

Traits of Descent

By
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SMASHWORDS EDITION

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Traits Of Descent
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A note from the author

Been a Star Wars fan all my life. Saw A New Hope in 1977 when I was seven. The rest is history. I used to write original work but tried my first stab at fan fiction after I saw Revenge of the Sith. I thought of how would a journal written by Palpatine look like? Thus, Palpatine's Journal was born and I haven't stopped writing fan-fic since.

I bought the DVDs of Firefly and fell in love with the show and characters in a heartbeat. Went to see Serenity five times in the theater and later got the Big Damn Movie on DVD itself. Shiny! As I got myself familiar with The 'Verse, I saw fit to try my hand at writing in it.

Like so many millions before me, I went to see The Dark Knight five times last year, once on IMAX, which was just mind-blowing. I have seen many movies and can appreciate great acting, but Heath Ledger's Joker was just awe inspiring. I had never seen an actor simply disappear into a role as well as he did. No one will ever even think of playing the Joker again. He set the bar that high! I started reading fan fics with the Joker, and so many go way over the top and use the same lines or techniques.

I've come up with my own Joker, based on Heath's role, and have gotten the best compliments. Someone told me that they could hear Heath say my words as the Joker. What an honor. I dedicate my Dark Knight fan fics to the memory of Heath Ledger. He's up there with the best: BrandoOlivierLemon...and now Ledger.

Recently read and watched Coraline and was blown away by both. I thought of a story based on the book (the movie adds another character for the translation because in the book there's a lot of inner thoughts from Coraline and that would be hard to express on film). I wondered what would happen to Coraline when she became an adult and I had to put it into words.

Madman007

Find Madman007's other works at <http://www.fanfiction.net/~madman007>

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Prologue

Five years after the events of The Phantom Menace...

Obi Wan Kenobi sat across from the couple whose family's lifestyle was about to change. He tried to hold his emotion in, yet they could see it anyway regardless of them not being Force sensitive. Obi Wan figured that his revealed compassion for them made himself and the Jedi seem more human. They needed all of the compassion they could get. The family was about to endure more than Obi Wan could imagine.

Across from him sat Ghill and Abri Helan. Each had a hand bound together as if it would gain them more strength. The husband, Ghill, stared back with a blank look. The wife, Abri, emitted enough emotion to stretch outside of their low-rent apartment on Coruscant in what would be their last known residence as themselves. She curled her blonde locks with her free hand in an obvious nervous tic. It was she who broke the silence after Obi Wan's explanation.

"We...cannot come back here...ever?"

Obi Wan winced at her question. He tried to eject all of the sadness he felt when he spoke. He failed. "I am afraid so. The Deponent Security Program was designed for people in your situation to ensure their safety.

Ghill spoke in his Coruscanti accent, "And disappearing from the face of the galaxy is the answer?"

Obi Wan sighed. "Unfortunately, yes. You must understand, you have done the Republic a great service. You sent one of the high-ranked members of this crime organization on Coruscant to Kessel for the rest of his natural life."

Ghill sniffed. "That won't stop them."

"Perhaps not. You did show them that the public will not tolerate their actions. You were in the right place..."

"At the right time. Yes, I've heard it before, Master Kenobi. Chance encounter, destined meeting, it was all in the Sabaac hand. Premonition took me to that spot at that point in time. I stopped to bring dinner home for my family and instead I brought them nothing but fear. Now we have to start a new life, not as ourselves but as total strangers with new names. How do you think we can manage that, Master Kenobi?"

Obi Wan sighed silently. He was afraid of this kind of reaction from the Helans. He had to endure many challenges over his life as a Padawan and a Jedi. Watching his own Master die in his arms was up there. Training the teenage Anakin Skywalker was not far behind. Facing an innocent family who had been thrust into the underworld of a crime syndicate and telling them they have to leave their

beloved home forever while changing their identities was fast becoming one of the most emotional ordeals that Obi Wan had to go through. Perhaps that was why he and Anakin were chosen for this assignment. He remembered Master Yoda's reply when he asked him how he was to explain this to the family.

"Find a method, you will, Obi Wan. Stronger than you think, you are."

He wished he could agree with his Master. Nevertheless, he had a duty.

He faced the couple and sternly said, "I know that you feel betrayed. You are thinking that after your service during the trial that this is the price for your heroism. I cannot stress enough the fact that you and your family are still alive. This organization does not want that. They will want retribution."

Abri snapped, "You mean revenge. They will really come after us?"

"I'm afraid so. To ensure that doesn't happen, the Jedi Council and the Chancellor devised a way for you to disappear." Obi Wan edged the sealed data pad he brought with him across the table to them and explained, "Your new identities are on here. They were randomly chosen. As was your destination. No one on the Council knows of it. There is a code to access an account that contains enough credits that will get you by for a little while. They can be exchanged automatically to whatever currency is used on the system you are on."

Obi Wan breathed deep at his next words. "We can only give you a few days before you have to leave here. You can take nothing that can identify you. No ident cards, mementos, holo-pics, or anything personal that can lead back to you."

Abri squealed, "Not even our children's things?"

"You can take essential items for the toddler, but no toys. With this organization, your children are the easiest target. Once you leave here, we will take care of your belongings."

Abri cried, "But, what about my parents? I can never see them again?"

"I'm sorry," was all that Obi Wan could manage.

Abri vented almost in tears. "How will I know if they're all right? How would I know if they...died?"

Obi Wan looked down away from her eyes searing into him. "Perhaps...we can find a way to announce something like that over the HoloNet. Though, it would have to be a one-way data feed. These people cannot know where you are." He finally looked up at them. "I wish there was another way."

Ghill stated, "I wish I hadn't stopped for dinner that night and stumbled on seeing that man frying that Rodian."

Obi Wan assured, "Because you witnessed that, the man who killed him has been caught and incarcerated. The organization that he is a part of will learn that they cannot get away with the series of crimes they are committing."

Abri cried out, "Why don't you call them by their name? Black Sun."

Obi Wan straightened himself. "That is unofficial. It is a nickname." He put his index finger over his upper lip and started to say, "Listen, I want to..."

Suddenly, a toy starfighter came flying into the room and over their heads. Along with the model came three boys of various ages, including a Padawan teen. Anakin Skywalker entered the large main room laughing with two younger boys encouraging him behind him.

Abri scolded first. "Pap! Cho! Stop this, right now! What is making the ship fly like that?"

Obi Wan focused on the toy and pulled it towards him to catch it. He glanced over at Anakin in his usual shameful manner and answered Abri, "That would be the Force, Mrs. Helan. The Force that is to be used sparingly and not for showing off, I might add." He glared at Anakin as he said this and his Padawan looked embarrassed.

"Sorry, Master, I was just having fun."

Obi Wan scolded, "We will speak about what is considered fun later. Right now you will sit here next to me."

After Anakin grudgingly complied, Abri did her part to scold her sons. "Tell me you didn't leave

Alexhi alone."

The eldest son, Paprhi, explained, "She's in her room playing with her dolls. She's fine."

Abri scorned, "She is barely two years old. Go now and watch over her like I asked you."

The second youngest, Cholar, whined, "But, mom, he was making the fighter fly. It was going zoom, zoom!" He made flying gestures with his arms.

"Cho," Ghill commanded, "you and your brother do as your mother says. We have a long trip that we have to discuss with you later. Go and watch your sister."

The two boys cried in unison, "Yes, sir." They dragged themselves back to the back rooms beyond the hallway.

Abri addressed Obi Wan. "I'm sorry about that."

Obi Wan stated, "The apology should be mine. Those in Jedi training should know better."

Anakin gave an awkward grin.

Ghill went back to business and asked Obi Wan, "Will the Jedi have any further need for us after we leave?"

Obi Wan silently thanked Ghill for changing the subject and answered, "I should think not. The trial is over. Officially, there would be no need for any further contact." Obi Wan reverted back to his assuring voice. "You have done your part, my friend. The Jedi Council will forever regard your actions in the highest honor. It is one thing for an experienced Jedi to come forward in a situation such as this. It is another when an upstanding citizen such as yourself steps up. You will be given the chance to begin a new life with new experiences."

Ghill stated sourly, "We just can't experience them as Helans."

Obi Wan gulped. "Correct."

Ghill sat up and bent forward to get closer to Obi Wan and his Padawan. "If you do manage to defeat this organization, Black Sun, will there ever be a chance that we can return to our old lives here?"

Obi Wan struggled to find the words that would dance over the gruesome details. "An organization like Black Sun cannot be overthrown overnight. They are well organized and powerful. It just so happened that you caught one of their Vigos, as they call their leaders, in a huge mistake that he should have never gone through. They will not make that same mistake again. Yet, even if we do manage to take down even their main leaders, more are waiting to take their place. Your identities have been erased for a reason. Your lives will not be safe here and the Jedi cannot protect you forever. That is what this program was designed to do."

Obi Wan's words lingered in the air as if the Helens were studying them.

Abri asked point blank, "What would they do to us if we stay here on Coruscant?"

Obi Wan did not know how to answer the question in a respectable fashion.

Unfortunately, his young Padawan did not have the term, respectable, in his vocabulary. Anakin answered bluntly, "They will surely kill you and your whole family. And they would sleep soundly afterwards."

Ghill sneered his question, "Is that a threat?"

Before Obi Wan could interject, Anakin replied, "That is a promise."

After Obi Wan and Anakin entered the turbolift down to their air speeder, Obi spoke harshly to his young student.

"In the future you should be mindful that there are times that call for tact. You did not show that to them when you spoke."

"I don't like to sugar-coat things, Master. She asked a legitimate question and I answered truthfully. Your way was too long in getting to the real point. Besides, he thanked me for my honesty. Or didn't you hear that part?"

Obi Wan held back a smile. This boy was me at that age. The difference being that Qui Gon had allowed his Padawan learn the truth of things. If Obi Wan allowed for the same amount of freedom in Anakin, it would be as if be as if a candle flame were unleashed to turn into a blaze. Obi Wan still warned, "Sometimes there is a difference between being truthful and being respectful, young Padawan."

And speaking of being truthful, what was your purpose in playing with the toy?"

"Like I said, I was having fun. Though, technically, I was giving the boys a sense of fun." He looked at his Master directly. "We all know they won't be having much of that in their new future."

"What was your assessment of the boys' demeanor?"

"The older one, Pap, is about the same age I was when my own life changed. He feels hesitant about it and I sensed his pain underneath leaving his home and friends."

"That is to be expected. What about the others?"

"Cho is half Pap's age. He's treating this as some sort of game where they have to pretend that they are another family. And the little girl is way too young to understand any of it."

"Don't be too sure. Children are very impressionable at that early age."

"Really?" Anakin replied as if he didn't believe his Master. "Can you remember anything that happened to you at barely two years of age?"

Obi Wan winced at the question. No Jedi would ever ask about another person's past without official reason. However, Anakin did many things without official reason. To answer his question, Obi Wan had to search through memory banks that had to be dusted off to remember them. The memories of that time were now reduced to images. He found one that he always cherished, yet held back even when he was Qui Gon's apprentice. "I remember joining the Jedi when I was about Cho's age."

"Joining? You mean taken."

"No. I meant join. I went willingly. My family knew that I had a higher purpose in becoming a Jedi."

"Don't you miss them?"

Obi Wan began to get flustered. Anakin was going down a path that no Jedi would dare follow. Then again, Anakin Skywalker did not seem fit to be a typical Jedi. Obi Wan still obliged the young man's question and considered his words. "I do...think about them on occasion. Particularly on my Life Days."

"I believe we celebrated that well this past year."

"Yes, but perhaps if you have another surprise party planned for next year you should hide the number of people attending better. I could sense their anticipation even before I reached my door."

"Maybe I'll learn that surprise parties are not suited for Jedi Knights."

"I don't know, Anakin, you surprise me all the time."

Anakin laughed. The hum of the turbolift was on its own for a few moments before Anakin said, "You do know that you never really answered my question."

Obi Wan glanced at him and gave him a wink. "I know."

"Well, thanks for being your evasive self as usual."

"And thank you for being the same uncontrollable teenager that you are."

Anakin nodded. "Glad we got that cleared up."

Obi Wan felt he needed to give Anakin something more. "As you may have known over the years, Anakin, I am not one to dwell in the past. What is done has been done. I will say that, despite knowing that joining the Jedi as my duty has fulfilled my destiny so far, leaving my family at that young age was no less devastating."

"I remember."

Obi Wan cringed at his Padawan's answer. Of course, he knows what leaving his family is like. "I'm sorry, Anakin." He stayed silent as he felt Anakin reflect on his mother. Obi Wan no longer felt the childish fear for his mother that Anakin once had when he first came to Coruscant. Occasionally, Obi Wan could sense sudden apprehension in Anakin during some mornings. The results of waking up out of a nightmare? Those instances were few and far between by now, yet it compelled Obi Wan to wonder.

"Are you still having dreams about her?"

The question of who did not have to be addressed. Anakin replied, "Yes. But, they're not bad now. I almost get a sense that she is...happy. It's distant, but I can feel her joy."

"Perhaps she has come to terms with your leaving."

"Or she has forgotten all about me by now."

"Anakin, I seriously doubt that. You are a hard person to forget."

They reached the floor that held the platform where their air speeder was waiting. They exited single file with Anakin allowing his Master to go first. As they walked side by side, Obi Wan noted the run-down look of the building. Flecks of paint were coming off the permacrete. Graffiti of various political and romantic statements were scattered across the walls. Trash was littered on the floor. The residents and the owner obviously could not afford utility droids that could clean the area.

It made Obi Wan think. On Coruscant, as with most civilizations, there were different class systems that were based on financial gain. The higher end district had buildings that were state of the art in structure and decoration. This district, where the Helans lived, was filled with the middle class. These were the citizens who made a living by working everyday to simply provide for their families. Obi Wan felt an admiration with people such as Ghill Helan, sometimes more so than any skilled Jedi he knew. People like Ghill would never call themselves a hero. Yet they were looked upon as such by their children. Their lives were spent the same way day after day. Their father went to work while the children went to school. They come home to spend time together during dinner and thereafter for a few hours before going to bed and starting the next day again.

Until something disrupts that functioning cycle.

For Ghill Helan and his family, that disruption happened over a standard month ago while he stopped to get dinner for his family one night. There was a commotion nearby that caught Ghill's attention. He peeked into an alley where he found two WeeQuay's holding a Rodian while a human male argued with him. The argument became deadly after the Rodian did not give an answer the human wanted. The human shot the Rodian several times point blank and frying the creature until he was dead. Ghill was stunned and quickly took off and ran home where he knew he would be safe. When the HoloNews reported the death of the Rodian and asked the public to give officials any tips, Ghill came forward and identified the killer. The man was a high ranking Vigo in the crime organization around the galaxy unofficially known as Black Sun. The man stood trial and Ghill's testimony helped put the Vigo away to the spice mines of Kessel for the rest of his natural life.

Yet, that did not end the threat to Ghill and his family. Ghill started to receive death threats through the HoloNet and at his workplace. That was when the Jedi came up with a way to make it seem as if the Helans disappeared off the face of the galaxy. Chancellor Palpatine was a key figure in persuading the Senate to approve the Deponent Security Program. Ghill and his family would now be safe from harm.

But, at what cost?

Obi Wan's own Padawan had endured leaving his family to become something more than a slave. Obi Wan wondered if Anakin could relate to the children as they left their beloved home.

Just before reaching the doors that led to the outside platform where the air speeder was parked, Anakin suddenly replied an answer to Obi Wan's unspoken question.

"There is a difference between me and the Helan children, Master."

Obi Wan stopped just short of the doors to face Anakin with the proud look of an accomplished teacher. "You are becoming more experienced at reading emotions and their details. I must devise more challenges in that area."

"Please don't. I don't know if I'm that good."

"Nonsense. You are more ready than you think."

"Didn't I get the feeling back in their apartment that you didn't want to unleash me yet?"

Something about a candle turning to a blaze?"

"Yes, well, maybe you are too good. So, what is the difference?"

"Huh?"

"Don't play games, Anakin. You knew I was wondering if you and the Helan children's situation about leaving home are similar."

"With a huge difference. I left home as Anakin Skywalker. No one can take my identity away

from me. I will always be referred to as Anakin. The Helan children will no longer be named Helan after this week. They will have to relearn their new names and become new people. They will be strangers inside their own bodies."

"Yet, they will still be alive."

"Which brings up a question. Is it better to die as yourself or live as another person?"

Obi Wan couldn't help but smile.

"What? Why are you smiling?"

"Anakin, you can be very profound when you want to be."

Anakin shrugged. "I have my moments."

"And those are the moments that surprise me."

"You're the one who's gonna be surprised when you let your hair grow long in the back. You'll wake up one morning looking like a Wookiee."

Obi Wan grinned. "I've had the close cut look for so long that I wanted to try something different."

"I'm gonna do the same after I get this braid cut off. Then I'm just gonna let it grow."

"Then you should be careful to not make me angry. I am the one who gets to say when you can cut that braid off. Though, if you keep showing me the wisdom you just displayed that might not be as long off as you think." Obi Wan considered. "In fact, that is the reason why I will assign you to write the report on this mission."

"What? No fair. You know I can't write."

"If you write what you just said to me you should do fine. And it will make you more expansive in your teachings as a Jedi."

"Master, a Hutt is more expansive."

"You accept, then?"

"Do I have a choice?"

"No."

"Then fine."

"Let's go, Anakin."

They went outside onto the landing platform and joined the heavy midday traffic of Coruscant.

A few days later, Obi Wan and Anakin returned to the apartment building that was the Helan's former home. They came with several utility workers and droids to help remove the items inside. They entered the apartment and it was devoid of all humans. All that remained was now unclaimed possessions. As Obi Wan paced through the main room, Anakin went to the bedrooms to observe. Obi Wan watched as all the hard work that Abri Helan slaved to decorate the home was being removed with distant sentimentality by the workers and droids.

Anakin returned to the main room to stand before his Master. "Everything is still there. All of their clothing, holo-pics, and toys are where they left them."

Obi Wan glanced at his Padawan while two workers carried away the sofa that they had sat upon a few days ago. He calmly stated, "Yet, there is something that is missing. Correct?"

Anakin sighed. "Sometimes it amazes me how you can see through me, Master."

"Trust me that it is getting harder to do every year."

"Yes, there is something missing. A Tall poster."

"A what?"

"You haven't been around many children, have you Master?"

"I have so. You know I sometimes stand in for Master Yoda in his Beginning classes."

"Let me rephrase. I meant civilian children, not those training to be Jedi. A Tall poster is something the parents get for their children while they grow up. It marks the kids' height every year so they can see how much they've grown. My mother made me a homemade one years ago before I outgrew it. The Helans must have had one made with all three of their children. Even the two-year-old."

Obi Wan looked discouraged. "This would have their names on them, I assume?"

"Yes."

Obi Wan sighed in frustration. "I was afraid of this. They are risking themselves by taking something like that."

"I'm sure they secured it. Folded it up maybe. It could be well hidden that way."

"Regardless, it's risky. But, it seems I cannot stop them since I have no clue as to their destination."

"You can't blame them for taking at least one thing that has been a part of them for this long, Master."

"I suppose. They have escaped with their family intact. That should be enough."

They watched as the workers were almost finished and the apartment started looking as bare as if no one had ever lived there.

Anakin spoke and his voice now echoed in the now empty room. "What's gonna happen to all of this?"

"The latest I heard from Master Windu is it will all go to charity. We would have to inspect the items first to check for any identifying marks."

"Like initials scratched into toys?"

"Exactly."

Anakin reflected, "Maybe when this Black Sun is destroyed, the Helans can reclaim all of this."

"They are just things, Anakin. Material items, however sentimental, will never replace the value of your loved ones. The items can be replaced. Your loved ones cannot."

"I stand corrected, Master. Maybe when Black Sun is destroyed the Helans would just like their own name back."

Obi Wan smiled again proudly. "Someday, Anakin. Someday."

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Chapter One

Time: Twelve years ABY

Setting: Nal Hutta

The run down tapcaf was now so deserted that it was merely an echo of its former festive self after a standard hour earlier. The music had been turned off. The dancers went home for the night. The watered-down well drinks and kegs of ale were stored. It was quiet. It was just the perfect background for waiting.

Exactly the way Meeko wanted it. It took a long time to bribe the owner to allow him and his guards to close that night. Meeko had chosen the location specifically. Though devoid of the public inside, the tapcaf was positioned on the edge of what Nal Huttans considered suburbia. Any chaos heard there would echo to the Hutts in various forms. It wasn't like the residents could put a stop to anything. It was merely bad business for the Hutts if anything went wrong with high end deals.

Not that Meeko expected Rousch to start any chaos. Meeko was protected by two WeeQuay guards if anything did go awry. Rousch did know how to deal. He had been a Vigo in the ancient Black Sun days in which he was inherited the same position in the newly formed Black Nebula. It too was a shadow of its former self ever since Prince Xizor had died. It was strange to believe that throughout Black Sun's existence, it took the death of its greatest leader to bring it down so close to a bottom level that it disallowed its old name. Creating Black Nebula was for the sole purpose of letting the galaxy know that Black Sun's presence would still be felt, despite the name change. There were fewer Vigo

leaders in Black Nebula. Some, like Rousch, became a Vigo through necessity, and normally would have never had the chance of rising to the same power during Xizor's reign.

Meeko always considered himself to become a Vigo someday. He could be the first Rodian to do so. His species were perceived to be less educated and only useful for trivial duties. Most Rodian could not make hard decisions easily. Meeko had come a long way to dispel that presumption about his race. Despite his skills in crime all through his life, he would never be considered Vigo material.

One of his WeeQuay guards suddenly said in his language, "We wait too long. Them not coming."

Meeko never attempted to use the WeeQuay's language. He stuck to Basic, which is what he spoke the majority of his time. If you didn't speak Basic, you would have a hard time in the smuggling business. "He is most definitely coming, Quay'psi. Rousch is taking his time. Like all Vigo. You'll have to be patient."

