,” El-Diablos whispered, desperate to surface from his distraction. He felt as though he were drowning, his mind frantic for answers. “Though, I am certain I spoke riddles to you when I summoned you away from the Academy that stormy night two months ago. Drunken riddles.”

Slang laughed, handing the glass goblet to the Sith and pouring one of his own. “There were Rebels to be burned out and bases to ruin, as well Mandalorian Wine that needed sampling. I would have been a fool not to come. But after two months now, I wonder if I haven’t overstayed my welcome. You seem overly preoccupied.”

“Never, old friend. Never.”

“Then if it was not press-ganging me away from the Academy, what ails you? If I may be so bold as to ask?”

“This communiqué,” El-Diablos showed the datapad in his hands. “It speaks of how the Imperial guilds are disunited, segmented...the smaller guilds isolated, while the larger guilds have become self serving, including my own.”

“A problem the Rebels do not appear share. Not on the surface.”

“Etnam tells my master that he’s being openly honest and yet, his words illustrate there is

something he is not saying. Something he cannot say.” In a moment of fury, the Sith tightened his hand on the goblet. The fabricated glass shrieked in protest; the liquid contents within boiling and frothing with the abrupt disturbance of Force fixed upon it. “He speaks of a viper, a viper. What kind of madness—“ As his rage intensified, the glass shattered explosively and the contents evaporated into steam.

Slang was silent for a long time. He knew from experience, it was best not to approach the Dark Jedi until the moment of ire passed. “A viper, Lord El-Diablos?”

The Sith turned to him, the glimmer of hope in his eyes being genuine. “If you know something, speak freely, Slang.”

“Most riddles, no matter how complicated, are often solved by the simplest of answers. Perhaps too simple.” Slang scratched absently at his chin, his thoughts moving as swiftly as the sub-light engines that propelled them out of Trulalis’ orbit. “I’m not convinced if what I know will serve you or further your frustration.”

“Tell me everything and I shall be the judge.”

“Almost three months ago, before leaving the Imperial Academy for the pleasure of your company, I trained the graduating class. Among them was perhaps the finest OPO base-buster I have ever had the privilege to train.” His voice deepened as if the memory had left him haunted in some manner, contemplating a confession. “There is no doubt, even as I might deny it. She is the greatest I have ever trained. I would have begrudgingly professed that she was my equal. A few weeks before graduation, when she managed to destroy thirty-five bases, I was certain of it.”

“Thirty-five bases, Slang?” El-Diablos asked, incredulous. “In a week?”

“Not even a week, four days. She did so while on leave with her guild and wasn’t even fully tested. With no other equal, this act alone would have made her valedictorian of the class.

Before the class rankings could be announced, this student managed to bring the total to 100 bases vanquished and was the first cadet to ever be awarded the Bronze Cluster of Service. Within a month, El-Diablos, and I do not jest, she earned her second medal—the Silver Cluster of Service. I’ve heard recent reports that she earned the Gold Cluster six weeks after, and is poised for the Platinum Cluster, which will be handed to her by the Emperor himself, should she achieve it.”

El-Diablos groaned, “Slang, what does this have to do with my riddle?”

“Because, my fine Sith, my little prodigy is a member of a guild that makes its home on Talus, the only Imperial-controlled planet in the Corellia sector. And her guild militia goes by the appropriate moniker of <VIPER>.”

El-Diablos felt suddenly light-headed. Struggling to control his breathing, he leaned against the edge of a nearby desk. “<VIPER>? What do you know of them?”

“A great deal. Soelle was such an unusual student; I made it my business to know about her.”

“Soelle?”

“That’s her name. Master Sergeant Soelle Khiss. Her grades and merits earned her the rank. Such a very unusual cadet,” Slang mused, sipping absently at his glass, “a hopeless romantic, idealistic, naïve.”

“Not unlike yourself in those early days at the Academy.”

Slang laughed, shrugging his shoulders hesitantly. “You mock her, if you compare us in the same breath. This child possessed such a sense of purpose and focus, surpassing the ambition of even the most veteran base-busters, myself included. I remember her so distinctly, not one black mark, not one demerit, not one disciplinary sanction marred her folder.”

Distracted by his thoughts, Slang mumbled, “What I wouldn’t give to have a class of such romantics. We’d bring the Alliance to their knees.”

“Talus, did you say?”

“Yes. <VIPER> is not a large guild, not well known for anything or any one member. But recently, they were mentioned at an operations debriefing because they have single-handedly, and I do mean single-handedly—“

“Kept Talus an Imperial-held world. Slang, this riddle is beginning to make more and more sense,” El-Diablos said slowly, his gaze once more going to the viewscreen and the depths of space. “Continue.”

“They’re successes have brought them to the vanguard of the war. Being so small a guild, they managed to stand against that crazed Jedi who wears all white and spends more time running in circles than fighting. You know the one—”

“Apathy,” El-Diablos sighed, a chill dancing along his spine.