Quay'psi replied, "Me no like patient. Take too long."

Meeko had to grimace at the creature's accidental hint of wisdom. The environment went silent again. Until a small distant crash was heard from the back storage room.

"What was that?" questioned Meeko.

The two WeeQuay stared at the door that led to the back storage area of the tapcaf. They were ready to pounce into action as soon as it would be necessary. The noise did not continue.

Meeko had to prod them impatiently. "Well, one of you go see what it was."

The other WeeQuay started for the door cautiously. He was almost near enough to touch the controls to open it when it suddenly looked like he was being attacked. He started to choke and he seemed to magically lift into the air as his blaster fell to the floor. The WeeQuay squealed in pain.

Meeko looked frantic as he strained to see who the attacker was. All he could see was the blurred view of the storage door. And with the extra sensitive eyes of a Rodian, Meeko could just make out the shadow of a creature. Instantly, he knew. He called out, "Rousch! Call off your Defel!"

"That will be enough, Visnel," ordered a voice from behind him.

The WeeQuay was lowered and his choking was replaced by excessive coughs. The limited light coming from the storage room fragmented into the form of a wraith. Meeko turned around and as he suspected, Rousch was standing with a case in hand. He was big-boned. Not as rotund as a Hutt but more than the usual size of a human. The dark hair of his goatee looked more groomed than the receding gray hair on his head. He looked at Meeko with a confident smile.

Meeko attempted a smirk with his oversized lips. "You always love dramatic entrances."

"Your Basic is improving, my friend."

"You're not my friend."

Suddenly, the WeeQuay who had been attacked by the wraith lunged at Rousch and pointed his blaster at him. He warned, "Quay'ell no like surprise!"

Rousch quipped at Meeko, "Your guards, though, need some pointers in their Basic."

Like lightning, the wraith was on top of the advancing WeeQuay ready to act. There was a murderous threat behind the glowing red eyes of the creature.

Meeko ordered, "Get back, Quay'ell."

Quay'ell pleaded, "I take him dead."

Meeko calmly stated, "And then his wraith kills you where you stand before you realize it."

Rousch noted, "Smart for a Rodian."

"I try to give my species an element of intelligence."

"You have a long way to go. Now, are we done threatening each other, because I do believe you have some new product for me."

"That all depends on if you have enough credits for me.," Meeko shot back.

Without a word back, Rousch placed his case on the nearest table and clicked it open. He reached inside to produce a datapad, which he also set on the table beside the case.

"Funny, that doesn't look like a credit case," Meeko

Rousch said nothing as he punched in some keys on the datapad and then angled it so Meeko could see the screen. Rousch explained, "This has a link to your account. Five million credits are being transferred there as we speak. See?"

"Yes, but the price was ten million."

"I will send the codes to the encrypt that will transfer the other half when my associate and I are safe and well outside the perimeter."

Meeko sighed but stated, "Fair enough."

"Now, about that product?"

Meeko nodded and reached for the edge of his coat. He exaggerated the motion of opening it wide to show Rousch the lack of weapons hidden. He pulled out from an inside pocket a small flask. He opened it and set in on the table next to the datapad. Inside were three small vials of a pink liquid.

Meeko announced, "Behold, the future source of profits. All the effects of glitterstim mined from Kessel and crystalized into liquid form. Yay for progress."

Rousch scoffed. "Progress. All you did was create upgraded death sticks."

Meeko chuckled. "Death sticks? Those things are the past. When were those last popular, when you were ten? No, this stuff makes death sticks feel like bacta water."

Rousch took one of the vials and opened it.

Meeko warned, "I'd be careful if you're test driving those. What's in there is very concentrated for mass production. A little of that will bounce you into Oblivion for days."

"You're crazy if you think a man of my status would sample his own product. I have my own way of testing." Rousch pulled out another contraption from his case that looked like a plasti-form tube. Meeko could tell even from a few meters that there was a small amount of white powder inside the tube. Rousch tried to carefully pour some of the liquid spice into the tube but managed to spill a drop anyway.

Meeko said, "That was about a few hundred credits you just spilled there."

Rousch shot back sarcastically, "Sorry about the mess."

"Actually, I was more concerned with leaving evidence."

Rousch ignored him and continued with his testing. He capped the tube and shook the contents inside. He stopped and held the clear tube to the light and a bright green hue appeared. Rousch grinned and remarked, "I don't think I've ever seen it turn that green before."

Meeko said proudly, "As I said, it's pure. Has something to do with it being in crystallized form. You satisfied now?"

"Very," Rousch stated as he started putting away the tube and the rest of the vials inside his case. He then started to mention, "Now, once we are away, you will find the codes for the encrypt transferred to the datapad here. Then you can..."

Just then there was a sound all of them heard that sounded like a small piece of metal dropping to the floor with a ting.

"What was that?" Rousch quickly asked.

Meeko supplied casually, "Sounds like someone dropped some change."

Rousch emphasized, "I don't carry change."

"Neither do I. Nor my guards." Meeko started looking around the empty tapcaf and his WeeQuays mimicked his action. Instead of looking up, Rousch looked down at the floor apparently concerned as to what hit the floor. After watching him search for a few moments, Meeko was getting impatient. "Rousch, you're getting paranoid. It's nothing. Can you leave and finish the deal?"

Rousch then shouted with glee as he found what he was looking for. His large frame strained to bend over and pick it up. His look was filled with confusion. Meeko edged closer to him to see what the object was. It was no coin. Rousch held a medium sized cooper-colored piece of metal in the shape of a circle.

"What is it?"

Rousch turned it around so Meeko could see. There stamped in the metal was the old insignia of Black Sun. A black dot was in the center of a spiked circle with a point at its apex. This would have

been stamped during Xizor's day, or before.

Meeko asked, "What exactly is that?"

"It's a Vigo's chit."

Meeko chuckled, "Why Rousch, I didn't know you cursed in Basic."

Rousch turned angry, "I said 'chit', you imbecile. It's what Vigos receive as a symbol of their dedication and loyalty. I have a similar one like this stored away when I was made Vigo after Xizor died. I have a new one for Black Nebula." He sniffed. "Funny, they use a lower grade meleenium than this old one."

"All right," Meeko, began, "so the five million credit question is, what in chak'ra is it doing here?"

Rousch grinned. "Why Meeko, I didn't think you cursed in Huttese." Rousch enjoyed his small crack at the Rodian while he turned the metal over on its opposite side. All the joy in his face was substituted by a look of utter horror. He was so frozen with fear that he inadvertently dropped the metal back to the floor. After the clang ended, Rousch started to look frantically around the tapcaf.

"Visnel," he called for his wraith, "keep your eyes open. For anything."

Meeko bent over to pick up the metal and saw that there was a name etched on the back. Caiecos. Meeko asked, "Who is Caiecos?"

Rousch gulped as he looked panicked. "He was once a Vigo. Long before I had been one. I was only starting into the organization when he was made. But, we heard. We all did."

"Heard what?"

Rousch finally looked at the Rodian to answer, "The murders. Caieco was one of several Vigo who were murdered back then."

"Murdered? What, Black Sun couldn't take care of this on their own?"

"It was all hushed. Not open to the public. They suspected, but never knew. The official word was that the group of Vigos died in a suicide pact."

"That was convenient. I take it the killer was never found."

"You got it. Then the murders just stopped. It was right around the time the Empire took over."

"I'm sure Vader and the Emperor didn't cry over blasted Vigos."

"Oh, the killer didn't just off them with a blaster. There isn't a word for what was done to them."

Meeko could detect the increasing amount of panic in the current Vigo's voice. He held up the chit. "This doesn't mean they are starting again."

Rousch glared at him. "Meeko, they never found their chits. They were missing. And suddenly this turns up here and now?"

"All right, let's don't panic. Why don't you give me the codes for the transfer so we can all get out of here." Meeko was almost embarrassed that he was using Rousch's fear to his own advantage. Almost. He was expecting Rousch to revert back to his sarcasm and call him on his greed. He didn't. Rousch was truly spooked.

Instead, Rousch admitted, "Actually, that's a good idea." He made a beeline to the datapad and started punching in keys quickly.

Meeko motioned to his nearest WeeQuay and muttered, "You be on alert too."

The creature said proudly, "Quay'ell ready for anythi..."

The sound was a small swish and it was quick. Too quick to be seen even with a Rodian's wide peripheral vision. Meeko could only see a dark flash go past him. Yet, he turned and there was nothing. He looked at his guard and saw a blank expression staring back at him. "Are you all right?"

The WeeQuay struggled to utter, "Small...pinch." With that, the creature collapsed to the floor with a thud at Meeko's feet. Spilling out of the WeeQuay's abdomen was a pool of magenta blood.

Meeko muttered to himself, "Tu chak'ra."

Rousch called out to him casually to say, "The transfer is done. You are ten million credits richer. Now, we are leaving."

Meeko was confused. He heard his words and it registered. He doesn't know. The kill was that

silent. Meeko mentioned to him, "We may have another problem."

Rousch finally walked over by Meeko's side. "What do you mean? We're finished here...", he spotted the dead WeeQuay. "Wh...what happened?"

"I don't know. I just know we may not be finished here." Meeko had always considered himself an intelligent criminal. He had brushed himself up with all manners of violence. This was something different. "You've got all your stuff?"

"Yes," Rousch whispered in fear.

"Let's take the back exit. I don't want to find out who is behind this." They both turned...and were frozen in shock as to what they saw.

Meeko's second guard was being held as a victim. Holding him by the neck from behind was a thin humanoid figure wearing a tight black one-piece tunic with blood red highlights along its limbs. Its face was not just obscured by the WeeQuay's head, but also a darkened hood. It was faceless. Silent as well. It did not announce its presence. There was no sarcastic greeting or threat of any kind. It was just there. Its other hand grasped a long, thin vibroblade that was aimed directly at the WeeQuay's waist.

All at once, it broke its silence and spoke in a mechanical, almost droid-like whisper. "I am behind this."

Meeko braved speaking with it. "All right. You have our attention. What do you want?"

The figure said nothing.

Meeko could see the outline of fragmented light that was Rousch's wraith. It almost sprang into action against their new guest, when Meeko shouted, "Stop! Don't do anything." He kept his large eyes on the hooded figure. "No one else has to die tonight."

The figure said back eerily, "Yes. They do." In that instant, the figure plunged the blade deep into the waist of the WeeQuay. The creature squealed in pain and sprawled on the floor. It soon stopped squirming and its cries became silently...dead.

Rousch called out to the killer, "That was very dumb. Now, you'll have to deal with my wraith. That is, if you can find him."

True to his threat, Meeko looked back and found the wraith gone from its former attack position. With its ability to bend light and become a shadow that couldn't be seen until it was too late, their new guest had no chance. There was no way to tell which direction its attack would come from. Meeko almost felt sad at how quickly their guest would soon be dealt with.

The humanoid stood motionless before them. Its hood revealed nothing of what was lurking from beneath the blackness. Finally, it reached for something on its belt. A small device of some kind. It placed it on the table beside it and flipped a switch. The device started blinking a small white light rapidly.

Rousch questioned Meeko in whisper, "Is that a thermal detonator?"

"None that I've ever seen," Meeko answered.

Within seconds, the device went off. A flash of blinding white light flooded them all around. Both Meeko and Rousch tried to shield their eyes with their hands, but they were too late. They were temporarily blinded.

"What's going on?" Rousch shouted his question full of panic.

Meeko noted the flash did not interrupt their hearing. Especially his. Rodian's had a keen sense of hearing which Meeko now relied on. "Shut up and let me listen."

Soon they could hear the battle cries of the wraith in its attack of the mysterious guest. The sounds of battle were evident. Meeko almost felt sorry for their attacker. The cries continued as their sight was slowly returning. They started to see darker shapes rather than sheets of white. Soon, the cries stopped.

They looked before them and saw the shadowy form of the wraith standing tall in victory.

Rousch confidently stated, "Well done, Visnel. Come on, let's get out of here." He turned in the general direction of Meeko and apologized. "I'm sorry about your guards. But, you have your credits. And I have my product. I promise to profit generously." As he walked toward his wraith, Meeko saw it

first with his wider eyes than the human's. He could see the dark shape before them, but with hints of blood red. Those weren't the cries of battle they heard. They were cries of pain from the wraith. Meeko looked down and saw the true dark shape of the wraith on the floor.

"Rousch, no!" Meeko tried to call out.

It was too late.

In a flash of speed, the strange humanoid lunged at Rousch to push him back with great force. A durasteel pillar had stopped their momentum and Rousch was pressed against it so hard that Meeko could almost hear the man's spinal cord snap. Rousch yelled out in pain that Meeko did not want to think about. The attacker took his left hand and grasped it around Rousch's neck.

Rousch was forced to gag his question. "What...do...you...want?"

The figure replied icily, "I want your chit."

"It's...it's you! You killed those Vigo."

"No. I am not who you think." The hooded figure got so close to Rousch's face, Meeko wondered if Rousch could see its face underneath its hood. It added, "I am worse."

Meeko decided he had to act. He knew he couldn't defeat this being. It had already taken out two WeeQuay and a wraith within minutes. Meeko took out his blaster and pointed it at the figure. "Now, listen. That man is a prominent figure in the Black Nebula organization. You know what will happen if you kill him?"

The figure replied, "I am counting on their reaction."

Meeko continued. He knew he should have been running as soon as Rousch was trapped. But, he couldn't. He was a criminal. That didn't mean he did not have a heart. Or a soul. "I can't allow you to do this. You've got your working arm at his neck. There's no way you can get a shot off at the same time..."

In another blur of motion, the figure reached onto its belt with its right hand and flicked...something...at Meeko. It was a hint of another small piece of metal. Meeko didn't have time to study what it was. It came at his leg quickly and buried itself deep through his right pants leg and into green flesh. Meeko shouted in pain and he fell backward dropping his blaster.

After he squirmed on the floor holding his injured leg, their guest spoke to him. "I need for you to be silent now. Do not worry. I need you alive to tell the tale." It looked back at Rousch and said, "As for you..."

Rousch pleaded. "No! Please, no! I...I have credits. Many credits. They're yours. Please."

It hissed, "All of your credits cannot equal the actions of what you are a part of."

"Wh..what are you?"

The figure produced another cylindrical weapon that clung to its belt. It was extended with the right hand and ignited. The most familiar sound in the galaxy emitted from it. A lightsaber. This had a white blade and was about half the size of the lightsabers that Meeko had been witness to see. The figure extended the blade out in a pre-jabbing motion, obviously aimed at Rousch's mid-section.

It finally answered Rousch. "I am your doom."

* * * * *

Chapter Two

Coruscant Mon Mothma's New Republic office

The room was serene, which echoed the same nature of the figure who occupied the office. It offered a wide view of the constant motion of Coruscant traffic on the other side of the transparisteel wall. The office had little else in the way of decor. No sculpture. No paintings. Not even one holo of a loved one on the desk. Most others would comment on the impersonal aspect to Mon Mothma. Luke Skywalker knew that it was just part of her no frills attitude.

Luke and Corran Horn had come into her office after her assistant had let them in. They each had been summoned individually on the previous day by the Chief of State. The meeting's subject had yet to be determined. Corran had enough instinct in his CorSec background to guess. He read HoloNet news. He knew why he was summoned. He pondered why Luke had been called concerning a killing spree of criminals.

Mon Mothma's assistant led them inside and directed them to the two seats opposite the Chief of States desk. Each man sat down before nodding to Mon Mothma as she stood in greeting. She addressed her assistant. "Thank you, Miria, that will be all. Please hold all of my calls until we are finished. And, Miria, if anyone asks, I am in an important Senate meeting."

Miria answered before she disappeared behind the sliding doors, "Understood, Miss."

Mon Mothma addressed the men as she sat in her seat behind her desk. "I want to thank you both for interrupting your busy schedules to meet with me"

Luke gave a nod and said, "It's no problem. I have all the trust in Tionne and Streen as substitute teachers."

"I have no doubt," she answered. "I will get to the point. As you may or may not suspect, I need an important favor to ask of you both. I'm not sure how well versed you are in current events, but one in particular has been brought to my attention."

Corran spoke in turn. "You're talking about the murders on Nal Hutta the other night."

"Correct. How much do you know?"

Corran shrugged. "Some thugs and their boss were cut down by a vigilante. Cut and dry, if you ask me."

Mon Mothma turned to Luke to ask what he had heard.

Luke stirred in his seat and was almost embarrassed to answer, "I'm sorry, I really didn't get a chance to get any details. A Twi-Lek student of mine did mention something about it yesterday. One of his relatives lives in the suburb where that tapcaf is. I usually don't have time to catch up on the latest murders across the galaxy." Luke winced. "Sorry if that sounded patronizing."

Mon Mothma smiled sweetly. "I understand. As you are both somewhat familiar with the official report, let me fill you in on the unofficial. This vigilante, as Corran called him, was not after a random leader of a nefarious gang. The leader who was murdered was a former Black Sun Vigo. The weapon used on him was a lightsaber."

Both Luke's and Corran's ears perked up. Corran commented first. "Is that so? That explains the lack of truth surrounding the whole mess. Not that Nal Huttan authorities are all that truthful, anyway."

Mon Mothma replied, "Nal Huttan security had gone to extreme lengths to keep that out of the HoloNet."

Luke questioned, "Are they sure it was a lightsaber?"

Mon Mothma stated grimly, "Cauterized wounds. No blood spilled."

Corran noted, "I thought that didn't happen with Defels. Their blood is too thin to be cauterized or something."

She replied, "The Defel was not killed by lightsaber. He and the two WeeQuays were simply cut down with a vibroblade."

Corran noted, "It takes more than one vibroblade to take down a Wraith."

Luke ignored Corran's comment and stated in deduction, "The Vigo was special. So, you believe there is a Jedi out there killing former members of Black Sun. The only evidence is the use of a lightsaber."

Mon Mothma's brow lowered. "Isn't that the primary weapon of the Jedi?"

"For the most part. Although, it can still be a weapon even in non Jedi hands. Han himself had to use mine in an emergency once."

Corran mumbled, "Hope you were out of his range."

"Actually, I was almost freezing to death and semi conscious." He eyed Corran with a look that translated into his unwillingness to tolerate Corran's humor at the moment. Luke faced the Chief of State

again. "Am I to assume that you chose us to start an investigation?"

Mon Mothma nodded. "It would be a terrible thing if we had a citizen using different methods to take out former members of Black Sun. And an even worse situation if it was a rouge Jedi."

Luke thought of her words. This was the part about being a Jedi that Luke considered to be subjective. The Jedi of the Old Republic had called themselves the guardians of peace and justice. So far in Luke's short time as a Jedi, there was more emphasis on keeping the peace in the galaxy. Keeping justice was another matter to contend with. It was an aspect that Luke had been unfamiliar with. He did act as a mediator while he was in the thrall of the clone of Jedi Master C'Boath. Yet, that had been C'Boath's version of his own justice, which did not resemble the Jedi's definition. The current Jedi Council had mulled over countless times as to what justice meant. Especially with the recent situation with the crimes that Kyp Durrone had committed.

Luke asked her, "You're not wrong that it would be a bad situation either way. Yet, who's to say there wasn't a specific reason why that Vigo was the target? Suppose it was at random."

Mon Mothma asked, "Are you willing to take that risk?"

In his mind, Luke thought of all the Dark Jedi he had encountered in his life. Exar Kun. The clone of C'Boath. Emperor Palpatine. Darth Vader. All had been a threat to the Jedi. None had ever been a direct threat to regular citizens of the galaxy. Luke didn't want to imagine the danger if any one of them had gone on a killing spree of just anyone. Why would they? They would be too easy of a target. Luke nodded to Mon Mothma. "No, we can't risk it. Are there anymore former Vigo still alive?"

Mon Mothma smiled at Luke's forward thinking. "Yes, we compiled a list."

Corran interjected, "Which I'm sure Y'ull Aab was so willing to give to you."

Mon Mothma countered, "Despite his defeat against the Imperial remnant, Y'ull Aab was cooperative with New Republic agents."

Corran sneered. "From whom he receives a healthy supply of ships. It's so nice to know that the New Republic is feeding that maniac's dream of reforming Black Nebula."

The Chief of State shot back, "Not a feeding. An incentive. Now, do I have both of your agreements that this has to be researched?"

Luke gave his unspoken approval, but Corran crimped his brow. He addressed Luke more than the Chief of State. "Is that it? Just like that and the Jedi are reduced to a police force?"

Luke replied calmly, "If there's a threat to the public, Jedi or non Jedi, we have to investigate this."

Corran quipped, "It's only a threat to the scum of the galaxy. I say let him finish his job."

While Mon Mothma stirred uncomfortably at this reply, Luke stayed neutral and calm.

Corran cried, "You knew I would react like this, Luke. I've spent more than half my life chasing and arresting this scum. And now someone starts killing them and you want me to care enough to investigate?"

Luke uttered, "If we allow this person to keep killing innocents then we are no better than him."

"Better to be rid of them than to have actual innocents murdered."

This time, Mon Mothma spoke. "Would you rather have the blood of vengeance on your hands than the rights of justice? I had hoped, Corran, that your Jedi training would have taught you better than that."

Corran shot back, "I'm no longer a Jedi."

Mon Mothma replied, "Some part of you will always be a Jedi. I expected more from you, Corran." She turned to Luke. "Will this present a problem in working with him?"

Luke shrugged. "Not in the slightest. Corran and I have come to terms on his leaving the academy. With all that happened this past year with his wife kidnapped and what happened to Kyp Durrone, I thought it best to allow Corran choose his own path. And he chose."

Mon Mothma said sourly, "I suppose I shouldn't judge. I am leaving by my own choice as well."

"That is not your choice. Your illness decided that for you," Corran noted.

"Discreetly put. Now, since this will most likely be the last mission I will give you, are you in,

Corran?"

"On one condition," Corran requested. "I go into this as a former CorSec officer, not as a Jedi."

"I'd expect nothing less," was her answer. She looked on a nearby datapad and announced, "I have made arrangements to secure the crime scene for seventy two standard hours starting yesterday."

"That doesn't give us much time," Luke figured.

"I'm sorry it couldn't be more."

Corran mentioned, "That's no small feat with Nal Hutta officials."

Mon Mothma beamed as proudly as she could without showing any indication of how much her illness had taken its toll on her. "You forget who you're dealing with. I simply hinted at the loss of their trade routes through the Inner Core."

Corran smirked. "Which hinted at the loss in their pocketbooks. Well played. Now I can see why you're Chief Of State."

"Not for long. Leia will be taking over at the end of this month. My reign is over."

Luke assured, "And we are proud to serve you until that time. Anything else that may give us a lead?"

"There is. It was something I wanted to wait until you both agreed before I told you. There is a witness."

Luke gasped, "A witness? Someone who watched the murders? That's strange."

Corran followed up with, "He was kept alive so could tell the tale."

Mon Mothma stated, "That's what we believe. As you can surmise, this was no ordinary murder. There was a purpose here. This act was done by someone who has a grudge against Black Sun."

Corran quipped, "Who doesn't? All we have to do is make a list of Black Sun's enemies. It'll be easier to find a Jawa at a Tuskin Raider convention."

Luke replied dryly, "Thanks for the Tatooine allusion."

"Anytime."

Mon Mothma cleared her throat to get their attention. As they both straightened and rid themselves of humor, Luke made note that though she had been weakened by her illness during her tiring duty as Chief of State, Mon Mothma was still all business.

She went on. "I trust in both of your methods of investigation. You are permitted to use any source at your discretion. Truthfully, I don't want to know the sources. I only want the news that a rouge Jedi or a civilian madman's killing spree is over."

"I understand," Luke said as he lifted himself out of his seat, sensing the meeting to be over. Corran did the same as he nodded to her but she stopped him.

She said sternly to him, "I sincerely hope that you and our Jedi Master can work in tandem together without allowing any differences get in the way."

Corran answered, "You have my assurance that they won't."

New Republic shuttle Space Run en route to Nal Hutta

Both Luke and Corran thought it best that they charter a New Republic shuttle rather than arrive on Nal Hutta in each of their own starships. That way it would look more official to the Nal Huttans as well as more intimidating. It was a way to show the Nal Huttan security that it was the New Republic and not just the Jedi who were deeply involved.

The two men had made their respective arrangements for at least a standard week of absence from their duties. Luke assigned Tionne to be in charge of the academy while she and Streen could take over lessons. They hadn't had many students in the past months, more likely from the events surrounding Kyp Durrion scaring potentials off. Luke hoped that will change over time. Tionne and Streen would only be dealing with established students.

It was much easier for Corran to arrange for a leave of absence from Rouge Squadron. All he had to do was mention to Wedge two separate phrases. Jedi mission and Luke Skywalker. Wedge understood the higher priority over Rouge drills. Corran had suspected that since the Rouges had been involved with two major factions in the past year, the Kyp Durrion crisis and the attack on the Jedi

Praxeum by Desann, Wedge had wanted to give the squadron a break anyway.

When he told Wedge he was joining Luke in an investigation into the murders on Nal Hutta, Wedge almost felt sorry for Corran because it didn't seem like a vacation. Corran could never tell Wedge, nor admit fully to Luke, that investigating was more of a break to Corran than being a Jedi or a Rouge. Detective work made Corran feel like he was back home.

After Luke set up the coordinates into the navi computer for the hyperspace jump, Corran admired the Jedi's virtuosity as a skilled pilot even in the mundane acts. The instinct was so natural. Corran often wondered if Luke had never realized his potential as a Jedi, how powerful would he be as a member of Rouge Squadron.

Suddenly, Luke spoke from the captain's chair nearby Corran, "It would never work. Wedge would never let me overshadow him."

Corran sighed deep and scoffed, "Is it too much to ask for you to stay out of my mind, Master?"

Luke shrugged, "If you can stop projecting so loudly."

Corran admitted, "I guess my mind has drifted more lately."

"It's had a lot to process in the past year."

Not wanting to go into the details, Corran made note to Luke, "You do realize that we may be the pawns in this charade of an investigation."

"I don't get that sense in this."

"Not yet, you don't. Chief of States don't send two representatives of the Jedi Order, former or current, to investigate murdered scum on Nal Hutta."

"Unless there was a specific reason. In this case there is."

Because a lightsaber was used? Like you told her, anyone can wield a lightsaber."

"We have to know either way, Corran."

"And if it's not a dark Jedi, do we still investigate? I don't know about you, but I can't feel anything dark since Kyp."

"Kyp?" Luke eyed Corran.

"Exar Kun, I mean. Do you feel anything out there that could be a Dark Jedi?"

After a moment of reflection, Luke replied, "No. That doesn't mean it shouldn't be researched. Dark Jedi or citizen, this person is killing in cold blood."

"Correction. He's killing known criminals."

"So criminals have no rights?"

"As a former CorSec agent, I won't even dignify that with an answer."

"How about as a former Jedi?" Luke shot back.

Corran noticed the Jedi Master trying to avoid making eye contact with him. Luke simply stared ahead at the molted star lines with a neutral expression. Corran then stated, "I'll remind you that the condition I gave Mon Mothma also applies to you as well."

"Of course," answered Luke in his famous I Know More Than You Believe tone. "I am grateful that you came with me, Corran, despite our differences. I do regard your CorSec experience highly."

"Speaking of which, let me handle the Nal Huttan authorities. They're a bit touchy with investigations not conducted by them. They get nervous when they're under the microscope with not only Jedi, but the Master Jedi looking on. If Retnir N'ros is still head of NalHut Security, it'll be a wonder if there's anything left of the crime scene."

Luke assured, "Mon Mothma's threat was veiled, but no less valid. At least for seventy two standard hours." Luke glanced at the chrono on the shuttle's console. "Make that fifty two hours."

Corran chuckled and wondered aloud, "Maybe we can tell them she meant three days on Nal Hutta's solar schedule. What is a day there, eighty seven hours?"

Luke answered sourly, "I doubt they would fall for that old smuggler's trick."

"I suppose not." Corran hesitated bringing his next subject up to Luke, but he had to. "You know we could use a direct source on Black Sun. Or, at least, Black Nebula."

"Are there any direct sources left? Didn't they kill themselves off in some kind of suicide pact?"

"That was never proven. More like they got so angry at each other as to who would take over that they ended up killing themselves. Still, there may have been some who didn't make that meeting. Or may not have been in power enough to be a Vigo. This Rousch that was killed...I read his bio and there would have been no way he would have made Vigo back in Xizor's day. Still, even if there are no former members left, there could be plenty of historians. I was kind of thinking of someone who has direct knowledge of how their organization worked from the inside."

"Yes, I thought about Karrde."

Corran chuckled, "Right street, Luke. Wrong block."

Luke straightened and said sternly, "I'm not asking Mara to help us, Corran."

"Oh, so you're going to ignore the fact that she brought down Black Nebula with her assassination of Dequc."

"That was never official."

"When is anything official where Mara Jade is concerned?"

"Mara Jade is only concerned with people who can benefit her needs alone."

"You don't believe that. You two make a great team together."

Luke almost laughed aloud when he said, "I'll file that remark under comedy, Corran."

Corran smiled, sensing not only Luke's want to change the subject, but also an underlying current of regret. Corran couldn't read enough of the Jedi Master to find out what it was, but he knew it was more than just failure. He ended the conversation with, "Whatever you say, Master." He paused and said, "I still say there is more to this than just the murders."

"I agree. We won't know anything more until we search the scene and speak to the witness."

"Maybe. Tell you what, whoever is running around killing former Vigo from Black Sun has a huge pair of gugistu."

Luke flashed at Corran beside him with a grin. "Did you just say..."

"Ah, you didn't think I knew a bit of Huttese, did you?"

"Right." Luke stared at him for a long pause and said, "Found a book of Huttese slang?"

"Pretty much."

Nal Hutta Tapcaf crime scene

It was always cold on Nal Hutta for Corran. It didn't matter what season it was, he could always feel the coldness in the system's air. He could never decide if the source was the constant wind or the cold blood of creatures who would kill you without a moment's pause.

They had landed in a secured space port pad as directed by NalHut officials. Retnir N'ros was, in fact, still head of NalHut Security. As one who hailed from Malestare, Retnir had an automatic mistrust of all other officials in power besides his own. That distrust had doubled for Corran Horn since he had been CorSec. As Corran exited the shuttle ramp before Luke and saw Retnir standing with two of his troops and his bronze protocol droid, he could see that same distrust on his three eyed face. He greeted them through his translator droid and went on to explain procedures. The gist was that they had secured the tapcaf from the public since the bodies had been found. The insides of the tapcaf had been untouched except for removing the bodies.

They proceeded to the tapcaf by speeder. It had been sectioned off by low density laser barriers. If anyone would try to cross over them, they would receive a small burn that a bacta patch could handle. They also would be discouraged to attempt to cross the barrier again. Once they approached, Retnir announced through his droid that per the Chief of State's orders, he and his troops were not allowed to go in with Corran and Luke to avoid being biased. They were simply there to ask any questions.

Luke started in immediately with a question. "Was there any indication as to what the nature of their meeting was? I read the report of the projected time of their death and it was at a time when the tapcaf would have been closed."

Retnir rumbled in his language and the droid was silent. Corran figured it was language that was not to be repeated. Instead, the droid translated an obvious pat answer. "We do not know what goes on in my jurisdiction. I am sure that whatever they were doing after hours, their actions were not condoned

by myself or the public."

Knowing that it was a method of dancing around the true issue, Luke let it go.

Corran and Luke proceeded to go inside the abandoned tapcaf. The first thing that hit them was the smell. Retnir was true to his word about not removing anything inside. That included the food and meat in the back that was starting to spoil. The area was neat and tidy, which was more indication that every patron went home before the events took place. The tables were cleaned and chairs upturned. They walked around and observed not only with sight, but also with the Force.

Corran thought to ask after several minutes, "You feel anything?"

"Nothing," answered Luke sadly. "I found where one of the bodies fell." Corran looked over to where Luke pointed at the green fluorescent outline of a body outline.

Corran noted the location and looked around until he found it. "Here's the other one," Corran announced. "These two must have been the WeeQuays. They're too big for the Defel. You notice something about their positions?" After he found Luke straining to see and shook his head, Corran explained, "They're within their perimeter of their security positions. This one guarded the outside perimeter and the one next to you flanked on that side. It seems that the focal point was the post there."

Luke looked over at the supporting post to see the same green luminescence of an outline and said, "That must have been where Rousch was killed."

"Yes. And the guards are right where they should be."

Luke sighed. "I don't follow, Corran."

"The guards were killed right where they stood. They didn't have time to fight."

Luke nodded to admire Corran's keen sense of observation. He went closer to the post and noticed something. The shock of realization from Luke was strong enough to alert Corran.

"Luke, what is it?"

"Come here a moment and look at this." After Corran obliged standing side by side with the Jedi Master. Luke continued and pointed. "See those burn marks in the permacrete?"

"Yeah. Almost in a circular pattern. A symbol of some kind? Something he drew after killing him?"

"Not after. During. Those scorches were made by the tip of a lightsaber."

Corran shifted his angle to look at the column by its profile. "The cuts aren't that deep."

"They wouldn't be." Luke looked at Corran and said grimly, "The body of Rousch was in the way."

"Luke...are you saying..."

Luke interrupted, "What was the official cause of death?"

"Wounds inflicted by lightsaber slashes."

"Not slashes. It was a series of stabs through his body."

"Around the heart."

"Which singed it. Slowly."

"Oh, kriff. He not only wanted Rousch dead. He wanted him in pain before he went. Luke, I'm afraid we can rule out a Dark Jedi. Any Sith would not go to the trouble of slow torture. They would just kill you on the spot."

"I agree. And we can rule out anyone with Force potential. Otherwise, why would they kill the others with a vibroblade?"

"I still want to know how a wraith was killed by a mere vibroblade."

"I'd like that answer too." Luke abandoned the post and started walking around the clean tables looking for anything missed. "I have to tell you, Corran, the more I know about this incident the worse I feel about it. The amount of hate behind that torture had to be intense."

"Let's just look around a little more and get out of here. This place is starting to give me the creeps."

"Can't argue there." Luke and Corran had both been exposed to death in their lives, yet each experienced it in different ways. Luke had to wade through dead bodies of soldiers who had once been

committed to lay their lives down for honor of keeping peace in the galaxy. It was nowhere near how Corran sifted through dead bodies of victims who had died at the hands of a murderer. Corran found the small green outline that had to have been where the Defel landing. It was way across the main area. Corran guessed that the murderer could not see the wraith and somehow landed a lucky slash with his blade.

Luke was about to give up until he felt a faint presence as he passed a table. He looked carefully on its surface. He spotted a light gray drip spot that was really more powder than liquid now.

Corran came over to him. "Find something?"

"I don't know. All the tables have been cleaned except this one."

Corran shrugged. "Looks like somebody missed a spot. Guess they should fire him."

"What drink do you know of that dries up into a powder?"

"I know of a few that makes you feel like powder."

Luke shrugged off his joke and placed his real hand over the spot and reached deep into the Force. He received a series of images that included a dry desert land with intricate caverns of crystal. He shared these images with Corran and they each looked at the other to say at the same time, "Glitterstim."

Corran added, "At least we know what the meeting was about."

"It's strange, though. I thought spice was in a solid form. This looks like it's water based."

Corran shrugged as he reached into his satchel. "One way to find out." He pulled out a labpad and took the thin appendage and placed it on the spot to collect a sample. Immediately, the pad analyzed the contents and within moments the results appeared on screen. "It's glitterstim, all right. With an exceptionally high concentration. It has the most density I've ever seen. Like it's been crystallized into a liquid."

"Liquid spice. Now, there's a highly profitable project that's worth killing over."

"My thoughts exactly. Though, why be secret about it? The Hutts don't mind a deal as long as they get a cut."

"Unless there was no intention of sharing with the Hutts."

"That could be dangerous. A new product on the market and they don't have a profit? No wonder it was secret."

Luke added, "At this particular tapcaf."

"Right in the heart of suburbia. The last place where the Hutts would suspect a high end deal would take place. There's something missing, though.

What?

What did they use for payment? Corran bent down to glance directly at the surface. He saw a collection of dust accumulated since the night of the murders. There was a concentration of more dust that created a ninety-degree angle. There was something set down here. Probably a datapad.

A datapad connected to a credit line?

Exactly.

So, where is it?

That is the golden question.

You think Retnir removed it?

No. The dust there is too thick. Besides, if he removed that, why didnt he clean up the spilled spice? What do you think?

Luke stated, I think we need to speak with that witness.

Corran agreed. Thats a good idea. Time to get out of here.

Nal Hutta Security Headquarters

Corran and Luke waited in the solid durasteel walls of the cell for quite awhile. Then the door on the opposite end of the room slid open and two human guards flanked a limping Rodian with a bacta bandage around his right leg. He hands were in binders. There was a retractable table that extended out of the opposite wall, where Corran and Luke were seated and leaning against one side of it. The guards

carefully sat the Rodian in the seat on the opposite side. There was no barrier in between them and the guards left them alone with their prisoner and the Jedi witness. Luke figured that because of his own presence, the Rodian wouldn't dare try to attack or escape with a Jedi in the room. From the looks of his leg, the Rodian didn't look like he could run far anyway.

He had been the most intricately dressed Rodian that Luke had ever seen. Usually, the aliens wore tattered vests or flight suits that had been scuffed. This one wore a brightly colored and expertly tailored suit with high end jewelry around his neck and wrists. He had the look of someone who was pivotal in a certain spice deal in a tapcaf.

Corran leaned over the table and exclaimed, As I live and breathe, its Meeko.

The Rodian actually spoke Basic well and returned with, Horn. Its been a long time.

Luke asked Corran, You know him?

Weve had some run ins over the years. Never anything official.

Meeko added, And never anything convicting, either. I must say your presence here comes as a surprise. Unlike your friend here. He glanced at Luke.

Luke had to get over hearing a Rodian speak fluent Basic. He did have a lisp, which was unavoidable with the Rodians huge lips at the end of his long snout. Luke asked him, Why are you not surprised Im here?

Meeko scoffed. If Rousch had been killed any other way, you would be saving the galaxy elsewhere along with the other Jedi and not here with an ex member of CorSec.

Luke and Corran exchanged glances and hid their amusement about the inside information that Corran had been trained as a Jedi. Corran wanted only his immediate family, the Jedi, and the Rouges to have that knowledge. Meeko had just proved that the secret held well inside the underworld.

Corran started the questions. We just came from the tapcaf.

Meeko cracked, Try the Bloody Zailias. They should be good now.

Cute, Corran reacted. Tell us what happened. And dont think of leaving anything out, or this one will know. Corran thumbed at Luke.

Meeko stated, Im not saying anything until my trial.

Corran almost laughed. Meeko, dont be ridiculous. We are your trial and jury. The only reason you dont have an executioner by now is because the murders were plastered on the HoloNet. I suspect the Hutts will be lenient on your sentence if you help us. Who knows, maybe you wont spend as much time on Kessel as the new product you were endorsing the other night.

Meeko looked as shocked as a Rodian could. How did you know about that?

Corran grinned. Analyzing dried up spots on tables is a neat trick.

Meeko muttered, I told Rousch not to spill any. So, I guess I dont have much choice.

Not much. And we can skip the messy details of how you were planning to exclude the Hutts out of what looks like the deal of a lifetime. All we want to know about is your sudden mystery guest.

Meeko sighed. Everything was going great until he showed up. First, we heard the chit fall to the floor.

Luke repeated, The chit?

Yes. It was a old piece of metal that was given to each of the Vigos in Xizors day and before. Some kind of symbol to represent their commitment. This was all according to Rousch. He said that the one we found had been missing until now.

Missing? Corran asked.

Yes. From the famous suicide pact of the Vigos after Xizors death. Rousch hinted that this one had been someone who was tortured and murdered in cold blood separate from the pact. That Vigos chit was never found. Until we found it on the ground.

Interesting, Luke uttered. Where is the chit now?

I assume our guest took it.

Corran blurted, Like he took the datapad that transferred your credits?

The Rodian eyed Corran with his large black pupils and demanded, Before I answer that, do I

have your guarantee that if I give you my incriminating information that my sentence will be reduced?

Corran assured, Well see what we can do.

Not good enough.

Luke glanced at Corran first and addressed Meeko. If you help us catch this murderer, I will see to it personally that your sentence is reduced.

Meeko answered wryly, I didnt know the Jedi were so concerned with the elimination of former Black Sun leaders.

Luke countered, Were only into justice.

Meeko replied, Nice to know there are still idealists left in the galaxy. And I dont mean that sarcastically.

Thanks, said Luke sourly. Now, can you describe this guest?

Meeko thought in remembrance. Medium height. Tight black tunic with red lining highlights along the limbs. He wore a hood, so I never saw his eyes or face. He didnt speak much, but when he did it his voice was deep and raspy, almost a whisper.

A vocoder? Luke asked.

No, it was not mechanical. Tell you the truth, I was not really paying attention to his voice. In fact, he didnt speak at all when he was...well, when he was busy with Rousch.

Corran accused, You mean when he was putting Rousch through torturous pain while you sat back and watched.

Hey, I tried to stop him. He indicated his wounded leg. This is what I got in return. He threw something at my leg that made me numb. I couldn'tt move. The yurif already killed my two guards each with a single stab to their abdomens. Then he took out the wraith after he set off some kind of...flash.

Flash? Corran repeated.

Yes. It was some kind of mechanism that flashed a bright white light and blinded Rousch and I. By the time we could see again, the wraith was dead. There was nothing I could do. I admit Im a businessman who deals in questionable items. Im not a fighter.

Luke added, And you were scared.

You bet your kistana I was.

Luke looked over at Corran and explained, Kistana is Huttese for

I know, Luke. I do read my book of Huttese slang.

Meeko ignored the exchange and went on. He already told me he wasnt going to kill me. How was I supposed to trust him? This killer has a serious score to settle with Black Sun. Hes not afraid to inflict pain or death on anyone to get to them. Its like he wants Black Sun to come after him. Hes baiting them. He wants to torture them all. The Rodians voice was starting to crack with emotion and both Luke and Corran could feel the aliens fear coming through. It was time to let him go.

Corran suggested calmly, Maybe you should get some rest and let that leg heal. Weve got enough for now. Ill speak to Nal Hutta about your cooperation. If we catch this bantha fodder, Ill make sure they reduce your sentence. Maybe you wont even set foot on Kessel. Well see. He stood up and said to Luke, Lets go.

As they began to leave, Meeko stopped them. Wait! Theres something else. There was a name etched on the back of the chit. Caieco. Rousch said he was an old Vigo when he started into Black Sun. He was murdered years before the suicide pact. They covered it up saying it was a suicide. They never found his chit. Until we did the other night.

Corran repeated, Caieco. Good. Well look into it. Thanks, Meeko.

New Republic shuttle Space Runs cockpit

Luke and Corran sat wearied from the days research in their seats while the shuttle was still docked at the NalHut spaceport.

Corran sighed his question. Ever feel you have more questions coming from an investigation than going in?

Sometimes. We have a description of the murderer. We know what to look for. We also have a

lead in that name Meeko gave.

A Vigo who was supposedly murdered before the pact and was covered by saying it was suicide. Either way, it doesn't give a good impression of comfort as a Black Sun member. Unfortunately, we only have Rousch's word on the name. And we can't exactly ask him now.

No. It seems to be all pointing in the same direction. The past.

Corran grinned at a pleasant memory. It's like my father used to tell me. If you want to begin an investigation, start at point A. In this case, point A is the illustrious history of Black Sun.

I could start researching on the HoloNet.

No! Don't go there to search about Black Sun. That will alert everyone you don't want to know what you're researching.