“They even had the scquris to blow a base right in the middle of Apathy’s city. Ha!” Slang laughed and clapped his thigh, moved by the thrill of such a bold act. “With little Soelle, <VIPER> doesn’t need more personnel or additional resources.”

“A base-buster?” El-Diablos mused. “As good as you say, Slang? Are you certain?”

“The child has a voracious love of seeing Rebel bases fall. That’s not something that can be taught. Does her record not speak for itself?”

“It does as does your endorsement.” El-Diablos fought through the thick web of his thoughts and strategic probabilities. “How difficult will it be to find her?”

Slang frowned and again shrugged his shoulders, his lekku revealing the answer before he spoke. “None too difficult, I suppose. <VIPER> does have three satellite towns: one on

Talus, another on Rori. Sleepy Hollow I believe it's called. There's another smaller outpost on Dantooine. I will make the proper inquiries. I believe the leader of <VIPER> is a Zabrak. Goes by the name Lomm."

El-Diablos paused, his thoughts interrupted by a distinct memory of a tall, lean, dark-skinned figure, and lavender eyes. "Lomm Ka'Sol?"

"Colonel Lomm Ka'Sol. Self-made soldier. Do you know her?"

"I know her well. When Bece needed assistance during her Jedi trials, I needed a warrior, a strong one with no fear and great stamina to distract a Krayt Dragon as Bece was too weak to take the beast by herself. My wish was answered when we encountered Lomm at the Nightsister Stronghold on Dathomir. We had gone there first to begin Bece's trials. I calculated that with great care and strategy, the two of us could slay the Elder and escape without too much difficulty or injury. Lomm was already there, killing Nightsisters without much effort or strategy. She was hunting crystals, she said, but I sensed she was there for something far more precious."

"What was that, lord?"

"Revenge. I offered her a reward to aid us in killing the elder. She said nothing but set right to the task of getting to the bottom of the cave. Within moments, the three of us had killed the elder without incident. A feat even a sole Sith could not accomplish without some aid. I believed and still do that Lomm could have taken the witch by herself. Just as she handled the Krayt we later fought on Tatooine. When Bece achieved the rank of Jedi Knight, Lomm bowed deeply to her, then to me, and asked that should we ever need her services again, we had but to ask. She left, not even staying for the ceremony." El-Diablos shook himself from the revelry. "She had no guild affiliation then."

“Well she does now and is sole mistress of it. I had thought <VIPER> was a dead guild. Upon meeting Soelle, I learned quite differently.” Slang recognized the preoccupied look in the Sith’s eyes, a chill squirming along his spine and head tentacles. Such looks evolved into schemes and such schemes evolved into plans that moved worlds and meant the destruction of cities. Slang grinned, knowing that soon he would be riding a tide of destruction as only a Sith could conjure. “I’ll set a course for your temple on Tatooine. There I can make the proper contacts to find Soelle and her guild of vipers.”

“Dreams are certain evidence of a haunting.”

—Zahabu No’bi <NIF>

Chapter 03:

The landscape was surreal, but Soelle recognized it as home—the Doaba Badlands, Socorro—deep in the interior of the Socorran deserts where none but the fearless roamed among the unpredictable earthquakes, bottomless sand wells, predator-infested water grottoes, as well as the occasional hostile native. Soelle was on foot, which was a certain death sentence in such an unsympathetic environment. She seemed unconcerned by the location as she followed a strange figure up a steep incline into the dunes. Often they had to crawl on their hands and knees to get closer to the summit, fighting to maneuver through the shifting ash and sand. Though she was unclear why or how she had come back to Socorro, she was filled with a tremendous sense of calm and good spirit and felt a smile on her face. Yet, it was not truly her face.

The figure walking ahead of her was dressed in all white: close-fitting smuggler’s cargo pants tucked neatly into white boots, and a white gunman’s duster that was more gray than white

from the airborne ash in the air. Because he wore a white turban, she could not see his hair or his face as he led the way farther up the slope. The man was telling a joke, but she could only remotely hear what he was saying in accented Corellian. She laughed, moving up to the stranger until they were shoulder to shoulder, peering into a deep dust bowl of a valley.

Soelle felt puzzled. There was supposed to be something on the dune floor, a shipment of spice. She dropped down to a knee and then lay prone in the ash, staring along the interior wall. There was nothing but sand—sand and the distinct hiss of a lightsaber, erupting in the stillness. With no time to react, she threw herself to the right side; but not before a searing pain shot into her shoulder and forearm. The agony sent waves of nausea burning through her throat. Though she tried to cry out in pain, her voice was stolen in the shriek of the assaulting lightsaber, wielded in the hands of a trusted friend.