What do you suggest?

It's like I said on the trip over here. We need a direct source. A living source with no ties would help.

Luke stated, I'll put a call into Karrde.

That a boy. Tell me what he says. And try to leave my father-in-law out of it. Boosters got enough problems on his hands.

Will do.

Luke went to the shuttles com and holo-projector and entered in the cryptic codes to hail Karrde's organization wherever he was. Luke had been given the codes in emergencies, and this fell into that category. It took several tries through security walls, but Luke got through. Luke never thought of himself as an expert slicer, like Ghent, but he managed well enough.

The holo came on and the blue-white image of Aves appeared.

Yes? Ah, Skywalker. To what do we owe this pleasure? You need Mara?

No, Aves. I need to speak with Karrde.

Just like that? No indication of the reason why? You know that the cost is higher that way.

Luke snapped, Just put it on my account. Is Karrde there?

Just a moment, Master Jedi. His sarcasm came through as his image disappeared. Within a few moments, the chiseled face and black goatee of Karrde replaced the image of Aves.

Skywalker, Karrde greeted too sweetly. I'm sorry, but Mara is away on an errand of mine.

Luke almost gritted his teeth as he reiterated, I don't want Mara. I need to talk to you about something important. But, not over the waves here. In person.

What? You don't trust my secure lines?

Not for this.

Ah, so the murders on Nal Hutta are too secret even for me? Isn't that what you needed to speak to me about?

Luke was stunned for a few seconds until he realized who he was speaking with. It might be.

It is. And I suspect that you may need a direct source into the history of Black Sun.

I...well...

Yes, you do, Karrde said with confidence. Have no fear, my friend. I have just the man in mind. I'll send you the coordinates where we are. See you soon, Jedi.

Yeah, soon.

* * * * *

Chapter Three

Aboard the freighter Wild Karrde

The shuttle moved upward into the small docking bay of the Wild Karrde with ease. Luke and Corran finished up landing procedures and each headed down the shuttle's ramp. At the bottom of the

ramp Aves was there to greet them. He stared at the two of them as they descended the ramp individually.

"Well, if it isn't the Hero of the Rebellion and a former CorSec bum," he announced wryly.

Corran was the first down the ramp and he replied, "Bite your tongue, Aves. We paid your docking fee handsomely. Or can't you count that high?"

"I do believe that fee just went up a thousand credits for insulting me."

"Is that all it costs to insult you? Luke, better have those New Republic credits handy. I'm in an insulting mood."

Luke came down behind Corran and warned, "Let's not get carried away."

Aves looked at Luke with his hard-chiseled face scowling at the Jedi Master. "Skywalker, you must be here on business."

"Why do you say that?"

"Mara's not here."

Luke turned to Corran, exasperated. "Why does everyone think I need to speak with Mara?"

Corran shrugged. "Beats me. And Aves, you should already know we're here on business."

"Yes, but that's as much as Karrde told us."

"Is that odd?" Luke asked.

"Not really. Karrde does leave even us out of the loop sometimes. Though, I suspect it's about those murders on Nal Hutta. And if the Jedi Master is here, then there must be a Jedi connection that the Hutts managed to hide from the HoloNet."

Corran sneered. "We could be here to discuss the impending implosion of the Smuggler's Alliance."

"And that would be something that Karrde would share with us. Come on, Karrde's waiting. You remember how to walk and talk. Or was that not in your Jedi training?"

The two men ignored his remark and followed Aves through the decks and up onto the bridge. Luke had been on the Wild Karrde so many times that he didn't need guide. They reached the bridge and Karrde's crew were busy at their respective positions. Karrde himself was standing before the main viewscreen scratching his black goatee and wearing his vest that mimicked the same color as his beard. Upon seeing Aves come in with Luke and Corran following him, Karrde's face brightened.

"Ah, Luke Skywalker and Corran Horn. Welcome back to the Wild Karrde. I trust Aves was courteous."

"No more than usual," answered Corran.

Aves pointed at Corran and spoke as if they were on a schoolyard. "He insulted me."

Before Karrde could respond, Corran said, "It was said in fun, Aves."

Karrde smiled and looked at Aves to repeat, "It was all in fun, Aves."

Aves grumbled something undetectable and went to the navcom station. Karrde then greeted his guests. "First order of business, how is your beautiful wife, Mirax, Corran?"

"She's taking it easy these days."

"No doubt. She has been through much in the past year."

"And I haven't?"

"I'm sorry, Corran. I didn't mean to imply anything. And how is Booster?"

"Effectively avoiding you."

Karrde grimaced. "As he should. Good man. And Luke, is your sister ready to take over New Republic Central?"

"She'll do fine."

"I'm sure she will. Now, gentlemen, let us go into my ready room and discuss what you came for. Aves, you have the helm."

Aves questioned back, "Are we still on for Sluis-Van?"

"Of course."

Corran asked, "Going out for more ships, Karrde?"

Karrde said back, "Ah, that is on a need to know, Corran. But, well done in trying to get it free. Come, this way."

They followed Karrde to a small room offset from the bridge with a desk and chairs inside. Karrde followed the men inside, shut the door, and offered them to sit in the seats before the desk as he took the seat behind it.

Before Karrde could speak, Corran noted, "You always keep your crew in the dark about your matters?"

"Matters involving certain legends, yes."

"Legends?" Luke exclaimed. "I thought we were here to discuss the history of Black Sun."

"Ah, motives are wide and varied, but legends live on. Even the notorious ones."

"Karrde, what are you talking about?" Corran asked.

Karrde breathed and spoke, ignoring Corran's question. "The history of Black Sun won't help you with your case. Their history is too vast and speculative for even me to comprehend all of it. However, there is an instance in its history that may give you a connection."

Corran demanded, "Stop with the games, Karrde. What do you have?"

"Not much, really."

"Then why are Luke and I here?"

Karrde smiled in his devious manner. The one that said that he knew more than he let on. The difference with Karrde was that it was usually true. He answered by saying, "To give you a piece of the puzzle."

Corran looked to Luke, who could only give a shrug in doubt. Corran then prodded. "Ok, Karrde, I'll bite. What do you know?"

"I know that a Jedi is involved."

"A Jedi weapon," Luke corrected. "We haven't yet confirmed that a Jedi is involved."

"But, a lightsaber was used, correct? And it wasn't used in a traditional fashion. Am I warm?"

"Maybe," Luke said.

"I am. I also know that the lightsaber may have been used for torture on the main target. A current Black Nebula Vigo named Rousch, perhaps? Those who were in the way of the target were dispatched rather quickly, right?"

Corran remarked, "You're a little too informed, Karrde."

Karrde smiled confidently. "I still have a few Hutts in my pocket."

Luke quipped, "Those would have to be pretty big pockets to fit in even one Hutt."

Karrde chuckled. "Indeed. Now, is there anything I'm missing from your crime scene?"

Corran asked, "Why should we tell you? Do we have any guarantees that what you tell us will help our case?"

"When have I ever let you down?"

"Oh, ho...Luke, do you want to take that question, or should I indulge him with an answer?"

"I'm not touching it."

Karrde sighed. "Ok, the business with the Katana Fleet wasn't handled in the best way, I admit. Though, I would remind you that I did have the Empire's greatest strategist after me."

Luke added, "And I would also remind you that you essentially had me prisoner in your complex while you decided who would bid the highest for me."

"Water under the bridge. I was only searching for the best profit."

Luke leaned forward to fold his arms on the desk. "I guess the question becomes, Karrde, what is the best profit for this piece of the puzzle we need."

"You've been reading ahead, Jedi Master."

"Can't go through life in this galaxy if you don't."

Corran admitted, "Now, for once, Luke I agree with you. So, Karrde, spill. What do you want?"

"Let's just say I'm in need of protection."

"Protection from what?" Corran asked.

"Or who?" Luke added.

"Just protection for a project I'm working on. One that is highly sensitive. It has to do with a certain prototype."

"Ah," Corran cried out. "Hence, the trip to Sluis-Van. This wouldn't have anything to do with plans for a star fighter the New Republic is developing?"

"It might."

Luke squinted his eyes at Corran. "You mean the X Wing that will be invisible to scanners and radar?"

"That's the one," Corran confirmed.

Luke looked at Karrde. "You think the blueprints are at Sluis-Van. You're heading there for an information raid."

"The thought had occurred to me. That is, unless we can come to an arrangement."

Corran informed, "We can. I can try to convince Mon Mothma to include you in on the profits. We can call it part of the Smuggler's Alliance compensation. Or a consolation prize."

"Oh, I wouldn't bother Mon Mothma on this yet. My project won't be in effect for another few months."

Luke started chuckling and shook his head. "You were never going to Sluis-Van today. That remark was for show to us. You were going to wait until my sister was in power before you went information gathering."

Corran said, "Yes, I see. The shipping contract the New Republic has with Incom would be expired by then. Any information leak would be blamed on the transition."

Karrde explained. "I did intend to make it a joint effort."

"Don't worry," Corran said. "You help us with this case and you'll get your profit share. Though, I can't promise a high percentage."

"If the ships perform as well as projected, even a small percentage would be a fortune." Karrde then addressed Luke. "Congratulations, Jedi Master. You saw right through me. Not many can say that."

"Mara can," Luke shot back.

"Which is why she is still my second."

Corran spoke up. "All right, now that we've got your payment out of the way, let's hear what our missing puzzle piece is."

Karrde took a pause before he began. "How much do you know about the Vigo suicide pact?"

Corran shrugged. "As I understood it, the Black Sun Vigos figured they'd have no future with Xizor gone and the Empire no longer on their side. Or, at least, Vader side. They all met together and drank a healthy portion of enital poison. Though, it was probably mixed in with a vintage Vistulo brandal."

Karrde smiled. "Rumor says it was a classic '34. But, that was the public version. Tell me, at your crime scene, was there evidence of a small metallic insignia?"

Luke nodded. "The remaining survivor mentioned an old chit that was found."

"As I expected. Was there a name on the chit?"

Luke searched his memory. "Yes. Caieco. The survivor said it was the name of one of the Vigos in the suicide pact."

Karrde gave a smirk and said, "Let's just call this survivor, Meeko, shall we? Don't worry, I surmised the name myself. My source would only say it was a Rodian. Meeko would be the only Rodian smart enough to be at the head of any deal like that. Though, it's interesting that my source wouldn't give a name. Anyway, Caieco was the name of a Vigo involved in the pact." Karrde stared twitching his goatee. "Very interesting."

Luke supplied his own sarcasm. "You have the name of our killer, yet?"

"No," Karrde said seriously, ignoring the sarcastic jest. "But, I have a clue to a possible connection. Ever heard of Skarce Voxan?"

Corran erupted in full laughter and exclaimed, "Karrde, that name is a long dead myth."

Karrde answered calmly, "What are myths but a series of truths put together?"

Luke asked in confusion, "Who is Skarce Voxan?"

Corran answered, "Myth. Legend. Horror story. Depends on who you ask. His clients or his victims."

Seeing that Luke was still confused, Karrde supplied with a background. "Skarce Voxan was a notorious hit man for Black Sun in the pre-Clone War days. He was used for special targets. Traitors. Informers. Embezzlers within the organization. People who Black Sun wanted to hurt the most. If you crossed Black Sun and won, you would get a visit from Skarce Voxan."

Luke suggested, "So, he was an assassin."

Karrde corrected. "He was a glorified serial killer who got paid for his kills. The legend goes that Voxan was fascinated with dealing death and pain. Not in that order. He would torture his marks with a passion and he would have fun doing it. See, to Voxan, there was no such thing as a quick death."

Corran seemed to reminisce when he recalled, "I remember my father would tell me stories of how officers would joke on an unsolved murder case and they would blame it on Voxan. 'Must have been Voxan who did this one.' They would threaten criminals they interrogated by saying if they didn't talk that they would hire Voxan. And it usually worked with those too young to know. Even criminals had heard of Voxan and were scared of the name. Nobody ever saw Voxan face to face. Or, if you did, you wouldn't be alive long enough to tell about it."

Karrde put in, "I think I know someone who has seen his face. Or, at least, holovids of it."

Corran asked, "How could that be possible?"

Karrde shrugged. "From rumors I gathered over the years, Skarce Voxan was totally private. The only way to hire him was through a series of extensive comms that never directly led to him. Though, he had been picked up a few times by various officials. They questioned him but never had enough to convict him. He always got away. He was smooth, meticulous, and very precise at what he did."

Luke brought them back into the present. "So, what does this assassin have to do with the Vigo pact and our crime scene?"

Karrde explained, "There was always the rumor that the suicide pact did not involve any suicides. There was the fact that all of the Vigos' honorary chits were missing. The officials chalked it up to them disintegrating them in an act to dissolve their identities. There was no evidence of that, though. Meeko proved that just by mentioning the chit."

Corran noted, "I noticed the Hutts left that out of the HoloNet, too. I do remember my father telling me of an unofficial rumor that Voxan himself killed the Vigos and made it look like suicide. And he collected all of their chits."

Luke said, "That sounds a little far-fetched. If that happened, who would have hired him to do that?"

Karrde replied, "Who, indeed? Prince Xizor was already dead by then. Unless it was a pre-existing order for Voxan to carry out in the event of Xizor's death. Though, I can't see the advantage why Xizor would want all the Vigos dead."

Corran offered, "Maybe he thought that if he went, so too would Black Sun."

Luke commented, "The Falleen did have quite the ego. Leia can attest to that."

Corran wondered aloud, "Could it have been the Empire?"

Karrde shook his head. "No. The Empire needed Black Sun in place. Despite Vader's hatred of Xizor, Palpatine thought the organization was too resourceful to obliterate. And Vader was too filled with blind vengeance to see things clearly."

Luke shifted in his seat at the mention of his father's alter ego. Karrde noticed.

"I'm sorry, Luke. That was insensitive of me."

"It's all right. I made peace with my father on the last Death Star. If I remember Leia's account of her time with Xizor, he formed a plan to have me killed."

Karrde finished the thought. "And knowing what we know now of Anakin Skywalker, that would have made Vader terribly angry. I always wondered what set him off at Xizor."

Luke changed the subject quickly. "So, we have a possible connection with the Vigos' suicide pact and the murders on Nal Hutta. The question is if this was a one-time act or will this continue?"

Corran asked, "Are there any Vigo's still alive today?"

Karrde answered, "There are a few left. None of them were truly Vigos when it was Black Sun. There was Black Nebula. And that was dissipated shortly after the Battle of Endor. As I understand unofficially, Mara herself had a hand in dissolving that version of Black Sun. Now, Y'ull Aab is trying to restart Nebula again. I'm sure there are still those who were in line to be Vigos in Xizor's time will now get their chance today. Aab's even gone so far as to establish the chit system again for the new Vigos. The one who was tortured and killed the other night, Rousch, had no business becoming a Vigo. It's more about ego than honor now."

Luke asked, "So, why start the revenge after fifteen years or so after the pact?"

Karrde retorted, "You will find that revenge has no statute of limitations."

Luke shot back, "Jedi don't go out for revenge."

"And it can't be another Sith, or you two would have detected it."

Corran replied, "Maybe. It can't be Voxan himself. If I calculate right, he would be near a hundred years old. He was almost certainly human."

"Yes, that we know. And it was never known if he had any family. Then again, it's not hard to simply copy his work. And that leads to just about anyone."

Luke figured, "It would have to be someone well trained. Especially lightsaber training."

Karrde said, "Lightsabers have been known to be used by non-Jedi, Luke. Mara has even admitted to using one during her time as an assassin."

Luke countered with, "Mara had also been trained by Palpatine."

"Is there a difference in being taught the Sith method and being taught to kill?"

Luke emphasized, "Mara wasn't trained to be Sith."

"Can you prove that?" Karrde sneered.

"Yes," Luke simply stated. "If she had been taught Sith philosophy, then the clone of Master C'Boath would have an apprentice by now and we would have a whole set of different problems. The fact is, Mara requested that I not allow her to cross into the Dark Side, even if it meant killing her. Sith don't follow that doctrine."

Corran interrupted, "Ok, we're getting too far off the subject. Karrde, is there anything else you can give us besides a history lesson and a myth to follow up on?"

Karrde stated, "I know of someone who has archives of Black Sun. I contacted him as soon as I made the connection between the murders on Nal Hutta and Black Sun. He is merely an historian now, but he was a former employee in their service at one time. He will never tell me what he actually did, not that I want to know. He has quite a collection of various Black Sun archives from the many eras of their history. I'm sure he could provide more information that you need. His name is T'ryas Dane. He's on the Vesper system."

Corran noted, "That's pretty out there."

"All the better to hide from society. What stories he can tell."

Luke quipped, "Stories that could get him convicted."

"Oh, he's in his nineties. I doubt he would be the focus of any investigations now. Apart from him, I have only speculation." Karrde stood to suggest the end of their meeting.

Luke and Corran stood as well and Luke replied, "At least you pointed us in a direction."

"I'll be sure to include that in my proposal to your sister in a few months."

"I'm sure you won't forget."

"I'll forward the coordinates to T'ryas's home on Vesper to your shuttle. And, if you will, keep me updated. You never know when I can help."

Corran replied, "As long as that works in reverse. If you have anymore information that will be

useful to us, please contact us. If the price is right, of course."

"We could always revise that percentage on the new ships. Other than that I say good luck to you gentlemen."

The planetary system of Lianna

Lohl Ch'la was almost ready for bed. He took all of his meds, which were too many according to him, but just enough from his doctor. He was just past seventy. Death was around the corner, though no less frightening. He had a good life.

That is, after he worked for Black Sun. He had been alive for only a quarter of a standard century at that time. It was decade or so before the Clone Wars. Before anyone had heard of Geonosis and Kamino. He had been foolish enough at twenty-five to be lured into an accounting position in an organization that was well hidden from its primary purpose. He started noticing which hands the profits were going to. High officials in the Senate. Aides in the Chancellor's office. Even a few Jedi, though none on the Council itself.

After quickly seeing the nefarious actions of what was unofficially known as Black Sun at that time, Lohl decided to quit.

He found out that quitting Black Sun was not the easiest of tasks. He went to the only people who could be trusted. The Jedi Council. They gave him sanctuary as he disclosed classified accounting data. There were convictions, but none were at the level of Black Sun that the Jedi Council needed to make an impact with. After Lohl gave his information, the Jedi knew Black Sun would retaliate against him. They helped him disappear from the galaxy.

Lohl had changed his name and identity so he could live. That was the price for his freedom from Black Sun. His constant fear and guilt were soon added to the cost. Over the next thirty years of living as another person, he had always asked the same questions. Would they still find him? Would they know who he was, regardless of his name change and his move to Lianna? Would the next client he met with as an accountant be an actual hit man from Black Sun? What was that man's name who they used in special circumstances?

Voxan.

Lohl remembered the name on the books. Ironically, Lohl himself had signed for the petty credits that had paid Voxan.

For thirty years, Lohl forced himself to be alone. The fear and guilt that ate at him everyday was not worth sharing with a loved one or a family. Occasionally, Lohl would go to the Yadarria City market. He kept his eye on a beautiful lady selling citra fruit. He never let it become more than coveting. She did not deserve to share his pain. He could not make himself constantly lie to her everyday about his name and his situation. He kept everyone at a distance. His choice to live outside the borders of Yadarria City in the country was his own.

Then, fortune favored him in the death of Prince Xizor, followed by a suicide pact of the highest Vigos. There suddenly was no Black Sun. And with its demise went his fear. Surely, the remnants of the organization would not be bothered to look for him now. He gained back his identity. He was Lohl Ch'la once again. The fear was gone, but the guilt still remained, though not as prominent as before the pact. It would always be there as a reminder. His first order of business in order to forget was to visit the market once again.

Ciranna was the name of the woman who owned the citra fruit stand. He discovered that she had been married once, but was widowed not long before Lohl set himself free. They spent time together and he revealed his secret that became his redemption through her. They had married soon after and they enjoyed each others company through the turmoil of the Empire and the celebration of the New Republic.

Their joy lasted another fourteen years. Ciranna then contracted Pariak's Disease and it took her quickly. In the previous year, she had died. Lohl found comfort in the fact that Ciranna knew him as himself and not as a false identity. They were each lonely for different reasons, but they were together for only one.

His guilt from working for Black Sun was nearly forgotten. Until a few days ago when he read about the murders on Nal Hutta. He knew the name, Rousch, from a list he saw as possible Vigo candidates. Though he believed Rousch got what he deserved, Lohl wondered if he was next. He had kept tabs of the newly formed Black Nebula, and considered them half as organized as the original version. Yet, there still was a chance they could find his records and then find him. Over the past few days, his fear had returned. Even at his age, Lohl still feared death.

He laid in his bed now with the medications flowing through his blood. He savored the sounds of nothing. Would this be what death was like? Endless silence?

Unless that silence included a scratching noise.

In the country, Lohl was subject to visitors in the form of rodents who were cousins of whomp rats. They would scrounge his yard for scraps of food. Usually, they would go away after finding no evidence of scraps.

The scratching continued. It became more prominent as the sound progressed into a scraping noise. Maybe one of them was trying to get in. It was enough to keep him awake.

Lohl grumbled and sat up with his creaking body to put on his slippers and robe. He headed into the semi-darkness through the main room to the front door. He punched in the security code to open the door.

Nothing.

He stuck his head out to look around to the left and right. No rodents. He shrugged and shut the door, entering the lock code to the door. He decided that since he was up, and thirsty, he would get himself a drink. He stumbled into the kitchen and found the same glass he used earlier at dinner. He refilled it with water.

Before he put his lips to the glass, he felt the cold.

The blade at his neck was cold against his ancient skin. Upon feeling it, his whole body went rigid. This is it.

There was silence before he heard the voice. It was a soft whisper with a hard edge. And it spoke volumes. "I want you to do as I say. Try to escape, and I will end you."

Lohl was frozen with fear. He tried to plead. "P...please, don't kill me. You're the one who took out Rousch the other night, aren't you?"

"Nice of you to remember his name. Now, turn around." The killer removed the vibroblade so Lohl could obey his command.

The killer's features were still in the shadows. In the limited light emitting through the window, Lohl could see a figure wearing a dark hooded tunic with red lining. He could not see a face. He had to ask, "Who are you?"

"I am as you were once. Someone with an alternate identity."

"Please don't kill me."

"I will not kill you. But, you will help me send a message."

Lohl crinkled his brow. He wasn't expecting this from a murderer. "What kind of message?"

"Not your concern. All I need for you to do is to read." A motion to reach into a pocket occurred and out came a small piece of flimsi. It was placed on the kitchen counter.

Lohl picked up the flimsi and read it. "Are you crazy? Bringing them into..."

"As I said, that is not your concern. I need for you to repeat the words as written. Anything more will result in your last stand."

"No! Please! All right. I'll do it." He gulped and felt the dryness of his throat. "Just let me take a drink first."

He heard from the killer what sounded like an impatient sigh, and then, "Fine."

Lohl lifted the glass to his lips and he gulped down the water sloppily. After he was finished, Lohl breathed quickly to catch his breath. "All right...I'm ready."

The killer produced another gadget that was placed on the counter and aimed it at Lohl. It was turned on and a thin blue vertical light scanned Lohl to capture his image. Lohl was given his cue with a

nod.

Lohl gulped and began reading the words on the flimsi verbatim. In the middle of his reading, Lohl stopped to wipe his brow. He was sweating. He continued reading until there were no more words. The holocam was put away.

"Well done."

"What is that going to accomplish? You've brought them into this now. What chance do you have at succeeding?"

"I make my own fate, Ch'la. Much like you did. You have done well in hiding your true nature as a Black Sun employee."

"But, that wasn't me. I was a pawn."

"You were still a part of the organization. No matter how many years have past. Money changed hands with those who kill for it. Your hands. How many lives had you exchanged for credits?"

"It was not my money to give. I only signed the checks."

"And without your signature, there may have been no bloodshed."

"Someone else would have taken my place."

"Perhaps. And you traded your place for an alternate identity. An act that showed courage. Yet, your guilt was too much."

Lohl started crying. "I know. I know. It's been eating at me even after all these years. I simply couldn't do it anymore. I quit. I helped the Jedi catch a few members of Black Sun."

"None of which were significant. Though, it was more than any had done before or since. That was still not enough, was it, Ch'la? You may have left Black Sun...but it didn't leave you. Yet, you managed to live out a good life. You can never know how much I admire that."

Lohl's heart began pounding faster. His nerves must have been on the edge. He knew he was facing a killer. "Black Sun didn't just take my dignity. It took my soul."

"But you gained it back, did you not? Through her? A life of romance. A life fulfilled. That is why you are only a messenger. That is why you deserve an honorable death."

Lohl's eyes popped. "What? No! You s...s...said you weren't going...to kill me."

"And I didn't. You did that yourself."

Lohl looked confused. The killer merely glanced down at the counter. To the glass. Lohl then realized. "What was it?" he asked as calmly as he could. His sweating and heartbeat continued faster.

"Enital. The same used in the pact."

"How...fitting. How...long?"

"Not very."

Lohl cried as he grabbed the edge of the counter, "I...didn't want to...die...yet."

The killer spoke an undeniable truth. "Why not? You've been living for the dead in the past year. I would think you would cherish death. You will finally be with her again."

Lohl's vision become blurred. He started losing control of his gravity and began to fall to the floor.

The killer stood over him and continued. "You are lucky, Lohl Ch'la. You can die with your name intact."

He struggled to speak. "What...is...your...name? I...deserve...that."

"I suppose you do. I have many names. The one that you would recognize the most is...Voxan."

"I...remember." He started to lose feeling in his entire body. Numbness surrounded him.

So this is what death was like. Endless silence.

Unless that silence included a voice. A voice that bridged the gap between realms. The voice that told him that death was endless time. Her voice. The angelic voice he fell in love with. The one that would now be with him forever.

Lohl formed a smile on his face.

My Ciranna...

New Republic shuttle Space Run en route to the Vesper system

"You've been silent, Corran. What are you thinking?"

Corran looked over at Luke in the pilot's chair and chuckled. "And here I thought a Master Jedi wouldn't need to ask that question."

Luke frowned. "I'm no Master yet, Corran. I'm not omniscient."

"So I've been told." Corran paused and asked Luke, "Do you remember having any nightmares as a kid growing up on Tatooine?"

Taken back by the question a bit, Luke searched his memory. "I guess I did. The one that I can remember was being stranded in the middle of the desert. No food. No water. Just me, the two suns, and the sand. Of course, on Tatooine, a nightmare was considered having an adventure."

"Except in your case, you woke up and had your adventure for real."

"You could say that. Where are you going with this?"

"Nowhere. I was just remembering how my father would tell me all of his horror stories from his work. Murderers, thieves, spice dealers. I always had the urge to defeat them all when I grew up. I wasn't scared of them. On Corellia, the murders were the garden variety political kind. Simple blaster shots to the head or poison. Nothing too elaborate. But, when my father would tell me stories of Skarce Voxan, those kept with me. I would have nightmares that Voxan would come after me. He would tear me from limb to limb with his bare hands when he caught me. And he would be smiling the entire time. I never pictured Voxan as a hideous monster. To me he was a normal looking everyday human. A person who you wouldn't think of when they passed you by. Sometimes, those monsters are the scariest."

Luke reflected. "I imagine that's how Palpatine looked to the galaxy when he was just the Chancellor. Until he showed his true face, nobody was the wiser. Including my father." Luke paused as he watched Corran dive into deep thought. "Are you going to be all right with this case now?"

Corran shook himself out of his thoughts and eyed Luke with a skeptical glare. "Yes, Master, I'll be fine. I'm a big boy now. I know that nightmares can't hurt you."

"Unless you allow them to. I've lived out a few nightmares of my own for real."

Corran sighed. "I'm sorry, Luke. I didn't mean to belittle your..."

"I know you didn't. And I'm all right with it."

"I can tell. You did squirm when Karrde talked about Vader."

"Ok, Corran, do you need me to tell you a Voxan story so we can both regress at the same time?" They both laughed.

Luke then asked seriously, "Do you really think Voxan is involved?"

"If he is, he has one hell of a secret to a long life."

"Maybe it's a relative. A son, perhaps?"

"I can't even imagine Voxan reproducing."

Luke shrugged. "It happens to the best of us. And the worst. Look at Han now."

Corran laughed. "Oh, yes. Who would have thought that a smuggler like him could ever be a family man."

"Could be worse. For instance, it could be you someday."

Corran shook his head. "Funny you should mention that. Mirax has started talking about it."

Luke gave his attempt at a devious smile. "Oh, really."

"I guess the kidnaping ordeal gave her a sense of family preservation. Me? I'm worried about my sanity preservation if I'm to bring my own offspring into the galaxy."

"I think you'll do fine with your children, Corran."

"You're too kind, Master."

"I said you'd be fine with your children. With anyone else's they'd be lucky to survive a few hours with you."

"Thanks. And what about you? When are you going to continue the Skywalker line?"

"I think Leia has that covered."

"No, those twins are going to have the Solo name."

"And having the Skywalker name would be even more pressure to live up to. Besides, you have to have a wife first before you have kids."

"You must be holding out for someone, then."

"What? You're crazy. When would I ever have time for that? Who in this galaxy could put up with me?"

Corran raised one brow at Luke and smiled.

Luke cried, "No, it's not Mara, Corran. That woman has more problems than she knows what to do with. She ignores all of them and keeps to herself. That was how she was taught by Palpatine."

"Oh, don't give me that again, Luke. Mara's made amends with her past. She stopped trying to kill you, didn't she?"

"The jury's still out on that."

"She cares about you, Luke," Corran stated seriously.

"How can you tell? Her emotions are so well blocked that even I can't read them."

"Don't use the Force to look for them. Listen to her words. Watch her actions. You know, she asked me to look after you when she left your Academy."

"Because there was nothing new I could teach her."

"You better make sure that was the true reason."

Luke sighed heavily and finally said, "I'm not ready, Corran. And neither is she."

An alert sounded on the console and before Corran could attend to it, he said, "Fair enough." He checked the alert. "Ah, we have a message coming in."

"Odds are it's either a wife, a sister, or a Chief of State."

"Uh...none of the above. Luke, this message has no source data."

Luke sat up straight in his seat. "Anonymous?"

"Pretty much."

"Can't you boost the receipt signal?"

"Not with this equipment. The Rouges might have had been able to."

"Record the data anyway. Maybe Ghent can look over it later."

Corran said, "Will do. All right, who are you and what do you want?" He pressed the receive button.

The holoprojector showed an image of an elder man, at least in his seventies or eighties. He was standing near a kitchen counter in his bed robes. He looked like he was holding a piece of flimsi. He breathed once and started reading off the flimsi..

"My name is Lohl Ch'la. I am with the person you are seeking in reference to the murders on Nal Hutta. He wishes to give you a message. What was done on Nal Hutta was only the beginning. Black Sun is an organization that has not fully paid it's price for the countless crimes it has committed. I intend to rectify this. I will not stop until the last remaining member of Black Sun and it's lesser form, Black Nebula, is eliminated. No one can stop me. This includes the Jedi." The old man stopped to wipe his brow. He continued reading. "Do not interfere with my goal, or I will add the Jedi to my list. Even they have been known to go back on their promises. Heed my warning." The old man stopped reading and the image disappeared.

Luke and Corran looked at each other with curious interest.

Corran finally said, "Well...that was different."

"There was no source data on this?"

"None. But, we may not need it."

"Why's that?"

"He gave us a name."

"A name that could easily be found on the HoloNet."

Corran turned to log on to the HoloNet and started typing in variants of the name, Lohl Ch'la and found several entries.

"Could we narrow that down a bit?"

Corran cross referenced the name with Black Sun. They found one.

"Good thinking, Corran."

"I do my best. Hmm...looks like he was an ex accountant. We can rule out another Vigo. This was before the Clone Wars by almost a decade. He literally was in charge of the money. He wrote the checks and paid the credits. All under false distribution. Quite an elaborate system, actually."

"What does it say after that?"

"Oh boy. He turned on them. He went to the Jedi Council and turned over evidence. They put some away, too. Of course, only minor players. They could never get enough to smear a Vigo."

"Naturally. Sounds like a mission for Skarce Voxan."

"He never got to him. Says here that Ch'la went into a Jedi program. The Deponent Security Program? Ever heard of it?"

"No. But, I'm guessing that's the last entry. Ch'la must have disappeared after that."

Corran checked. "Yes. For thirty years. Then he reappeared on Lianna. Right about the same time when a group of Vigo killed themselves."

"And with Black Sun's data destroyed and their leaders gone, Ch'la was free. And for all intents and purposes, I'm willing to bet he didn't just reappear on Lianna. He was already there."

"Under an alias."

"Pretty much defines deponent. Is there anymore?"

"Pretty normal after that. He gained his name back. Aw..he married not long after the pact. No kids. Smart man. Lived pretty quietly as an account in Yadaria City. Oh, great Tarkin's Ghost. His wife died last year of Pariak's Disease." Corran took a moment. "Well, he's with her now."

Luke questioned, "What makes you think he's dead?"

"Didn't you see him sweating?"

"Yes, but I chalked that up to old age."

"Not even age can make you sweat that progressively. It was getting worse by the end of the message. My guess is the killer poisoned him. And if I had to guess the type of poison..."

"Enital," Luke followed Corran's thought. "That's pretty tame considering his last batch of kills."

"The killer saw revenge in Rousch. He may have seen redemption in Ch'la. Admiring him for escaping Black Sun and creating a life afterwards."

"Why send this directly to us?"

"I'm afraid we've been found, Luke. This guys now knows where we are and where we're going. I'd like to know how in a Hoth's winter that happened."

Luke considered. "Would Meeko have leaked it?"

"Not possibly. He didn't know we were going to Vesper. And the Hutts would have him highly protected and watched. Especially since he was planning on excluding the Hutts in the deal of the decade." Corran shifted gears for a moment to say, "By the way, I must commend you on keeping the data that we found a special spice away from Karrde."

"We don't know much about that yet, or even if it has anything to do with this. How is Ch'la connected to this? He was just someone who succeeded in getting out of a bad situation."

Corran offered. "Ch'la wrote up the checks for Black Sun. He was in charge of the petty credits. The kind that can't be traced. He could have personally handed credits to Voxan himself."

"Savor the irony. If Ch'la could identify Voxan..."

"He would be a liability."

"But why after so many years?"

Corran's face darkened. "There is a possibility that we haven't considered. I hate to say it with your recent brush with the Emperor Part Two, but what if Voxan had been cloned?"

"That's a depressing thought. That question leads to who would have a set of Spaarti cylinders lying around. And the only lead to that may be already dead on Lianna."

"I can alert Yadaria City security to look into that." After he sent his contact information, Corran sat back and breathed out heavily. "I can't believe we are actually tracking the most notorious hit man in

this galaxy's history."

"We've fought and defeated worse than him." Luke then felt a strong sense of doubt in Corran.

"What is it, Corran?"

"Nothing, Master. And don't try prying again."

"I wouldn't dream of it." After a beat, Luke asked seriously, "If you want to be reassigned..."

"No, Luke, I don't," Corran snapped.

"This doesn't have anything to do with your nightmares, does it?"

"No, Luke. And stop analyzing me. I'm fine. I just want to know more. Black Sun's connection to this. Motive for wanting to kill every member of Black Sun. What does the enhanced spice have to do with this? I have to know, Luke. I inherited that urge from Valin Horn."

"I know, Corran." Luke stared ahead at the molted starlines through the viewscreen. They were headed to Vesper to speak to an historian of Black Sun history. "Something tells me you will have your answers."

* * * * *

Chapter Four

The planetary system of Vesper - The home of T'ryas Dane

"Are you sure this is the place?" Corran asked Luke as he came up beside him after he paid the air-taxi.

"Unless Karrde's coordinates are incorrect."

Corran checked the datapad again. "They're not. Does this look like the home of a former Black Sun employee to you?"

"He's probably using it for obscurity." Luke stared at the run-down shack that stood before him. It was well outside of the city perimeters. "Looks like the perfect hiding place."

"Right. This would be the last place anybody would look. Black Sun certainly didn't leave any kind of severance pay. I don't know, Luke. Don't know what we can find here."

Luke stated calmly as if he were talking to one of his students, "It has been my experience that looks can be deceiving. Come on, let's get this over with."

The two men approached a rusted door that looked like it would fall down with so many cracks in the permacrete. Luke chimed the alert. It took a few moments before the door slid open with a shrieking metal on metal sound. In the doorway stood an elderly man of at least a century old. He had wrinkled skin, his head bent down at the neck from back problems, and he walked with a cane. He wore the thickest spectacles that Luke had ever seen. Before either of the them could greet him, the man spoke first.

"You Karrde's men?"

Corran answered, "We're not his men. But, we are in need of your assistance."

Luke spoke their greeting. "I am Jedi Master Luke Skywalker and this is Corran Horn. I assume you are T'ryas Dane."

"All my life. So far. I wait for you since Karrde tell me you were coming. I was busy digging up old holovids from my old employer, Black Sun. Come in." He turned back inside as Luke and Corran followed. Luke detected an accent that was definitely not Coruscanti. His speech pattern was more relative to a Neimoidian with a higher pitch.

The inside was not any better looking than the outside. Pieces of flimsi, broken equipment, and other nondescript debris were scattered randomly. They came through a small kitchen off of an even smaller hallway. T'ryas ended up in a small room beyond the kitchen.

As Luke entered, he muttered to Corran, "And I thought the Falcon was a mess."

Corran added, "I've seen garbage mashers cleaner than this." He stopped in front of T'ryas within

definite earshot and quickly said, "But, it's still lovely."

"It is not much, but is suitable. Here, sit." They sat on an old sofa that had seen better days as T'ryas stood. The man said, "I'm afraid I don't have refreshment."

Luke said, "That's all right. Thank you." On the other side of the room, he spotted a large shelf full of nothing but holovids. They were too numerous to count, but Luke estimated at least five hundred. "Are those all holovids of Black Sun?"

"Oh, yes. I collected them after the suicide pact. I had access to them in their headquarters on Coruscant. There are vids of secret meetings, unofficial transcripts of various cases, and many other sensitive materials. They were all placed in my protection. After Xizor died Black Sun never fully recovered. Even the Black Nebula didn't last long."

Luke and Corran gave a knowing glance since they knew who essentially ended Black Nebula. Luke asked, "How did you end up out here on Vesper?"

"I gathered all the incriminating evidence and took off to the farthest and most obscure system I could find."

"Mission accomplished," Corran noted.

T'ryas seemed to ignore him. "Yes, everything you want to know about Black Sun is on that shelf. Karrde sometimes contacts me for information and pays handsomely. He seemed to believe that I could help you too. Do not worry, I am charging this through Karrde."

"That's great," Corran quipped.

T'ryas leaned forward on his cane. "I have suspicion this is about murders on Nal Hutta a few days ago."

Corran snapped, "How did you know that?"

"I do have HoloNet. I'm not fully out of touch here."

"Of course not," Luke said. "We are looking for something about an unofficial employee. An assassin. One who we believe may be connected to the murders."

"There is much on assassins on the vids. Mostly payments made to rogues. What is assassin's name?"

Corran stated, "Skarce Voxan."

The old man's eyes popped from behind the thick glasses, which made them look as large as plates. "Voxan? You really think he has anything to do with this? He would be so old by now. Older than me even." He chuckled.

Luke asked, "Would you have any vids with him on it?"

"Hmm...Voxan was hard to capture. Never did business on premises. Except there was one time he did come to be paid and receive instruction."

Corran said, "That would be rare."

"If memory serves, I believe his next assignment had to be told in person."

"What was it?" Corran asked.

T'ryas looked embarrassed. "I don't remember. But, I find vid for you." He went to the large shelf and for the next several minutes, the old man searched frantically for the correct holovid. In between his failures, he expressed his frustration in calls of, "No. Not this one. Ah, here...no."

Corran eventually leaned into Luke and muttered, "I think Mirax can decide on what dress to wear out faster than he can find a vid."

Luke replied, "You must have been absent when I was teaching about patience at the Academy."

Finally, T'ryas exclaimed, "Ahh, yes. Here it is." He went over to an ancient model of holoprojector that Luke had last seen in an Anchorhead junk shop. T'ryas announced, "I'm not sure of quality. I do not think Voxan can be seen. Even when he knew of recording, he disguised himself or made sure his image was obscure. He was smart fellow."

"And sick one, too," Corran added.

T'ryas said sadly, "Yes, I know." He inserted the vid in the projector and there was a stuttering blue-white image of a small office. When it cleared, they could see two men sitting opposite each other

at a small conference table. The holocam must have been in the high corner of the ceiling due to the overhead view of the men. The man farthest from them had light brown hair wearing a professional suit. The image was grainy, but they could make out a Black Sun insignia on his suit pocket. It was too unfocused for them to identify the man. The man closest to them had his back to the camera. All that could be seen of him was his dark tunic worn tight and the back of his black hair. This had to be Skarce Voxan.

T'ryas hit the pause button as he raised the volume. "Is not good sound."

"What is this? Where are they?" Corran questioned.

"This is, I believe, Conference Room B."

"What are they doing there?" Corran continued.

"Is better to find out nature of talk by listening, I think."

"Took the words out of my mouth, T'ryas," Luke uttered and eying Corran.

T'ryas hit play and the men's conversation began.

The Black Sun rep said, "It's not a question of accomplishment. We could all see the results of your mission and my clients are pleased."

"But...", Voxan said in a surprisingly soft even tone.

"But...did you have to attract the attention of the HoloNet?"

"You're questioning my methods?" Voxan stated.

"I'm not. And my clients don't care how the job is done." The rep leaned on the table closer to Voxan. "What they do care about is unwanted attention. They need their privacy for a reason. They believe that is part of your payment."

"Don't give me that. What I did will never be linked back to them. I made sure of that. As I always do. If they don't feel confident with me, they can find someone else."

"It's not that. You just made it so...messy."

"The messier the better."

"I must say that does make you very efficient. Despite your...interests in your targets, shall we say, you are one kriffing good assass..."

Voxan slammed his hand down on the permasteel table. "Two things. One, don't ever describe my work in the open. Especially when there's a holocam in the room. Second...let's watch the swearing."

The image of the rep was too grainy to see, but Luke would have guessed that the man gulped.

"Very well."

Voxan exclaimed, "This meeting was not my idea. I don't like doing this in person, as you and your clients well know. Where's my payment?"

The rep reached inside his suit to produce a small flimsi packet. He slid it towards Voxan.

Voxan picked it up and said, "You know you always use my untraceable credit accounts for this. Why was this meeting necessary?"

"Because of your next assignment. Look in the packet."

Voxan did and found another piece of flimsi, which he read. "This is it? All of them?"

"That is what it says."

"This is about that trial a few years back, isn't it?"

"I cannot confirm that."

Voxan chuckled. "Sure it is. Otherwise you wouldn't have given it to me in person. I knew retribution would be coming to them eventually."

"We don't consider it retribution. This is an elimination of a problem."

"I don't eliminate anything. I clean up things after they eliminate themselves. Where can this problem be found?"

"Actually, we're not sure. We finally have some leads after two years. You'll have to decide which is the better one. That is part of your problem. The Jedi hid them well."

"Won't be a problem at all, then." Voxan stood. "We're done talking. This will be the last time for a live meeting. Use my account next time with the same networks. They're all encrypted and secure."

"We couldn't take that chance on this one. The trial was highly public. You understand."

Voxan nodded. "Oh, and another thing. Make sure that vid is destroyed."

"It will be done."

"Make sure, or if I see my face on the HoloNet from this meeting I'll know which problem will need cleaning next. You understand."

"Y...yes, Skarce."