It was difficult to breath; the wound was mortal, but there was time...time to repay the betrayal. Her right arm was disabled, useless. Utilizing her left arm, Soelle grasped the lightsaber from her belt and ignited the blue blade and threw it. Expecting the desperate ploy, the attacking figure moved effortlessly from harm's way; but he did not anticipate that the saber would remain hovering about him, dancing and pirouetting, a vessel of the Force. As the traitor moved in for a kill, Soelle manipulated the Force in a last act of revenge, the Dark Side rising within her, even as her life ebbed away. She had to leave a mark, a final mark so that this injustice would be properly avenged.

The aggressor sensed peril at the last moment, pivoted abruptly, but not before the blue blade lanced through the left side of his chest. Though Soelle struggled to keep the blade in position, her vision darkened, a tunnel with only pinpricks of light moving farther and farther away until there was nothing.

“No!” Soelle shrieked. Her voice reverberated within the stark walls of her small house, as she sat up from her bed. In terror, she dove to the floor and writhed in agony. The skin and muscles of her right arm and shoulder burned unmercifully with scorching ferocity. Gasping for air, the disoriented girl flailed about on the cold, duracrete floors desperate to relieve the agony, remnants of the nightmare. The sleeveless military tee she wore was soaked with sweat and clung to her feverish skin. Knees bruised, Soelle crawled to the small shower adjoining the refresher and activated the water unit. Sobbing in the corner of the stall as the cold water poured over her and her fretful tears, she pulled at the slave collar about her neck, feeling as if the leather band strangled her.

Soelle wept inconsolably. It was the same dream. Every night. Some times it was only the climb up the hill. Other nights, she stood alone in the desert as the hot Socorran sun bore down on her shoulders...his shoulders, the man whose presence she occupied in the dream. More recently, the nightmare had played itself out completely with the lightsaber battle and the subsequent death, the ever-painful death and the yearning for revenge. Soelle lurched forward toward the drain and vomited, sickened by the sense of dying that always left her violently ill, every night for nearly two weeks.

Just after the dreams turned so violent, Memcha tried using herbal teas and fever poultices, remedies she used with the animals, even the rancor, to subdue them. They worked, quelling the nightmares; but the dreams eventually came back in force. Kesi issued a mild sedative, increasing the dosage over time until there was enough sedative given in one dose to put down a bull rancor. Eventually, Kesi refused to increase the dosage any more, fearing for Soelle’s health and safety. Lomm agreed. So her nights were spent in wakeful boredom or sleep-induced by a cocktail of the sedative, the remedy tea, and wishful thinking. All were

failing miserably.

Soelle massaged her throbbing arm and shoulder, desperately trying to recall the face of the lead figure, but she could not see his face in the dream or upon her awakening. She could only recall his manner of dress, always in white. Nor could she recognize herself, the man killed in the dream, nor did she recognize his voice or laughter. Bewildered by the nightmare, she realized that she knew nothing about the dead man, except that he was a Sith, a Dark Jedi and that the two had business on Socorro in the Doaba Badlands. Business that led to betrayal and death.

Her arm and shoulder numb, Soelle deactivated the shower and stood on her knees. Cold and soaking wet, despite the comfortable warmth of the climate controlled temperature, she shivered. There would be no more sleep tonight, as was the routine. So she quickly dried herself off with a towel and dressed in a dry, long-sleeve form-fitting shirt and the familiar tightness of her pirate leggings.

Pushing the small bed away from the corner alcove, Soelle removed the top sheet and tossed it to the floor against the wall. Then armed with a toolbox of paintbrushes and oil-based paints, a palette, and a fading vision, she rhythmically rubbed her fingers and palms up and down and along the smooth plaster of the wall. It was as if she were in a sleep-induced trance. The nightmare's residual visions grew less vivid. Soon, she would only remember the most telling details, not enough for a painting. Provoked to action, she started in earnest, dipping her first brushes in a mixtures of oil pastes and then with long, sweeping strokes of black and deep russet, she worked feverishly to simulate the vastness of the Doaba Badland desert.

From splotchy patches of ambiguous blackness, high sweeping dunes rose upward and crested on the walls, their texture revealed through wide, semi-circular strokes. From faceless

shadows, the subtle features of a desert plateau rose from the sandy floor as Soelle's hands worked furiously to bring the landscape to life. She kept a brush tucked precariously behind an ear, her eyes fully absorbed by the unrestrained girth of the landscape unfolding in her mind. Her hands fought to keep pace with the swiftly fading recollections of the dream. At times, she would sway, nearly falling to the floor from being breathless. Every so often, the base-buster had to remind herself to breathe as her hands moved instinctively to measure color for color, weight for weight, shadow to shadow.

The fresco covered the entire back wall of her bedroom, wrapping around the alcove and into the refresher with overlapping dunes. Well into the night, Soelle worked tirelessly to bring the image to vivid life and stopped a few hours before dawn to inspect her work. Overlooking a deep basin with a sudden drop in the desert floor, two figures stood on the edge of the sandy plateau, one dressed in a stunning white cloak that stood out prominently against the dark, shadowy silhouette of the fresco. The stranger stared in the basin, his right hand hidden in the folds of his coat; his back was toward the viewer. Dressed in neutral tones, the second figure stood nearby, one pace behind the first. A mane of sandy brown hair flew wild on invisible tendrils of wind. Head turned slightly askance; he stood looking over his shoulder, as if spying Soelle. His face was as featureless as the desert depicted in the desert horizon, without contour, texture, or detail.