Suddenly, Voxan grabbed the rep by the collar and drug him across the table. He spoke in an icy tone. "Do not ever call me by name. Or I will be cleaning a problem in this room now." Voxan threw the man on the table and reached into his tunic for something. Voxan turned and raised his arm to throw what looked like a vibroblade directly at the holo-vid. The image ended abruptly in a field of blue-white snow.

Corran retorted, "What a cheery fellow."

"Wait!" Luke shouted. "Go back and pause right before he throws the blade."

It took a few tries, but T'ryas finally stopped it where Luke wanted. Before them was an image of Skarce Voxan's face. His hairline was balding in the front, and his brooding eyes were deeply set. He grew a cleanly shaven black goatee similar to Karrde's but more full. He was medium height. With his soft, yet demanding voice, and his plain physical looks, he didn't seem intimidating to Luke. He glanced over at Corran and saw that he was glued to the screen. It was just like he said. Someone who looked so normal could be the most intimidating.

Corran found his voice in saying, "Behold, the face of a true monster."

"He's certainly charming. Wonder what that rep meant about the Jedi hiding them well. Who is them?"

Corran said, "It's obvious, Luke. That was his next assignment. It would have to be more than one target."

"But why did the Jedi hide them?"

"The Deponent Security Program. And the trial they mentioned. That would fit."

Luke turned toward T'ryas. "Do you know anything about that?"

"Yes. Seems I remember something about it. People in Black Sun would talk about it and always cursing it." He chuckled.

Corran asked, "How did it work exactly?"

T'ryas explained, "It set up new identities for people who had to stand trial against any organization that was known to take revenge on them. Namely, Black Sun. It would give them new identities to undisclosed systems. But, the program only lasted a few years."

"What happened?" Luke asked.

"There was a whole family who were put into the program when it first started. The husband witnessed a murder committed by a Vigo. He testified and sent the Vigo to the Kessel mines. The Jedi program sent the husband and his family into the galaxy to be never heard from again."

Luke supplied with, "But Voxan found them somehow."

T'ryas said sadly, "Yes. A few years later."

Luke thought of something and asked T'ryas, "Is there a date on that vid?"

The old man took the vid out and read on the side, "It says '23."

Corran noted, "That's a year before Geonosis. Before the Clone Wars."

"When did the Deponent Program start?" Luke asked T'ryas.

"Oh, I'd say about '25, '26."

Luke figured, "And the rep said they finally got leads two years later. Voxan's next target may have been that same family who were murdered. I wish we could see the Jedi's version of the case."

"Ah," exclaimed T'ryas, "I think I can help you there. If you pardon me, I search for a vid you need to see."

As the old man went into search mode for another holo-vid, Corran nudged Luke and uttered, "You want to go out to get some lunch?"

Luke crinkled his brow and said, "Not exactly the best time, Corran."

Corran shrugged and stated, "I'm just saying we could go into the city, grab a bite to eat, come back, and he will have found the vid by then."

Luke quietly chuckled. "Or we could start that list of Black Sun enemies."

"We could count how many arguments that Han and Leia have had since their marriage."

"Oh, Corran, that project would take years. I'm sure T'ryas can find the vid before then."

As if on cue, T'ryas exclaimed, "Ah ha! I knew I had it."

"See? What is it?"

"It is recording of a HoloNet announcement by a Jedi Council member to end the Deponent Program."

"This is a recording of a Jedi?" questioned Corran.

"Yes. He describes the family's death and is very emotional."

"Emotional? Not what I pictured an Old Republic Jedi to be."

"What's the date on that?" Luke interjected.

"Uh... '22."

"A year apart?" asked Corran.

"Not exact. The vid we see with Voxan was at end of '23. This vid is dated at start of '22."

"So, it's a difference of a few months at least."

Luke said, "Let's hear what it says."

T'ryas put the vid in and as soon as the image of the Jedi appeared, Luke felt both shock and pleasant surprise.

"Obi Wan!"

Corran squinted at the image. "You sure? Looks kind of young."

Luke turned to Corran with his own version of Han's lopsided grin. "In '22, he would look younger, wouldn't he?"

Corran grinned sheepishly. "I guess so."

Luke stared at the image of a young Obi Wan Kenobi. He was in his heyday as a Jedi back then. He still wore his goatee the same way. His hair, though, was much longer in the back and was a honey-brown, not the ash-gray that Luke remembered.

T'ryas played the vid and Luke heard the voice of Obi Wan for the first time in many years.

"This is Jedi Master Obi Wan Kenobi reporting for the Jedi Council on a motion to dissolve the Deponent Security Program."

Hearing Kenobi's voice again brought back so many memories for Luke. This was the voice that would persuade him to become a Jedi, like his father before him.

You must do what you feel is right, he would tell an eighteen-year-old Tatooine farm boy decades after this recording was made. His eyes were less sad, Luke noticed. Of course they were. This was before the Clone Wars. It was also before his best friend would betray him and the Jedi. Luke shook off the his emotions and focused on Obi Wan.

"There was a tragedy that happened a standard week ago which was unforeseen as a result of the Deponent Program. The Helan family had been murdered by an unknown assailant. Ghil and Abri Helan were found dead with several burn marks and heavy contusions that suggests they were tortured before their deaths. Their fingernails had been torn off, and Abri's eyes...her eyes were gorged out. Indications are that this had been done while they were still alive. And the children..." Obi Wan paused to catch his strength. "The children...were burned to death...beyond recognition. By the position of their bodies, it has been suggested that they were burned alive. All three of them." Obi Wan swallowed. "I am reporting this event to support the dissolution of my own Deponent Program. As it has been successful in some cases, it has failed in too many others. It's weakness was in the numbers of participants. The successes involved only one or two people whom we had to displace. In the case of the Helans, we tried to displace an entire family of five. In the words of my Padawan, Anakin, we bit off more than we could chew."

"A Black Sun operative had somehow found out the undisclosed location of where the Helans went. No one in the Council knew for that purpose. I suspect the leak had been through the transit records from two years ago. It must have taken a large amount of credits to uncover that information. It points to the reason why it took this long to find them. It will have to be investigated when time permits. We already have a name of a possible assassin. However, we are now on the brink of war with the Separatists. We will have to forgo this investigation now to address the current threats against the Republic."

Obi Wan shifted in his seat and breathed out. "I wish to add a supplemental comment in retrospect of these events. I realize that this is unprecedented in submissions such as this. I need for this to be on record. I have only found out about the Helans in the past twenty-four hours. Anakin and I had just returned from a mission yesterday involving the Outbound Flight Project. I have yet to inform Anakin about the Helans' deaths. He is very emotional when it comes to death of people he knows, which clouds his focus on the Force at times. But, that is another matter."

Luke thought of how hard it would have been for Obi Wan to train his father as a teenager. Obi Wan continued.

"Whether anyone has heard of the Helans or not, I need for it to be said that they were the among the bravest people I had ever known. They were thrust into a bad situation at the wrong time. They accepted what needed to be done. This speaks to the evidence of their courage. They eventually paid for that courage with their lives. None of them deserved the manner of their deaths." Obi Wan sighed again.

"As a Jedi, I am taught to allow their deaths to become part of the Force. They have moved on to another plane of existence. I will mourn them as a Jedi and let them go." Another pause. "As a human man...I cannot let go of how their deaths were dealt. I will never forget those images. That was their cost for a new life. And I played a role in getting them their new life. I will not; however, blame myself for their demise. I blame the organization that called for their deaths out of vengeance. That is not the Jedi way, but it still happens in this galaxy. Perhaps the Force had a higher purpose for the Helans than being mortals in a violent society."

Obi Wan placed his forefinger under the bridge of his nose, which was a gesture that Luke had been familiar with. His mentor went on. "I will never again place innocent citizens in dangerous situations as I had many times in this program. This program places people like the Helans in risks that they should never have to face. The innocents have enough problems to worry about. Therefore, I make a motion to end the Deponent Security Program as soon as it is possible. In conclusion, it is with a heavy heart that I honor the memory of Ghil, Abri, Pap, Cho, and little Alexhi. May I greet you again within the Force. End of transmission."

The image disappeared.

Corran could tell Luke was in a temporary reminiscent daze, so he started questioning T'ryas himself. "This was broadcast over the HoloNet?"

"Yes. I think it was a closed-circuit feed."

"Why would Black Sun have a copy of something like this?"

"I don't know. It was in their collection."

"A collection that you should know what was on it. What was your position title in Black Sun, T'ryas?"

The old man straightened as much as he could and gave a smug look to say, "If there was a mess, so to speak, I was in charge of cleaning it up."

Awakened from his daze, Luke caught on to the conversation. "You mean like Internal Affairs?"

"Not exactly. I was more in charge of..."

"The custodial arts," Corran cut in.

"What?" Luke exasperated.

Corran explained his theory. "He didn't collect all of these holovids as an employee of Black Sun. He found them in the trash while he worked as a janitor for buildings on Coruscant. That vid we

just watched would have never been shown to the public. It was intended for the Jedi Council. And it would certainly not have been in the hands of Black Sun members."

Luke and Corran felt the embarrassment exuding from T'ryas Dane. Luke wanted him to admit it himself. "Is this true, T'ryas?"

The man gave a defeating sigh. "More or less. I keep higher status up for Karrde. He pays me for information on vids."

Corran glanced around the messy home. "He must not pay you much."

"What he pays me I buy food."

Corran went further. "And if he knew you were a lowly janitor with no knowledge other than the holovids, he would drop payments to you in a heartbeat."

The old man's eyes went wide again. "You not tell him?"

Luke and Corran looked at each other and Corran shrugged. Luke said, "No. We won't ruin your reputation and livelihood. I suspect you can profit well selling these vids to the right person. You did help us."

Corran stood up. "And on that cue, I think we should be leaving. Thank you, T'ryas Dane. It has been an experience."

"You are most welcome, Corran Horn. I will continue search for vids that may help you. I will contact you if I find one."

"No," Luke stated, "you'll contact Karrde. We won't let you go hungry. One thing though. Is it possible for us to keep these two holovids?"

"Of course, of course," T'ryas chimed. Then he formed a mischievous smirk. "For a small profit."

New Republic Shuttle Space Run

"Even the Jedi have been known to go back on their promises."

"Huh?" asked Corran as he was preparing launch procedures.

"I was just reciting his words. The ones our killer gave Lohl Ch'la to read. I wonder what he has against the Jedi?"

"Now that we know the Jedi have an indirect link to the trial and a few of Voxan's targets, I'm thinking it could be a distant relative of the Helans."

"And this relative would have the skills and knowledge of an assassin?"

"They could learn. Could be why it's taken so long to start mowing down Black Sun Vigos."

"Lohl wasn't a Vigo. And he had nothing to do with the Helan trial. I read that bio of him you got off the HoloNet. He entered the Deponent Program in late '25. He was already on Lianna with a new name before the time of the Helans' murder. And a relative just learning about the ways of an assassin? You can't just one day decide to learn that. You have to live it first. There would have to be more meaning to it than simple revenge. That's usually why acts of revenge fail so often. They forget to dig that second grave."

Corran put in, "And you can scratch off Voxan training someone to take his place. One of the stories my father told me was once Voxan did have a partner. He made a drastic mistake that could have costed Voxan his life. Voxan punished him by gutting out his stomach and feeding him to a herd of gundarks. The ex-partner was still alive when the gundarks feasted on him."

"He's making Palpatine look like an Ewok."

"I keep telling you, we may be in over our heads on this one. Biting off more than we can chew, like your father said."

"If this is the same person, or the same type of person..."

"Or the same type of monster. I got the feeling that Obi Wan knew exactly where to start his search. The problem was that a pesky war broke out, as well as watching his best friend and student go down the Dark Side path. He never had the chance to look into Voxan further."

"I wonder if there were any reports of Voxan's murders after the Helans?"

"Probably. It's all speculative, like Karrde said. We could never prove anything."

"Maybe. I still think we have the advantage if we encounter someone like Voxan. We have the

Force. He doesn't."

"And how do we know that?"

"He threw that man on the table. And he threw the blade at the camera. If he had Force powers, why didn't he use them?"

"Maybe he didn't want it known?"

"No."

"Luke, this man made an art out of killing. This is insanity that you are not prepared for."

"I am the Jedi Master. I believe I can be prepared for anything."

"You sure about that?"

Luke gave a long pause. He muttered in a weak voice, "Not lately."

Corran made himself busy for a moment to blast out of Vesper's atmosphere and into orbit. "Any ideas where we're headed?"

Luke said, "Keep it on low sublight around Vesper for now while we decide."

There was a long silence between them for several minutes before Corran said, "Seeing Obi Wan brought you back to reality, didn't it?"

"Is it that obvious?"

"Well, seeing as how you paid way too much for those vids to T'ryas I'd say yes."

"We needed the Voxan holo for identification. It could very well be the only image of him that exists today. And the other holo was special to me."

"Didn't pick you as the sentimental type, Luke."

"As I always say, I'm full of surprises. Obi Wan was a wise man."

"No argument there."

"He was the one who introduced me to the Force."

"I know. That's not what's bothering you though."

"See, I did teach you well. I wouldn't say bother. It's more introspective than anything. Can you imagine how much more different the Jedi would be today if Obi Wan hadn't died?"

"As I understand history, he sacrificed himself so you could escape. If he hadn't, we wouldn't have had any Jedi today. Including you."

"I know. Just seeing Obi Wan in his early days made me think of what little the Jedi of today have accomplished. Sometimes...I doubt if I am the right person to lead."

"Why, you ignorant little kunta. Can you tell me of another Jedi who could have done any better than you're doing now? And in such short time? You are stronger than you believe, Jedi Master. Every one of your students look up to you. Especially after recent events. The older Jedi look up to you, too." Corran took a moment to add, "That includes me."

Luke smiled gently and tried to say, "Corran, I..."

"Do you know what I think of when I'm faced with tough decisions or seemingly impossible situations? I ask myself, what would Luke do? Your teachings during my time at your Academy helped me get through what happened to me and Mirax in the past year. More than you will ever know."

There was more silence until Luke expressed, "Thank you, Corran."

"Don't mention it."

"No, I really mean thank you."

"And I really mean don't mention it. If word of my confession to you gets to Rouge Squadron, I will have to behead you."

"Understood. Now, we'd better take a look at that list of current Vigos and figure out our killer's next move."

Corran suddenly dripped sarcasm. "Gee, it would be so nice to consult an ex-assassin on this. What better way to gain perspective on another assassin's motives?"

"Actually, I think it is time to consult Mara on this."

"What? Not acting defensive with the mention of Mara Jade? What have you done with the real Luke Skywalker?"

"Shut up. I would think my self-doubt would have given my true identity away."

"Relax, Luke. That's just who you are. Nobody can take that away from you."

"You don't mind if I talk to her here?"

"Why would I mind? Besides, now that your confidence is high, you can lower it again by talking to Mara."

Luke sat in front of the holoprojector. He placed the call to the Jade's Fire. Within a few moments, a ten-inch blue-white image of Mara Jade sitting at her ship's controls appeared.

"Yes? Ah, Farmboy. Karrde told me you might be contacting me. I read your case. Chasing down a killer of scum in the galaxy. Not enough action at your Academy anymore?"

Luke ignored her quips and said, "Hi, Mara. We do need your input on this. There's more information to add."

Mara sighed and groaned. "I knew it. Look, Skywalker, I'm not going to stop what I'm doing to go traipsing around the galaxy to investigate the deaths of trash."

"Mara, we have a vigilante making his own justice."

"Good for him."

"And he's using a lightsaber. A Jedi needs to investigate this."

"Then what do you need me for?"

Luke shut his eyes, cringing that he played right into her hands with his phrasing.

She went on. "You already have Corran Horn. He's used to investigating."

"So are you."

"That's not the only reason you need me, is it?"

"Well...no. You may have input that neither I nor Corran can provide."

"Let me guess. Your killer is showing skills of an assassin."

"How did you know?" Corran asked from the pilot's seat.

Mara shrugged. "I read your report."

Corran burst out, "How did you get a copy of our report? We didn't leave one with Karrde."

Mara's image flashed on Luke. "Wanna take that one, Farmboy?"

Luke admitted sheepishly, "I sent Mara a copy after we left Karrde. Just as a precaution."

Corran smiled and turned to look out ahead through the viewscreen. He added a barely audible, "Uh huh."

Luke addressed Mara's image. "What else could you tell from the report?"

"Do you know how to kill a WeeQuay instantly? Their hearts are located in their lower abdomen. Right where your killer stuck them."

Corran called out, "What about the Defel? He couldn't have gotten that lucky."

"He didn't," Mara replied. "Meeko said there was a flash of light. Probably a cave strobe that the killer adjusted for one quick burst. You get that near a Defel and they go blind."

Luke added in realization, "Because a wraith bends light to appear invisible."

Mara said, "If you supply too much light waves, there's nothing to bend."

"So this guy is an assassin," Corran announced.

"I wouldn't say that. He's a professional, for sure. But, this guy is out for vengeance. Plus, assassins don't take the time to torture their targets. Especially, a Vigo. I've checked my sources, and there are no contracts out on any Vigo, former or current, right now."

Luke said, "The problem is that we don't know which Vigo would be next."

"The last Vigo was on Nal Hutta, right?"

"Actually, there's been another death since. Probably wasn't officially connected to the murders on Nal Hutta. We know it's the same killer."

"How do you know?"

"He had the last victim send us a message. The victim read off a message to us."

"That's strange. Who was the victim? Another Vigo? No, that would have been on the HoloNet."

Corran answered, "He was nobody. Someone who spit in Black Sun's face fifty years ago and got away with it. We're not sure how he's connected yet."

Luke added, "And Mara, he wasn't tortured. He was poisoned."

Mara nodded. "Means the killer considered his death an honor. No pain. What did the message say?"

Luke said, "It was a warning. He'll -go on killing members of Black Sun and no one can stop him. Not even the Jedi."

"He mentioned the Jedi?"

"Yes. We just got new data that links them."

"Where was this victim poisoned?"

"Lianna."

Mara seemed to consider something and then ordered, "Then head to Rhen Var. There's a former Vigo living there."

Corran started, "How do you..."

Luke stopped him. "Corran, it's Mara. Doesn't that seem too easy for him to announce his next target that close to his last one?"

"It does," Mara said. "I'd be careful. He's baiting you. The mentioning of the Jedi might as well have been an invitation."

Luke dared to say, "You know, Mara, with your sources and your background, you could..."

"Stop right there, Skywalker. I'll be glad to give you some input now and then, but I'm not interrupting my duties to Karrde."

"Did Karrde tell you that we have a name?"

"You have a suspect already?"

"More like a lead. It was Karrde who gave us the name. I'm sure he'll understand if you wanted to help us."

"Who says I want to? And a name wasn't in your report."

"It's not a name I wanted to announce even in an encrypted report."

"You're safe with my encryption codes. What's the name?"

"Skarce Voxan."

Ever since Luke met Mara Jade, he had only seen her rendered speechless a few times. This was one of them. Her face was blank and silent. Luke could forget trying to pry into her mind without consequences. She fell so silent that he had to ask, "Mara?"

After a beat, she looked at him and said, "I'm in. I'll meet you in the Rhen Var system."

* * * * *

Chapter Five

Rhen Var spaceport

Luke and Corran met Mara Jade in her newly acquired star ship, the Jade's Fire. Luke had seen it before on a trial run she gave him a few months ago. He was positive that she made modifications since his tour that she couldn't wait to brag about. There would also be modifications that she would rather keep hidden. They each sat in what would have been the lounge area in most models of the same ship. There was no such luxury in Mara Jade's personal ship. There wasn't even any food. Luke had to bring along his own rations since he had been starved. Luke shared with Corran some of the rations. Mara sat opposite them and touched no food.

Corran began. "All right, what do you know about Skarce Voxan?"

Mara replied, "He's a legend in the world of assassins. His techniques were famous. Palpatine even incorporated some of his methods into my training regime."

Corran gnarled, "You mean like how to mutilate your targets while they're still alive?"

Mara shifted in her seat uncomfortably. "Not those methods. Voxan used infiltration and evasive maneuvers that are still being used today. I knew him by reputation. I still use his layers of channels for my own funds."

Luke questioned, "And that's all public knowledge?"

Mara stated, "Not exactly. When Palpatine took over as Emperor, he obtained possession of the Old Republic's records and data. That included large files on Skarce Voxan, who it seems they were about ready to hunt down and bring to justice."

Corran added in, "But a little war broke out that scattered what was left of the Jedi to the far corners of the galaxy."

"And nobody cared after that."

Luke speculated, "I'm sure Palpatine used Voxan to his advantage."

Mara corrected, "No. Palpatine may have adopted Voxan's techniques but he would have never used him on an actual job. That's what I was for. Besides, the Emperor already had a right hand assassin at his control."

Luke muttered in agreement, "Vader."

Mara went on. "Palpatine wasn't vain enough to hire a finely tuned serial killer. Voxan was a loose cannon that Palpatine would have never been able to control. Voxan's results were too messy and public. He drew too much attention to himself. Palpatine didn't want that kind of exposure."

Corran sniffed. "Of course not. He wanted to do all the major killing himself."

Mara grumbled. "I'm not defending his actions, but contrary to popular belief, Palpatine wasn't as sadistic as the galaxy believes. He did have his moments with certain traitors."

"He blew up a planet of several million of people, Mara," Corran countered.

"That wasn't Palpatine's decision. Tarkin was acting on his own. He was more sadistic than Palpatine was with that weapon. Palpatine wanted to test it on a uninhabited system first. He was certainly not on Voxan's sadistic level." She paused and uttered, "There is a saying among assassins. Violence perceived is violence achieved. If your target thinks you're going to inflict extreme pain on them then they will believe it will come and you get whatever results you need out of them. Voxan threw that philosophy out. When I...did a job, it was professional and quick. I didn't stay to torture my targets for hours on end like Voxan did."

Luke could tell Mara was getting edgier than usual and he changed the subject. "Were there any cases involving Voxan after the Clone Wars?"