Still restless, despite her exertions, Soelle took a brief shower to wash away the excess paint on her hands, arms, and face. There would be no more sleep this night. Rather than risk boredom, she opted for a nighttime excursion and, thus suited up in her scout trooper armor. She always felt safer inside her armor, as if protected from the cruelties of the outer world. Yet again, she recognized the childish illusion and the way it consoled her. Comforted, she set to

quick work pressurizing each seal, including the helmet before daring to leave her small house.

The night was pitch black, or more purple, as was the case on Talus with its thickened, unusual atmosphere. With the exception of distant street lamps on the borders of the Kor Bha'lir, the city remained quite dark and seemingly deserted. Soelle's night-filter vision automatically winked on and lit up that darkness in an illusion of green. Ordinarily, she would walk to the city's vehicle garage and push her BARC speeder to the edge of town before igniting the engine and riding off to the nearby Imperial Garrison. There was always someone about in the military cantina, an off-duty stormtrooper, a low ranking officer, perhaps even a smuggler who would share stories of their adventures and take her mind far from its nightmarish reveries. If she was lucky, there might even be a brawl or two, whereby a squadron of stormtroopers would break up the altercation. Unless the participants turned out to be known Rebels; then the fight would be allowed to play itself out, so long as the Rebels were losing.

However, tonight, Soelle wanted company on the short ride. Slipping into the conservatory stables, she quickly bypassed the rancor security hazard and went into Rosebud's stall. The falumpaset snorted sleepily and rose to his feet, ambling over to the stall door for his treat. Soelle threw him a flake of hay to keep him occupied as she deftly tossed the saddle and pads onto his high back and tightened the girth. Begrudgingly giving up a tasty mouthful of his hay, Rosebud accepted the cold metal bit with a yawn and followed Soelle out of the stables into the darkness.

Not well known for their eyesight, by day or night, falumpasets possessed an impeccable sense of smell. Soelle was not concerned with the animal spooking without warning. He was too well trained, broken to ride and defend by Memcha's own hand. Though he was but a mere herbivore, Rosebud would risk the ire of a rancor if so commanded. Using the porch as a

mounting block, Soelle stepped into the stirrup, then the saddle, and took up the reins. She rode away from the deeper shadows behind the guildhall. It was not as if she were sneaking away without permission. There were guards on top of the structure, working as sentries at Lomm's insistence. In recent months, as their base-busting operations increased, so had attacks on the city. Most of Soelle's guild mates knew about the base-buster's night terrors. No alarm would sound, though even now, she surmised, someone was reporting her departure to Lomm, who in turn would then notify Memcha to keep a light on for Soelle's return.

Coaxing Rosebud into a lope, Soelle kept the reins loose and allowed the falumpaset to have his head. Guided by the distant haze of the garrison lights, the falumpaset knew his destination with no needed prodding from her. He had made the trip too many times not to know or anticipate the reward awaiting him. Beyond the stalwart walls, there was a warm stable, a private stall, fresh hay, and companionship. The thought was enough to urge him on faster. With a warning snort, he galloped past a lair of kimas. Normally fierce creatures, known to attack anything that ventured too close to their warrens, the feline creatures retreated from Rosebud. They were not willing to risk the falumpaset's ire or disturb its nocturnal run. To make certain they went to ground for the night, Soelle fired a shot into the lair with her Caelli-Merced Sentinel IV blaster pistol.

The formidable, gray duracrete walls of the Imperial garrison were a comfort to Soelle as she cantered within sensors' range of the military stronghold. Arrayed in an elaborate star-shaped configuration, the peculiar base boasted a series of multiple dead ends and ambush corridors within range of manned turrets. An entire battalion of military personnel guarded the base, including storm commandos, Special Forces assault teams, and even a pair of pilots with their TIE-Advanced. If attacked, a single distress call to sister garrisons on Dantooine and

Tatooine prompted reinforcements that would arrive within the hour to turn the tide of the battle. Though these defenses did not guarantee complete safety from Rebel incursion, the Emperor's enemies were never eager to fight within the close confines of the labyrinthine walls.

A short distance from the garrison, Soelle reined Rosebud to an ambling walk and sat listening for the sounds of blaster fire. She was a base-buster, not a common soldier, or so Lomm constantly reminded her. It was the guildleader's way of telling Soelle that she was no good in a hand-to-hand fight, not even a shoot-out, which is why she was so frequently relegated to safe houses or to the safety of rear ranks. As the skies above Talus lightened, an imperceptible change to the naked eyes, Soelle heard no blaster fire emitting from inside the garrison walls, no hurriedly shouted orders, more importantly, there was no hissing of lightsabers. Outside the western entrance, the whine and whirring mechanisms of AT-ATs assured that routine patrols were underway. It was safe.