Mara took a moment to cool and answered, "No. He essentially disappeared after that."

Corran slipped in, "The myths didn't end."

"I suppose they didn't. I suspect that anytime a crime scene was found with tortured victims or an unexplained murder, Voxan was the likely culprit. Voxan became immortal through the threats of Security Officers across the galaxy. 'Better wise up or Voxan will come for you.' Trust me, Voxan, the man, was gone."

"How would you know?" asked Luke before he bit off a piece of freeze-dried ronto.

Mara sighed as if in defeat. "Because I couldn't find him. I was fifteen and Palpatine gave me my first solo mission." She considered. "It was more of a test than a mission now that I look back on it. I searched the ends of the galaxy. To parts known and unknown."

Corran prodded, "You never found Skarce Voxan."

"No. And I can't believe you two think you have. This killer of yours is calling attention to himself on purpose. He's inviting you to follow him. He wants to be caught eventually. Of course, he has some murders to deal out first."

Luke asked, "You think that's his goal?"

Mara stated, "I'm not sure what his end game is. I've read your report so far. The pattern is not Voxan's style."

Corran gave his own subject change. "The Chief Of State gave us a list of former Black Sun and

Black Nebula Vigos. There is confirmation that one lives here on Rhen Var."

"Yes," Mara acknowledged. "If my memory serves, he lives in the hills of Mount Eonin."

Luke smiled and shook his head.

"What?" Mara caught his unknown humor.

"It's just ironic considering who lived and trained here over three millennia ago."

"Yes. Well, there won't be any great Jedi to help you on this one. Only their ghosts remain." She took a second to see Luke and Corran sitting back on the comfortable lounge seats and she barked, "Are we ready? We need to speak to Rhen Var's Chief of Security first."

Corran frowned. "Not Dahn Cizler?"

"The one and the same."

Corran stood up. "That Zuulan doesn't know his antennae from his rumpus."

"He hasn't changed since your CorSec days, Corran. He's annoying but he gets the job done."

She got up and lightly kicked Luke. "You done stuffing your face, Farmboy? Time for work. Oh, and I suggest you put on something warmer. We're not in Tatooine anymore." Mara left the lounge for the outside ramp.

When she was gone, Corran cocked his head at Luke. "Charming, isn't she?"

"As a Tuskin Raider." Luke stretched himself as he stood and said, "Better get our thermals out of the storage."

Corran grumbled. "A thousand and one systems in the galaxy to hide and this ex-Vigo picks the coldest one."

"It's not as cold as Hoth."

"Good thing we're not going there. You just might meet up with that one-armed Wampa."

Luke laughed. "Yeah, he might want revenge."

"And here I thought Wampa don't set out for revenge. Something against their beliefs?"

"That's the Jedi."

"Oh, yeah. I keep forgetting."

Luke and Corran fetched their thermal suits and Mara met them at the bottom of their shuttle's ramp wearing several thick garments with a wide hood. They started walking the path to the main security building in the frigid wind. The whiteness of the snow-covered rocky terrain almost blinded them. After walking the path for a few minutes, Mara suddenly stopped dead in her tracks as she looked to her left at the other ships docked in the spaceport.

"Oh no," she muttered.

Luke followed the direction she was looking and he noticed the ships and the insignia that was plastered on each one. HoloNet News.

Corran saw the ships as well and he grunted, "Just what we need. A media circus."

Mara figured, "I'm willing to bet that the list of ex-Vigos that Mon Mothma gave you was public knowledge. And if HoloNet reporters know who's on that list, so does your killer."

Corran added, "I can't see Cizler leaking it. He may be scum but he has no love for the press."

"Agreed," Mara admitted. "Come on. Let's face the music."

They reached the building and the guards asked them for their ident cards. Luke and Mara showed theirs and Corran flashed his quickly. The guards let them pass and they entered. Luke came up beside Corran and muttered, "You'd think they would recognize an outdated CorSec ident card."

"I was counting on the fact that they wouldn't. Rouge Squadron doesn't have official ident cards and I can't exactly go around with my Hey-I'm-Really-A-Jedi card," Corran whispered back.

Mara uttered, "Just be glad you belong to no one."

Corran corrected her, "Uh, the Wife card may argue with that."

Mara snipped with no small amount of sarcasm, "Marriage. Ain't it the life."

They reached the entrance to the main precinct and they opened the doors.

Within seconds of their entrance, they were bombarded with several HoloNet reporters who instantly crowded them and started firing questions at a rapid pace.

"Jedi Skywalker, are you here to follow up on the ex-Vigo murders on Nal Hutta?"

"Are you here to protect the ex-Vigo who lives here on Rhen Var?"

"There is a rumor that a lightsaber was used in the murder. Can you comment on if there's a rouge Jedi on the loose?"

"Is the former Emperor's Hand helping you with the investigation?"

Each of them ignored the questions as they tried to squeeze their way through to the Chief's office. They were still struggling when a large reptilian humanoid came bursting out of his office. He had grey-green skin and there were small antennae protruding from his forehead. His face was roughened like tight leather with two slits in the center of his face to form his nose. The Zuulan Chief of Rhen Var Security, Dahn Cizler, shouted with a scruffy voice, "Quiet! Now, I told you people that you will have your answers soon. Just not now."

The reporters continued shouting their questions.

Cizler cried, "Right now there is no comment. All I can tell you is that we have secured the former Vigo as a precaution. This investigation is still ongoing. Let us do our work and you will have your answers as soon as we have them. Now, let these people through. Thank you!"

The reporters loosened their group enough so that Luke, Corran, and Mara could pass. As they did, Mara was tapped on the shoulder. She turned around to see a human male with perfectly groomed gray hair thrusting a HoloMic in her face.

"Mara Jade, the former Emperor's Hand. I wonder what you have to do with all of this."

Mara gave a sigh. "Mas Adema. I thought I smelled a sewer rat around here. As Cizler said, no comment."

Mas grabbed her arm and said, "Come on, your appearance here only proves the rumor."

Mara eyed his hand on her coat and then gave him a deadly green-eyed look. He immediately let go. She then asked, "What rumor?"

"Don't play with me, Jade. You know who the suspect is. The most notorious assassin in the galaxy's history."

"We can't confirm that, Mas. Now move along and find a burning home or a pet mongrel stuck in a tree," Mara spat back.

"How about an exclusive, Jade? We can intertwine it with your history. 'Ex Assassin Chases The Voxan Myth'."

"No thanks. Excuse me," Mara said as she pulled away from him.

As they entered Cizler's office, Luke took off his thermal helmet and went over to ask Mara, "What was that about?"

"Mas Adema...the most famous HoloNet reporter. He's been after my story ever since he reported the death of the Emperor."

Cizler shut the door and he invited the three of them to sit and he sat behind his massive desk. His weight made the chair creak. "Well, as I live and breath through my gills, it's Corran Horn. Can't remember the last time you came around my system."

Corran unfastened the helmet off his thermal suit and stated, "It was when CorSec followed up on that embezzler from Ryloth. Which you didn't have anything to with, of course."

"Of course not. And Mara Jade is a part of this investigation now. Mon Mothma forgot to mention that."

Mara said, "I'm sort of a last minute addition. First off, who leaked to the press?"

Cizler replied, "Come now, Mara. You know the HoloNet reporters. They see the Master Jedi and a former CorSec officer running off to investigate a murder of a scum gangster and they salivate. Add you into the mix and they have their dream story."

Luke hurried the talk along. "You spoke to Mon Mothma? When?"

Cizler shrugged his huge green shoulders. "Couple of hours ago on Rhen Var time. She gave me specific instructions to secure the ex-Vigo. Data like that doesn't go unnoticed around here either. The press put two and two together and they've been camping out here almost right after Mon Mothma's

orders."

Corran nodded. "Playing the good little Chief and doing what the leader tells you these days, Cizler?"

"Hey, I've been more legit since those days, Horn. Besides, it's better to have a good impression now when the real leader comes into office." He looked at Luke with his version of a grin. "Right, brother?"

Suddenly, Cizler's desk comlink chirped and he clicked it on. "Yes?"

A voice of another officer spoke. "Sir, she's getting antsy. She knows they're here."

"I know, I know, Vodd. Send her in."

Luke leaned to Corran's ear and repeated, "She?"

The door shushed open and in walked a human woman about middle age or beyond. She was dressed immaculately in a New Republic Security uniform. She was average height with short-cropped dark brown hair. Her eyes were firm and her expression meant business. She addressed the new arrivals. "Lieutenant I'hela Broadwater, New Republic Security Agent."

Corran commented, "Mon Mothma is not kidding when she's sending in the NRS."

Lt. Broadwater explained, "She suggested we assist in your investigation."

Corran muttered to Luke, "Seems we're getting all kinds of help on this case."

Luke shot back, "Good thing, too. You were becoming boring."

"Ah, I'm hurt."

Mara asked I'hela, "How current is your intel on this case, Lieutenant?"

I'hela answered, "I know who and where the targets are. Former leaders of Black Sun and Black Nebula. There are approximately ten still living today. I calculated that you would come here after the death on Lianna."

Mara tested her. "What death on Lianna?"

She answered lightning quick, "Lohl Ch'la. He was a former accountant for Black Sun before the Clone Wars. He informed on them and went into a program formed by the Jedi to hide his identity. After Black Sun disbanded, he went back to the name Lohl Ch'la and married on Lianna. His wife died a year ago. He was found hours ago dead from being poisoned. I just received a crime report on the findings there."

Corran questioned, "Who authorized that report?"

"Well...you did, sir. Did you not ask the Lianna authorities to look into Lohl Ch'la's dwelling?"

Corran remembered. "I did."

Mara said, "And the Lianna authorities found Ch'la's link to Black Sun and called the NRS."

"Correct," I'hela stated. "But you already knew Ch'la was poisoned."

"Yes," Luke stated. "The killer forced him to give us a message on our shuttle."

I'hela cried, "The killer knew your comm code on the shuttle? I've been trying to contact your shuttle to catch up to you but I haven't been able to get through your encryptions."

Mara stated wryly, "Maybe you don't have updated enough equipment. The NRS is fairly new still."

"Perhaps. What did the message say?"

"Sorry, Lieutenant, but that's on a need-to-know for now," Corran exclaimed.

I'hela pleaded, "I'm just helping, sir."

Corran barked, "When we need it we'll call you. Thanks."

I'hela shook her head. "Just like a former CorSec."

Luke interjected by asking Cizler, "What kind of security do you have around the Vigo?"

"Ten guards in all. Five in and five out. Stationed at the known and possible points of entry."

Before any could reply, I'hela cut in with, "Good. We can set up a perimeter around his dwelling. I'm going to need the comm codes of your guards so that..."

Corran almost shouted, "Wait a minute! This is a joint New Republic and Jedi investigation, missy. We were appointed by Mon Mothma herself. That's fine if the NRS wants to help. Just so you

understand that this is our operation. We lay down the ground work. Understand?"

"Fine," I'hela snapped back.

Corran turned to Luke and Mara. "Now, what is our plan?"

Mara and Luke looked at each other and shrugged. Luke stated first, "Set up a perimeter around his dwelling?"

Mara said plainly to Cizler with her eyes still on Corran, " And we're going to need the comm codes of your guards."

Cizler nodded in a wide smile as Corran put his hands on his head and let out, "Perfect!"

Cizler asked, "I would suggest not taking that bulky luxury ship near Mt. Eonin. That thing is too big for the ice up there."

Mara glared at Cizler. "It's not a luxury ship."

Luke said quickly, "We can take our shuttle."

Cizler mentioned, "Do you really think all of this security around an old Vigo is necessary? I mean, I do have ten of my finest watching him."

Mara stated back, "Believe me, it won't be enough."

Inside the house of Thar Nolog

The panic had been strong after he learned about the murder of Rousch on Nal Hutta. At first, Thar thought it was revenge on Rousch alone. The fat man was an idiot and had no business being a Vigo. Once Thar learned that Rousch's guards had been killed and the Rodian, Meeko, had been left alive, Thar knew it was more than revenge. It was vengeance. If it had been a professional hit, Rousch would have been the only target and there wouldn't have been any sign of torture. That sent chills up Thar's spine. The thought of revenge and torture combined brought back too many memories for the Mon Calamarian. It reminded him of one name.

Thar spent the next days looking at holopics of his old times in Black Sun. There were several images of he and his fellow Vigo painting the Coruscanti nights red. They always considered Thar a dampener of their spirits since he avoided bars. He would find their fun elsewhere. An occasional Mon Calamari female escort certainly didn't hurt. Thar found a holopic of he and Prince Xizor. It was the day Xizor became Head Vigo. Thar saw Xizor's obsession with defeating Lord Vader years before it became destructive to their organization. By the time Thar could warn them, it was too late. Xizor and Black Sun was no more. Thar had anticipated the fall and got out early. He knew what their next act would involve. They would die before submitting to failure. And so, they did. Literally.

He was summoned to the meeting. It was an obligation. Part of his allegiance to Black Sun. Death wasn't part of Thar's allegiance. Especially death by his own hand. He could never be that loyal to anything. He skipped the meeting. He couldn't have Vistulo brandal anyway. Black Sun was in tatters. There was nothing for him now except his wealth. He packed his bare essentials along with the hefty funds he collected as a Vigo and left Coruscant under unregistered transport. He didn't care where it was going. How ironic that it's destination had also once been a place of refuge for the Jedi Ulic Qel-Droma thousands of years earlier.

Thar established his new home on the side of the mountain. Locals would recall the site as the place where Ulic trained the famous Vima Sunrider in the Jedi arts. The galaxy rolled on in turmoil around him over the years. The galaxy outside didn't matter anymore. Thar Nolog had a grand house that he loved. Even the Imperials let him be when they set up their outpost on Rhen Var. And the galaxy went on still. The Empire gave way to the New Republic. Thar had no interest in politics. He was happy. During his years as a Vigo, Thar never considered himself evil. He thought of himself to be somewhere in the middle of the moral compass. Yet, he could still see how someone could take revenge on members of Black Sun.

Thar absently reached for his necklace. On the end of the chain was the piece of metal with his name etched. His Black Sun chit. He let go of it and took his glass of frog water. He had it specially delivered every year. It also reminded him of days gone by. But the frog water was connected to a place even farther back than his days in Black Sun. Mon Calamari. He missed his home world. The

ocean water. The salty cool air. The energizing sun. The sounds of aquabirds splashing in and out of the water.

Thar could never go back.

He had his fun as a Black Sun Vigo. Giving up his home was his sacrifice. If he set foot on Mon Calamari, he would be arrested. Admiral Ackbar formed an ordinance against Thar on Mon Calamari similar to Naboo's against Palpatine. It stated that because of Thar Nolog's past acquaintances with the nefarious Black Sun, the Mon Calamari people disowned him and banished him from returning to his home planet.

Thar didn't mind the coldness of Rhen Var. To an extent. He spared no expense in buying the state of the art in heaters for his house on the mountain. His neighbors would come to visit Thar just so they could feel the warmth that Rhen Var lacked. They visited, but they weren't friends. Occasionally, the sadness of his own exile crept up on him. Thar still had a great amount of wealth. He had no one to spend it on but himself. He was a hundred and forty five standard years old. It was not quite ancient for his species, but close. He made a deal that his wealth would go to the people of Rhen Var, who so willingly took him in regardless of his past.

He gave a long yawn and he downed the last of the frog water with his huge hand-flippers. He went to the front picture window. He didn't feel lonely that night. He watched the guards pacing around his house, protecting him. Chief Cizler informed him that the COS herself gave him an order to guard him. The irony of the New Republic securing the life of a former gangster was too bizarre for Thar to comprehend. Nevertheless, the initial panic that he felt after the Nal Hutta murders had subsided. No one would dare to try and attack with not only ten guards but also the Jedi Master close by.

He reached for his cane sitting upright against the counter and headed towards his bedroom. He was ready to retire for the night. He approached the bedroom door, which now had a guard standing by. The other four guards were inside scattered by other possible entrances.

Thar looked up at the faceless silver helmet of the Rhen Var guard. "I'm going to bed now," Thar's gruff voice said.

No reaction.

"I just had my frog water and I'm tired. Ever had it? Frog water? Heh, it probably tastes like sewer water to a human. It's certainly good to me." The guard's head never flinched. Thar tilted his enormous head. "You don't talk much, do you?" More silence. "I guess you're not trained to be casual. I'll say good night to you, then."

Thar opened his bedroom door, which was transparisteel like the walls. He started to enter the room when something to his left caught his bulbous eye. He could see something through the transparent walls that was in the hallway beyond his bedroom. He backtracked into the hallway and crept around the corner. He could see that there was a boot on its side. He moved closer and saw that a leg was still in it.

A human male was lying on his back in the hallway. Thar went to the man and saw that his clothes had been stripped to his undergarments. He edged closer but, suddenly, his cane seemed to slip out from under him. Thar caught himself on his knee before he went to the floor. He looked down.

The pool of blood stained his robe. It flowed from under the man. The dead man. Thar looked closer at the man's shirt. There was a design on it. A logo. Rhen Var Security.

Thar used his cane to bring himself up and he shouted, "Guards! Call security. There's been a murder. He's here! Get your..."

When he turned around, the guard who he tried to have a conversation with was now standing before him.

"Go get the medics! This man's been murdered!"

The guard proceeded to lift his helmet off to reveal his hooded tunic. Black with red trim. There was no face. Only darkness inside that hood. Thar stared in disbelief. Next came the chilling rough whisper. "I know."

"No! No!," cried Thar. "I retired. I'm not evil. I don't deserve to die."

"Yes. You do."

"It's true then, isn't it? You're him. Voxan. Not the original, of course. That would be impossible."

"Nothing is impossible."

"What are you? Some kind of vigilante?" Thar tried to add a hard edge to his voice to intimidate. It didn't work. "You're going around killing ex-Vigo for what? Revenge? Black Sun only made Voxan rich. We hired Voxan to do his jobs. What did they do to you?"

The only answer Thar received was the revelation of a blaster pointed at his chest.

Thar gave a nervous laugh. "A blaster? Not very original for a Voxan. What are you going to do? Shoot me?"

"Not quite." The blaster emitted a purple-white spiral that hit Thar's chest head on.

Thar let go of his cane and fell backwards to the floor. The stun setting was low and Thar was still alert. He landed beside the dead guard. He looked up at the dark figure hovering over him. A small decanter was produced from beneath the folds of the black tunic.

Thar couldn't move but he found that he could mumble his speech. "What...are you...doing?"

"I'm doing what you so deserve. You have tasted the luxury of wealth for too long. No care should follow you as you cared for no one after your treachery." The decanter's lid was taken off. It was starting to angle progressively over Thar's head. "I believe you should have a toast in your own honor." The liquid started spilling onto Thar's brown skin. The screams of pain were wild. The sounds of anguish was an abrasive music. More liquid spilled. More screams. The sound filled the room. Soon, the noise would reach outside. There wasn't much time.

A gloved hand reached down at the writhing form of Thar Nolog in outlandish pain. The movement had to be timed to avoid the enormous head as it swivelled around wildly. At last, the chance was there and the glove grasped at the necklace and pulled.

"You won't be needing this anymore."

The remaining guards finally came storming in at the sound of their protection's cries of pain. They saw and they confronted. Each were taken one by one with amazing ease. Amateurs. None of them were expecting a weapon so unique and strong. They each had spirit inside of them before their eventual end. Once they were all down, haste had to be recognized. Departure had to be swift before...

She arrived. She appeared in the doorway. She was grown now, but not all that different. She gave the order to stop. That was impossible. The game was just now getting interesting now that she had entered the ring. The exit was allowed through thick vapors. Departure achieved. Mission accomplished. On to the next one.

The crime scene in Thar Nolog's house

Mara looked out through the broken window where the killer had jumped through minutes before she reached it. He was gone. And I missed him! Perhaps not. He was still on Rhen Var. How he jumped down to the rocky mountain range and live she'll have to ponder later. If there was a chance she could trap him...

She reached for her comlink. "Cizler. I need you to set up a perimeter around the spaceport.

Cizler shouted back, "What happened?"

Mara stated plainly, "Nolog is dead. By a lot. So are your guards. All ten."

"What? How?"

"They were cut down by a large sword, and I don't mean lightsaber. Nolog...his death has to be seen to be believed."

"All right. Why the ports?"

"Because I just saw the killer jump out of a window over a fifty meter cliff not five minutes ago. If he's still alive, which I'm sure of it, he's still on the planet. He has to leave sometime."

"Right. I'll keep you and Skywalker posted." The connection clicked off.

She heard a few rasping coughs from behind her and she turned. "Speak of the devil."

Luke was trying to regain his voice. "What...is that I walked into?"

"It was a dimonium burst. Nothing toxic. It just messes with your eyes and lungs for enough time so that the murderer can get away. You felt the pain, too?"

"How could I not? It was loud in the Force."

"I came as soon as I sensed it."

Luke looked almost embarrassed. "I...would have been here sooner, but..."

Mara finished, "Your thermal suit was giving you problems?"

Luke winced and then looked around at the carnage. "Our killer did all this?"

"Yes. He used a vibrosword. Those are not easy to come by. They're even harder to master. Platanium alloy base with a cortosis coating. Sharp. It made quick work of the guards."

Luke slowly got closer to the body of Thar Nolog. Especially his face. Or what was left of it. "What happened to him? An acid?"

Mara sighed. "Hardly. You mean you've never wondered why Ackbar is never in an actual bar? Or anywhere near liquor?"

Luke was confused at the awkward question before he answered, "Can't say that I have. I just always thought he didn't drink."

"Alcohol is a poison to Mon Calamari, brainless. It acts as an acid to them. They're never in bars because they're afraid liquor will get spilled on them."

"Huh," was Luke's response.

"You should put aside your Force manuals and pick up an alien anatomy book sometime."

Luke looked at the carnage. "The killer has picked up a few anatomy books of his own. The Defel. The WeeQuays. Now this."