Soelle cued Rosebud with a gentle bump of her heel, and they cantered into the base, weaving between the mazes of corridors. Led by memory, she reached the established center of the garrison near the docking port. A stormtrooper acknowledged her arrival with a salute. Shouldering his blaster rifle, he left his post to hold Rosebud's reins as she dismounted. "Evening, Master-Sergeant Khiss, hope all is well in Kor Bha'lir?"

The question was clever, a way to make polite conversation and to determine if perhaps Kor Bha'lir were under attack. As the nearest Imperial city, Kor Bha'lir fell under the auspices of the Talus Imperial Garrison's protection and vice versa. If ever the base was attacked, <VIPER> became obligated to help reinforce and defend it. The duty was a commitment that Lomm took quite seriously.

"All is well," Soelle replied. "Any entertainment in the cantina?"

“Not really. A Sith arrived on a transport shuttle. He took up residence at the bar a few hours ago, but not much else.”

“A Sith?” Soelle gasped in a whisper. “Do you know him?” With a childlike hope, she prayed that it was Avari, Taer, even the unpredictable Daemen of <ELITE>.

“Mulder is his name,” the stormtrooper replied in a hushed tone. It was the tone most wary folk took when speaking of Dark Jedi.

“I’ve never heard of him before.”

The stormtrooper laughed quietly and covered his reaction by giving Rosebud a push when the falumpaset tried to press its way passed him toward the stables. “Be glad, Master-Sergeant. This one is as bad as they come. He’s disliked on both sides of the war. Just a warning, ma’am.” He gave Rosebud’s neck a kindly pat and led the animal off to the garrison stables.

Soelle calmly stepped into the cantina, her heart racing with excitement, and sauntered into the establishment and removed her helmet. The garrison’s cantina was a stark, watered-down version of the grand cantinas she had visited such as in Theed or Coronet, even in nearby Kor Bha’lir. It was one medium-sized room, no larger than the living room of her diminutive house, with a bar in the outer corner and a closet of a storeroom behind the counter. Pretending to be preoccupied with other business, she turned to walk to her usual booth in the back corner of the front room; but someone was already sitting there. She hesitated in middle of her stride, staring at the dark-hooded figure slumped casually in her chair. Sheepish with her reaction, she spun slowly on her heel and took a chair nearby, turning her back to the Sith. She cursed her luck and her immature reaction. A strange Sith was just the mystery she needed to take her mind from her nightmares. Here he was, and she reacted like a nervous school girl and put her back

him.

The bartender approached her, his servomotors whining as a slight hitch interrupted his steps. “The usual, Master-Sergeant Khiss?”

“Not tonight, BT-8, just some tea with a dash of Raava if you please.” When the droid did not respond, she glanced up at him. “BT-8? I said some hot tea with a dash of raava. Please.”

The droid stood stiffly still and unresponsive for a long moment before straightening his metallic frame. “Yes, Master Mulder, straight away.”

Before Soelle could question the droid, a shadow fell across her shoulder. In the wake of the retreating droid, the Dark Jedi took a seat opposite from her and sat down, crossing his legs.

“So you are the legendary Soelle Khiss. Excuse me, Master-Sergeant Soelle Khiss of <VIPER>?”

Soelle sat straighter in her seat, casting a brief glance at the patch on her shoulder.

“Master...?”

“Mulder. I am known as Mulder.”

“Master Mulder, I hardly think I’m a legend.” She blushed, flattered by the attention, especially from a Sith. “I have managed to raise the score against the Rebels, but there is nothing legendary in that, is there?”

“On the contrary, when your name becomes a curse in the mouths of Rebels, you are a legend. Trust me,” he sat back as the droid returned with their drinks. “I know. I’m something of a legend myself.”

Soelle remembered the stormtrooper’s ominous words. “This one is as bad as they come. He’s disliked on both sides of the war. Just a warning, ma’am.”

Mulder leaned forward across the narrow table, pushing the dark hood back to reveal a handsome, youthful face. Though his features were those of a young man, his eyes were dark and betrayed a sinister wrinkle of cruelty. Closely cropped blond hair adorned his head, highlighting those cynical blue eyes. Beneath the robe, he wore nothing more than a gray threadbare dress shirt and black, loose slacks.

“So you are a legend?” Soelle asked innocently, sipping at her tea.

“I am one of the most hated names to the Rebels, but if you keep going at the rate you’re going, I may have to step down.”

“May I ask what brings you to Talus, Master Mulder?”

He grinned with the glee of a confessed narcissist, his face enveloped in shadow. “You, gorgeous.”

“Me?”

“I have a thorn in my side and I need you,” he said, gently cupping her chin, “to remove it for me.”

“A thorn?” Soelle whispered, avoiding his sultry gaze. “That can only mean one thing: a Rebel base.”

“Can I count you in?”

Soelle felt a sudden surge of uncertain fear. It was against her nature to refuse a superior, any superior, in or outside the guild, and that included Sith. However, she was a member of <VIPER> and that affiliation demanded protocol. “I would have to ask permission from my guildleader.”

It was not the answer he anticipated. His smile faded slowly, and Soelle felt the Dark Side rise within him. Did he intend to coerce her with mind tricks as he had manipulated the

bartender droid? “Your guildleader? You don’t act independently?”

It seemed an odd line of questioning, and then the reason for his condescending tone became clear to her. He bore no guild patches, no ring, nor necklace, not even a tattoo that acknowledged what guild he claimed. A rogue, Soelle surmised, guildless. A guildless Sith, even more dangerous. “I am a soldier, Master Mulder. I have orders. While I mean no disrespect, you do not command my talents nor my loyalties, my guildleader does. Perhaps that is why you have heard my name. When orders are followed, bases fall. Lots of bases.”

He bowed his head, his lips pressed in a thin, thoughtful line. “You won’t need your guild, Soelle. I will provide all the escorts that you need, as well as firepower, and of course, you will have my lightsaber to keep you safe.”

Go on a raid without <VIPER>? Soelle was intrigued. The idea made her feel as naked as a stormtrooper without his chest plate. She was not certain how Lomm would react to such a request. How would Soelle convince her? What would Soelle say to counter her arguments?

“Soelle?”

The distracted base-buster sensed his earnestness and resented the pressure she felt emanating from him. Soelle got to her feet and bowed to Mulder, attempting to cover the impertinent mood and tone in her voice. “Master Mulder, I will gladly remove this thorn from your side, should you provide me the proper information, and with the permission of my guildleader Colonel Lomm Ka’Sol. Those of us who wield lightsabers may often do as we please, but those who do not must answer to greater forces.”

His reaction to her retort surprised her. The Sith grinned, stood up, and took her hand, squeezing her gloved fingers. “A lesson I wish I could learn.” He handed her a recording rod. “This is all the information you need to know, the entire operation.”

Soelle wasted no time in inserting the rod into her datapad and accessing the information. She nodded her head, liking what she saw. “Battlefront, here on Talus. They are a wily crew. <VIPER> was there 24 hours ago. They won’t like their bases attacked again so soon. They’ll be on high alert, expecting trouble.”

“Your point?”

“They have several excellent fighters, a Master Teras Kazi and a few riflemen.”

“None will be a match for my saber.”

Soelle frowned, rereading the datafile. “Just this one base?”

“It is a Rebel Detachment Headquarters, the largest of its type.”

Soelle coordinated the data with her own network information. “It’s not the base type that concerns me, but the number, Master Mulder. One base?”

“As I said, Master-Sergeant, it’s a thorn in my side that I want removed.”

“Running with the guild <Reign> as back up?”

“Will that be a problem?”

Soelle glanced up at him. “No, should it be?”

“They are one of the finest guilds in the Wanderhome sector, unquestioningly loyal to their guildmaster, Hakon Sharif.”

Soelle struggled to hide her startled reaction. If Mulder had taken up arms with Hakon, then what the stormtroopers said to her earlier had double meaning. A megalomaniac who insulted and ostracized his allies as well as his enemies, Hakon Sharif’s actions within the sector had nearly brought a truce among the Rebels and the Imperials for one sole purpose—to bring <Reign> to its knees. Before the unthinkable pact unfolded, the Emperor issued an edict against Hakon’s life if he did not cease and desist in his activities and fall into line with the other

Imperial guilds. It was an order even an eccentric ego like Hakon could not refuse, at least not without losing his life, his pride, and the majority of his guild.

Mulder handed a credit chit to the bartender droid to pay for their drinks. “When can you speak with your guildleader? The sooner this blight is removed, the happier I shall be.” He flashed her that charming smile.

“What did these Rebels ever do to you, Master Mulder?”

His smile deepened into a coy grin, but the shadows returned once more to his face.

“Does it really matter, Soelle? They are Rebels. Now, as for that answer?”

“I will have an answer for you by dawn.”

“Be certain you do.”

Soelle bowed to him and promptly left the cantina. With her helmet tucked beneath her arm, she sprinted toward the stables. Her heart raced with anticipation.

Though it was only dawn, Soelle found Lomm, awake and practicing her pikeman cadences, in the front rooms of the guildhall. The heavily muscled Zabrak was dressed in no more than a mock slave’s corset and a skirt, the high slits facilitating her swift, flowing motions. She struck out at the air, striking an invisible opponent, and Soelle could hear the wind of the vibroblade’s edge as it cut through the stillness. Pivoting on the ball of her foot, Lomm reversed her grip and her stance and struck again as if facing multiple opponents.

“Lomm? Are you going to answer me?” Soelle asked impatiently.

“What did I tell you about your helmet in my presence?”

Soelle jumped to attention, quickly hitting the pressure seals of her helmet. The <VIPER> leader disliked speaking to anyone when she could not see into a person’s eyes, especially when they came to her with a request. Readjusting the slave collar that pinched at her neck, Soelle doffed the helmet and tucked it beneath her arm.

“Mulder, eh?” Lomm said, her voice only slightly winded. “He is well known to me and not for good reasons. He’s undisciplined. Reckless. A rogue.”

“Memcha would say the same about Grinder or Kadem. Yet they get the job done, Lomm.”

“Mulder is the least of your worries, Soelle. I believe him capable of protecting you. But Hakon? The blood of many unfortunates paved his path to leadership. I don’t like it.” She finished a low sweeping motion and stood up, leaning on the vibrolance, her breathing deep, but controlled. “It will be the first time you have acted outside of <VIPER>.”

“The first time? Lomm, are you saying I can go?”

The Zabrak bowed her head and tried not to smile, unsuccessfully. “Mulder is a rogue. I dislike him greatly. Hakon is a fool who dreams of idle glory. I dislike him even more. You will be in grave danger, Soelle, make no mistake about it. I hold no illusions to this truth.”

Soelle bowed her head, suddenly feeling very cold. She collected her thoughts, realizing that she was standing in the shadow of her guildleader. The Zabrak towered over Soelle’s slight form. Lomm could kill with a touch. Soelle had seen it and yet, with that same hand, Lomm now caressed her chin, raising Soelle’s chin until their eyes met for the first time as equals.

“Lomm?”

The Zabrak laughed softly. “Still looking for the answers to your question, Soelle?”

“Yes, Colonel.”

“The definition of bravery?” Lomm spun the heavy pike in her offhand and slammed it hard against the marble floor, causing a reverberation throughout the room. “Bravery is to live life, facing every challenge as if it were your last...because it may well be...your last.”

Soelle sensed the negative finality in the comment. “Will this be my last, Lomm?”

“Soelle, Mulder is a rogue and Hakon a fool. All they leave in their wake, generally, is corpses, and only a few of those are Rebels.”

“Would you let me go if you thought I might never come back home?”

“Yes, only a Sith is fool enough to test destiny.” Lomm walked across the expanse of the guildhall’s antechamber and placed the pike in its place on the wall with her other prized weapons. “Be well, Soelle. Keep your wits about you.”

“I will,” Soelle whispered reluctantly. Replacing her helmet, she promptly left the guildhall, sending a signal over her comlink to Mulder. He had procured himself a base-buster and soon, the source of his irritation would be removed.

Paan’l Oukk was the son of a desert priest, who was in turn the son of a desert priest, who was the son of a desert priest. Descended from a long line of Ibhaan’I holy men, Paan’l became the eighth generation to don the crimson robes of the sect. Like his father and grandfather, he was a gaunt figure with sharp, angular facial features and long limbs. He was tall for a native Socorran tribesman, though he would have still been a few centimeters shorter than the pirates

descended from similar stock.

Beneath the threadbare robe, his only protection from Socorro's glaring sun, Paan'l's brown flesh was covered in ritualistic scars and tribal tattoos that marked his societal rank as a Bronwen, an Ibhaan'I shaman, one of the wandering holy men who made their homes in the deep, deep deserts. He wore the thin, red robe wrapped firmly about his tapered waist and tossed the loose folds over his shoulders to create a makeshift hood for his head. A single black braid of hair fell between his shoulder blades as he watched the last rays of the red sun set into the dark embrace of the desert that was its home. He smiled, his mind caressed by a fond memory. As a child he had embarked on a quest to find where the sun went at night. Though Paan'l was but ten years old at the time, his father approved of and encouraged his adventure into the Doaba Badlands.

Paan'l the child never returned home, not in the proper sense. Paan'l the Ibhaan'I acolyte returned a year later to begin his studies under his father's careful ministrations.

His apprenticeship took him across the face of Socorro: ten years as an acolyte with his father, learning the land and its fruits; another ten with his grandfather as a journeyman priest, learning about people and their ways, and then another twenty in his duties to walk the southern quadrant of the Doaba Badlands. Until recently, his had been an uneventful walk, advising villagers in his travels, chastising pirates, protecting the planet and its resources. More recently, his duties centered around confining an particularly evil wind.

The Force was a feral, spiritual energy the Jedi Knights sought to harness, often spending the entirety of their lives in this pursuit. They were never able to truly master their abilities, not until they humbled themselves to the noise, the deafening din of its infinite power—life. Complete peace belonged to the man or woman who could master themselves, their inner storms,

to surrender to the true and one power of the Force. Because in truth, the only thing a being could control was themselves.

Of course, there was a Dark Side. To maintain the order, there was a need for balance. With the cycle of life came death, and so forth. There were those whose pride would not be contained, but instead contained them within a darkened cocoon overflowing with a devastating silence. In time, that silence drove them mad. Only through acts of fury and wrath could they access the power of the Force and only then at great risk of being consumed themselves. Such men had perished in the Doaba Badlands and left their taint upon it. Great storms ravaged the heart of the deserts, aberrations of unrealized ambition and retribution. It was Paan'l's task to mark them, to mark their course, and maintain them within the boundaries of the deep desert, thus, no living being would be harmed by them. He had spent two years crisscrossing the planet in hopes of locating it.

Time meant little to native Socorrans. If pressed for the exact moment he sensed a notable change in the evil occupying the Badlands, Paan'l would not have been able to say, except that it came during a time of great upheaval. The immense storms shifted with the disturbance and ravaged the Doaba Badlands, keeping even the hardiest of nomads from venturing within its borders. In time, the storms returned to their habits, some even dissipated, but the evil remained. In the time of his walk between the Doaba Badlands and the Adsila Ridge, no less than a year and no more, the evil managed to do the unthinkable—to escape.

This was the reason that brought him out of the familiar deserts to the edge of Vakeyya, Socorro's capital city. Paan'l found himself compelled to undertake a nefthet'al—a holy walk, a journey that would carry him farther than he had ever walked in his fifty-two years of life. By some peculiar means, it had departed the planet and traveled into space. Thus, into space is

where he needed to go. Paan'l made a sacred gesture, touching his fingertips to his lips and then extending his hands toward the deserts. It would be a long time before he saw his lands or his people again.

From the hardened ramparts that marked the boundaries between the desert wilds from the established starport grounds, Paan'l stood apart and waited for the approaching figure to meet him at the top of the hill. He had never felt so utterly alone than this moment, trapped between worlds. The man walking towards him was not as naïve. He was a true desert walker, an ambassador of culture. Considered by their brethren to be the most revered Ibhaan'I shaman in their order, Benoni Ulte lived among the desert tribes as effortlessly as he lived among their allegedly more civilized cousins, the Socorran pirates and Corellian smugglers. He knew the ways of the desert and her indigenous peoples better than any priest on the planet did. As one who had walked many, many diverse paths, Benoni had even traveled into space and visited other unique planets.

Reaching the crest of the manmade parapet, Benoni approached Paan'l with the traditional respect due a esteemed equal. He bent low and respectfully rubbed his hands in the sandy ash, mumbling an invocation of peace, then offered his right hand in friendship. "Doaba ol'val tru, brother."

Paan'l received the blessing with a gracious bow, taking the residual sand and wiping it in his braid and shoulders. "Doaba ol'val tru, Benoni. It is comforting to be in your presence, as it has been some time," Paan'l said in their native tongue. Then noting the younger man's grim features, despite the waning light, he added, "I only wish it were under more pleasant circumstances."

"Are you certain of this, Paan'l?" Benoni asked. "This is a long, long walk, my friend.

You've had no time to learn the offworld ways. Your ignorance could be as dangerous as the unseen barriers that lay before you, perhaps even more so."

Paan'l shook his head, his resolve conveyed in the gesture. "This evil could not have left Socorro on its own accord. Someone has carried it away from this world. I must find it, return it, or bind it and banish it where it resides before any harm can be done."

"What if this entity was meant to leave this world, for some purpose unknown to us? It is not the Ibhaan'I way to interfere with the balance."

"If this is true, there must be a judge to oversee this vengeance and protect the innocent, while insuring the balance is maintained."

"Then I shall not attempt to dissuade you." Benoni took Paan'l gently by the elbow and led him back down the path toward the starport. "I have arranged for a ship to take you to the core world, Corellia. This is the central-most world and from there you will have access to many others. The captain of this ship will do what he can to acclimate you, but he has business of his own, thus, you will be alone, Paan'l." The shaman handed Paan'l a credit chit, smiling as Paan'l gave him a quizzical look. "This is the currency they value offworld. Use it for food, shelter, and travel."

Paan'l put the chit inside the leather satchel he carried over his shoulder. "I understand." Distracted by the assortment of spacecraft within the main hangar area, he swept his astonished gaze from side to side. The sense of loneliness within him grew exponentially.

Pausing at the ramp of a small tramp freighter, Benoni glanced up the receiving ramp. He made eye contact with a burly Sullustan, who simply waved and vanished into the darkened interior of the ship. Within moments, the low, grumbling whine of the freighter's powerful engines ignited and the craft shuddered with the vibrations. "I will say no more, Paan'l. New

adventures await you, just as they did when you were but a child, searching for the sun's hiding place. My ministrations would only clutter your mind. There is no advice I can impart except to stay true to your heritage." He bowed deeply. "Doaba ol'val tru."

"Doaba ol'val tru," Paan'l replied. He pulled his robes tighter about him, his skin chilled by the interior circulation inside the port. The air smelled stale and unnatural. Already, he felt himself cut off from the life flow of the deserts. Quietly, carrying his worldly possessions about him, including the strange chit, he walked up the ramp, his heart racing as the ramp shifted beneath him and raised up, sealing him inside the inner corridor of the ship.