"I think we can officially substitute 'killer' for 'mutilator' at this point."

Within the next several minutes, security officials and medics arrived, making the scene more chaotic. At some point, Corran made his way through and came upon the bodies himself.

"Now this is a mess!"

"Your powers of observation are astounding, Corran," Mara quipped.

Corran ignored her and informed, "I spoke to Cizler and he had no reports of anyone coming in or out for the entire time the guards were here."

"That doesn't mean anything," Mara remarked. "Assassins always find a way in. Unless...he was already here. Waiting."

"Great Tarkin's Ghost!" Corran erupted.

Luke muttered, "He found Thar."

"Yes. Well, he didn't die well. Is that the flask he used?"

Their eyes went to the silver decanter that was laid down as an afterthought on the ground. Corran picked it up through the opening by his pinky. He sniffed the opening. "Whoa. Hydroxal wood alcohol. Potent." He lifted the flask to them. "Hey, there's still some left. Anyone want a nightcap?"

"That's just wrong, Corran," Mara spat.

He set the flask down. "Sorry. My humor gets the best of me at crime scenes. Bad habit."

"Could your humor also take the worst of you along with the best?" Mara joked.

Corran examined the wounds on the guards. "What was used on them? The cuts look too short for a vibroblade."

"Think bigger," Mara suggested.

Corran thought before he called out, "Vibrosword?" He let out a heavy sigh. "This case is getting worse all the time. I assume you're having Cizler keep watch of the ports."

"Already done."

While the sounds of the crime scene went on, in came Lt. Broadwater running. She was catching her breath. "It is...freezing out there. I came as quick as I heard. What hap...Oh!"

Corran said casually, "That used to be Thar Nolog."

I'hela stated, "Let me guess. Alcohol."

Luke turned to her and asked, "How would you know that?"

I'hela answered directly, "Alien Anatomy was part of my curriculum at the University of Coruscant."

"Oh," Luke uttered. He avoided the red-gold eyebrows being raised at him.

I'hela demanded, "Why wasn't I informed as soon as this happened?"

Luke looked at her. "I would have thought you'd hear the commotion."

"Sorry, I don't have extra sensory ability in the Force."

Corran offered, "You're here now."

I'hela looked at the guards. "Do we have a weapon that did this?"

Mara put in, "I think the killer took it with him."

Corran laughed.

I'hela was beginning to have an edge. "Yeah, that's right. Laugh at the rookie agent."

Luke asked, "Aren't you a little old to be a rookie?"

I'hela explained, "I had a late start. It's a long story. Can we get on with it? This is real. You three know something you're keeping from me."

"What could we possibly be hiding from you?" Corran asked.

"The rumors. They're true. Aren't they? It's been going around since Nal Hutta. It'll spread more once this gets out. It's Voxan, isn't it?"

All three of them jerked their heads in her direction and made gestures for her to keep quiet.

Luke explained in a whisper, "We can't confirm that. It can't get out. Understand?"

"So, it is true."

"If it's Voxan, he must be immortal," Corran answered as he picked out shards of metal from one of the guards wounds and placed them in evidence bags.

I'hela went on in near hysterics. "Then it's a relative or a copy cat. Or even a clone."

Mara stated, "All are inconceivable."

"It doesn't matter. The name Voxan will have everyone scared. The press will have a field day with this."

Mara said, "They won't if they don't know about it. Keep it to yourself, if you don't mind. If that name leaks to the press, we'll never find out any leads."

"How do we prevent that from happening?"

Mara answered her, "Mislead them. Tell them we have the perpetrator on the run. Give them what they want to hear without any hard facts."

I'hela admitted, "That's good."

"So," Mara stood before the agent, "what are you still doing here?"

"What? Me? Talk to the press?"

"Wouldn't look bad for a rookie NRS agent. Plus it will give the NRS some publicity. A high profile case helping the Jedi."

I'hela had the sparkle of fame in her eyes. "Yes. I see your point. They're still camped down by the spaceport. I'll tell them what went on here but only what's on the surface. Nothing concrete."

"Be as non-specific as you can. They'll eat it up," Mara tipped.

"Right. I'll meet you down there?"

"In due course," said Corran.

"Thank you, sir." I'hela started climbing around the bodies and the coroners who were now scattered around the crime scene. Within moments she was out of sight.

Mara muttered, "I thought she'd never leave."

"She's only doing her job, Mara," Luke said.

"We'll see." Mara's comlink chirped and she reached for it and read the message. "Aw, Sithspawn!"

"What is it?"

"Karrde wanting an update."

Corran said, "Chances are he already knows about the murders."

"More than likely. The signal isn't too great in these mountains. He had to leave a message. I can get better reception in the shuttle. Excuse me." Mara edged her way between Luke and Corran to move outside the house. She flipped her hood up once she reached the outside cold air. She found a hidden alcove between two medic shuttles to shield her conversation from the wind. Before she put the call in, she made sure her barriers were fully equipped. She didn't know why, but she actually hated lying to Skywalker. Mara checked the screen of her comlink and reread the message.

You almost caught me. Contact me before I have to leave.

There was a comlink code after the message. Mara punched it in. She put the comlink to her ear.

"Hello, Mara Jade. It's been a long time," a mechanical voice on the other end answered.

"You're using a vocoder."

"Did you expect anything less?"

"What are you doing?"

"I'm doing what needed to be done a long time ago. Call it retribution."

"I just left the scene and I'd call it a slaughter."

"It's nothing you're not used to."

"I killed out of duty. And I did it cleanly."

"Is there a difference at how death is dealt? The result is always the same."

"It depends on how much pain you inflict before the death. You could ask the victims. Oh, you can't. They're all dead."

"Funny, Jade. I intend to deal more pain. I intend to give them the kind of pain they gave me all my life."

"I'll know where you'll be heading next."

"Good. I'll be waiting. Unless I'm already gone before you get there. Welcome to the game."

"Your father played this game very well. He was a legend."

A laugh through a vocoder had such a unique sound that most people would classify it as a screech. Mara knew the sound well through the most famous vocoder in history. Vader's.

"You think you know who I am, Jade? Believe that you are wrong. I'm no longer who I thought I was. I have no identity." The connection went dead.

Mara still held the comlink for a moment. Pondering. Calculating. Was that really who she thought it was? She finally placed the comlink in her coat pocket. She looked up and gasped.

"Luke! I...didn't know you were there."

"How could you? Did you update Karrde?" His voice was too calm and even.

"Yes. You know Karrde."

"I do. But that wasn't Karrde. Was it?" He was greeted with a rare silence from Mara Jade. He let it pass and said, "You were doing so well in the house when the comlink went off. But after you left, your barriers went up."

"You know me by now, Skywalker. My barriers are always up."

"Not like this. I can't describe it in words. I'll have to rely on an analogy. Usually, your barriers feel like they're permacrete. The ones you put up after you left the crime scene up there felt like transparisteel." He came closer to her. "And you're wrong."

Mara gulped. "About what?"

Luke stated firmly, "I don't know you at all." He gave his voice a dark edge she hadn't heard from him before. It was an eerie reminder of who he was related to. "We need to talk."

She surrendered to him and said, "I guess we do."

* * * * *

Chapter Six

... Everything going as planned. Controlled the HoloNet press with Rousch on Nal Hutta. He died a coward, just like father said he would. It wasn't my first kill, but it was the sweetest.

... Went on to Lianna for Lohl Ch'la His death was necessary, but unfortunate. He managed to escape Black Sun's hold on him. He should have been honored. Gave him an honorable death.

... Sent Jedi message through Ch'la. Used universal transponder receiver to get to the comm on the Space Run shuttle. Handy item father had. Informed the Jedi through Ch'la of my intentions. They have been warned. Logic dictates they will not comply. In the end, it won't matter.

... Went on to Rhen Var. HoloNet press was already there. Perfect timing. The Jedi arrived not long after. Note: Mara Jade has entered the game. Seeing her brought back so many memories. She was very young when she found us. She caught a glimpse of me then, though I was disguised well. She has her own beliefs about finding me. Let her have her beliefs, no matter how inaccurate.

... Getting into Thar Nolog's home was too easy. Pretended to be Rhen Var security. Killed the rest of the guards with ease. Father's technique with Mon Calamari worked like a charm. Terrible way for any being to die. Thar deserved it.

... The Jedi presence on Rhen Var worked to my advantage. It proved that I can act right under their noses. It was almost all over, however. Mara Jade came in quicker than I could imagine. She couldn't see me. Once again she caught a glimpse of me and I was disguised. Just like old times. I threw a dimonium cap at her and disappeared over the cliff with extended grapple. As expected with Jade, she called for a watch on the space port. Too bad she was having security look in the wrong place.

... Decided to throw Mara off my track. Spoke to her through her comm by vocoder. She remembered me. Told her about my plan for retribution. She knows all about killing in the name of duty, though she'll never admit it.

... Left Rhen Var and on to Damphine. I will beat the Jedi there.

... New development! Skywalker is changing the rules. Interesting. Adaptation is essential, father always said. This could make my mission easier. No! Not easier. I can hear father tell me now. Nothing is ever easy even if you know what you are doing. Nothing is that certain.

... One thing is certain. There will be more deaths. I will find out where they are heading. It shouldn't be hard. I am closer than they think. The ex-Vigos who escaped their justice will pay with their deaths.

... The Jedi? They are a more difficult dilemma. Now that Mara Jade has aligned herself with the Jedi Master, getting through them will not be easy. If I keep my distance and pace my steps carefully, I will succeed. The Jedi are as much a culprit in father's anguish as Black Sun. The Vigos sacrificed him for the greater good, and the Jedi allowed it to happen. They will both find a new brand of justice.

... Found them. They are all now right where I want them.

On Rhen Var - The Jade's Fire main lounge

"You lied to us about finding Skarce Voxan," Corran shouted.

Mara Jade replied calmly from her seat behind the main lounge table, "I did no such thing."

"Then explain how you know our killer."

Mara stated, "Technically, I don't."

Corran scoffed. "Luke just told me that you were talking to our killer like you were friends."

"Not friends. Adversaries."

"Then he is related to Voxan."

"I'm not sure."

Exasperated, Corran looked over at Luke sitting on the opposite side of the table. "Can you make sense of this woman?"

Luke gave a half smile and replied softly, "She told us before that she never found Skarce Voxan. She neglected to tell us that she tracked down whom she thought was Voxan's son. And she may have spoken to him but she's not sure if our killer is the same person."

Mara turned to Luke and said with sarcastic flair, "You know me so well, Skywalker."

"Not yet, I don't."

"Perfect," Corran voiced. "Next time I'll call you when I need a Mara Jade translator."

Luke gave no reply but he leaned closer on the table across from Mara. "Who exactly did you track down back then?"

Mara shrugged. "You're right. I tracked down the last known residences of Skarce Voxan. There were many. Almost all were dead ends. Much of the information from the old Jedi Order hadn't been very accurate. I did find in my research that there was talk of a son Voxan had not long after the Clone Wars. It was speculated that the son was the reason for the lack of Voxan's performances after that point."

Corran asked, "What was his name?"

Mara gave a slight chuckle. "There were several."

Corran replied, "So we just call him Voxan, Jr."

"You can call him a rancor's uncle for all I care."

Corran sneered. "You don't seem to be taking this too seriously, Jade."

"Because this is turning into an interrogation, Officer Horn."

"You seem to have information about our investigation that you were withholding. I just want to understand why."

Mara rolled her eyes and turned back at Luke, silently beckoning him to reply. Luke explained, "Mara isn't one to freely release information that she can't prove, Corran."

The door to the lounge slid open and in appeared Lieutenant I'hela Broadwater. She had obviously been running in the frigid Rhen Var climate and she took a few moments to catch her breath. She finally exclaimed, "I just had to interrupt my conversation with the press. I was just asked a question about Mara Jade actually speaking to the murderer of Thal Nolog. I had no clue what they were talking about. Maybe you can shed some light on it, Ms. Jade?"

"News travels fast in the press," Mara commented.

"You better believe it," I'hela shot back. "Do you know our murderer, Jade?"

"Maybe."

"What do you mean maybe?"

Luke cut in to calm I'hela down and he took some time to tell her about Mara knowing a possible identity of the murderer being the son of a famous hitman.

"You mean Skarce Voxan, don't you?"

"Why do you say that?" Luke asked.

"I told you it's the rumor that's going around everywhere. The press won't let up about it now. Of course, nobody believes it's the actual Voxan. He would be dead by now. It could be a copy or a relative."

Luke admitted, "It's possible. But I would like it if this part of the investigation is kept between us, if you don't mind, Lt."

I'hela nodded in agreement and then asked Mara, "If you spoke to him, do you know where he is?"

Mara answered, "Long gone by now. He may have had a starship close by away from the spaceport. By the way, who invited you on my ship?"

I'hela stood erect and answered in a commanding voice, "This is a joint effort between the NRS and the Jedi. I would think you would be more cooperative."

Corran uttered, "You don't know Mara Jade well, do you?"

Luke glanced at Mara and said, "Actually, I would like a better understanding of where our murderer is going."

"To his next target," Mara answered.

"Which is where?"

Corran reached for a datapad and called up the list of the ex-Vigo's locations and announced, "The closest from here is Damphine. And that's a distant close."

Luke remarked, "They sure pick the most obscure systems. Away from the public eye, I guess." I'hela supplied with, "No, they wanted to keep away from any trade routes. Less temptation to fall back into their old ways."

Mara replied, "Nice deduction, Lt."

Corran remarked, "I'm sure Rousch was thrilled to be back on Nal Hutta to meet with Meeko."

I'hela asked, "What was the purpose of that meeting? It didn't say in your report."

Corran snapped, "It's classified." He shot back at Luke, "Did you just give everyone a copy of our report?"

Luke shrugged. "I gave one to Mon Mothma. I'm sure she gave one to I'hela's NRS supervisor who let her read it." After I'hela nodded to confirm, Luke turned to Mara. "It would be too late to try and beat him to Damphine."

"More likely he was calling from a remote in transit."

I'hela thought to suggest, "Can we trace the receiving transponder codes on your comm?"

"We can but in all probability, he's changed them already," Mara answered.

Luke sighed his reply. "Which means Voxan Jr. will be always a few steps ahead of us."

Corran cried out, "Can we call him something besides 'murderer' and 'Voxan, Jr'?"

Mara suggested, "One of his assumed names was Mahc Teirnan."

"Then Mahc he is to us now."

"Until we prove otherwise," Luke added.

Mara said, "It would definitely throw off the press if we give them that name."

Corran asked, "Can't they research that back to Voxan?"

Mara scoffed. "The press can research the name all they want. It will never lead them to Voxan Jr, I assure you."

Luke uttered, "We need some time to research it more without allowing him to kill again. We need to stall him."

"Good luck there. We already know where he's going. Like you said, he'll be a few steps ahead of us," Mara replied.

Luke had a thought. "Maybe we can change the locations on him."

"What do you mean?" Corran asked.

"What if we can get all of the ex-Vigo's in one anonymous location. Preferably one that's mobile. Like a star cruiser."

Mara put in, "That might make his job easier."

"Not if he doesn't know the location."

Corran warned, "We would have to keep the location a secret. Not let many know."

"We'll have to use a powerful encrypt," Luke suggested. "I'll have to speak to Mon Mothma about it. She has each ex-Vigo guarded now and it shouldn't be a problem to bring them all in one spot."

Mara interjected with, "Sorry if this is off the subject, but didn't you say that Rousch's Vigo chit was taken?"

Thinking suddenly back to his report, Luke replied, "Yes, it was."

"So where is Thar's chit? I didn't see Mahc take anything unless he took it earlier. Did someone check his neck for a necklace?"

Corran muttered, "You mean what was left of his neck?"

I'hela added, "Maybe he didn't keep it on him. There could be something he placed it in still inside his house."

Mara turned to the Lieutenant and suggested, "Why don't you find Cizler and see if they found something? I'm sure he's still researching the house."

For a few seconds, it looked like I'hela was about to refuse Mara's suggestion with a pained look of disappointment. I'hela hesitantly nodded and slowly left the lounge without a word of protest.

After I'hela was gone, Corran looked at Mara. "Nice way of getting her out of the way."

"Like you said, we can't let many know," Mara said innocently.

"You don't trust her," stated Luke.

"I don't trust anybody, Skywalker. You should know that. Besides, I feel that you don't trust her either."

Luke smiled and wanted to compliment her on her attention to his feelings in the Force. But Mara didn't take compliments well, especially in front of others. Luke went on and said, "It's not that. It's just...something strange. Do either of you sense her?"

Confused by the question, Corran answered plainly, "I feel her presence."

"Anything else? Feelings."

"Not really."

"Maybe we can't get through to her feelings. She may be blocking them," Mara said.

Luke thought it ironic that Mara could suggest something that she has done herself. "Why do you say that?"

Corran smiled. "I get it. She's a soldier."

Luke was confused this time. "What does that have to do with anything?"

Corran explained, "Luke, do you know where most of the recruits of the NRS came from? Many of them were to become stormtroopers. The stormtrooper boot camp was on Coruscant and they had to go there before they were shipped to Carida." He turned to Mara to confirm. "Right?"

She nodded and added, "It was later on in the stormtrooper regime. Carida was becoming too vast to support the numerous applicants so Palpatine devised a screening system in Imperial City. If you passed you were sent to Carida. Failed, and you wound up as a security guard at the Opera House. I heard rumors that Mon Mothma must have given them a second chance in the NRS. Their standards were not nearly as strict as the Empire's."

Corran added, "Yep, not all of them could be in the 501st. The cops in the NRS today are probably sons and daughters of those under qualified stormtrooper wanna-be's."

Luke repeated his question. "That doesn't tell me why we can't read the Lt's feelings."

Corran chuckled, "You haven't known many soldiers, have you?"

Luke's eyes widened. "Uh...Rebel Army. There were many soldiers there."

Mara sniffed. "Rebels. Common folk turned to freedom fighters. People who weren't trained officially in combat. A true soldier is not trained to have feelings. They're trained to be focused and ready for anything at a moment's notice."

Corran finished her thought. "Soldiers are harder to read in the Force."

Luke gave a blank stare as he thought of his title of Jedi Master. Some Master he was. He felt he was still learning about the Force everyday. Perhaps when one is seeking the vast knowledge of the Force, they are a constant student.

Corran interrupted Luke's thoughts. "Now that I'hela is not here, what exactly is this plan of yours? Are you thinking of using a space transport and just picking up the Vigos?"

"Not exactly," Luke replied. "I was thinking of using something more obscure. That way we can spend some time researching this Voxan for more details. Even if this Mahc finds us we can defend the ex-Vigos."

Mara suddenly burst out, "Wait a moment! I said I'd help you with the research on this investigation, not play babysitter to a bunch of ex-gangsters."

Luke kept his voice at a soft even tone, knowing that his controlled patience unnerved Mara, especially after one of her outbursts. "Do you have other pressing issues to attend to, Mara?"

"As a matter of fact, I do. Karrde has me recruiting new clients now that the Smuggler's Alliance is fading away."

Corran uttered, "Karrde has plenty of people who can do that."

Mara emphasized, "I can do it the best."

Luke sighed inwardly as he didn't have time to argue with Mara. "Maybe Corran and I will be on guard duty while you do the research. My point was that when we get the Vigos in one mobile starship, it will be harder for our killer to act."

Corran put in, "That depends on what kind of ship you have in mind. A space transport would stick out like a sore thumb. A Corvette would be too obvious, not to mention the smaller size for, what, eleven Vigos and several NRS guards. Where were you planning on putting these former gangsters, Luke?"

Luke smiled as deviously as he could and said with pride, "In the very last place anyone would look. With a former competitor."

Realization sunk into Corran and he gasped, "Luke, no. Let me count the ways how much of a bad idea that is. Besides, he'll never go for it."

"He may if Mon Mothma ordered him. It worked with Bel Iblis."

Corran countered, "Bel Iblis has more respect with his organization than Mon Mothma."

Luke asked logically, "He wouldn't refuse the Chief of State's last request in her last remaining days in office. How would that look to the new Chief of State?"

Mara sounded surprised. "You are thinking ahead? What have you done with the real Skywalker?"

Luke let her comment alone and said, "I have to get a message to Mon Mothma quickly. You mind if I use your holo-projector?"

"By all means," Mara cheered.

Corran sighed. "I suppose you're wanting me to recruit for our rendezvous?"

"Why, when we have the greatest recruiter on board already?" Luke bemused, gesturing to Mara.

It was Mara's turn to sigh. "Me and my big mouth."

Corran smiled. "It'll get you in trouble every time."

"And I still don't learn."

Corran asked Luke, "What do we tell I'hela? She's going to want to tag along."

"And we can't exactly tell the NRS they're not invited." Luke considered. "Don't tell her anything yet. We can wait to give her the coordinates at the last possible moment."

Mara suggested, "We can set up several small jumps first before the final one to mask our trajectory. Actually, that will throw off the press as well."

"Good idea," Luke said. "I'd like to keep this plan between us for as long as possible."

Corran sneered. "I'hela's going to love that."

Luke shot back, "She doesn't have to like it. Just tell her it's for security reasons. She'll understand. I'll let you handle that one, Corran."

Corran rolled his eyes. "Perfect."

Mara questioned, "Do you really think Mon Mothma will go for this?"

Luke gave his voice a drastic tone. "I don't see any other choice. We can't just keep chasing this killer after he keeps murdering his targets. No, it's time we change the game plan on him. Let's go, I want to get to Mon Mothma now." Luke stood and headed for the lounge exit towards the cockpit.

Mara turned to Corran and said, "What's up with him? He so into taking charge now. Different for him."

Corran admitted, "I know. Scary."

Jade's Fire cockpit after the primary hyperspace jump

"Where are we heading?" asked I'hela through the comm of her SIE patrol ship, Horizon Star. She had followed the initial jump into hyperspace after the Jade's Fire jumped first. Once each ship was back in real space, I'hela could speak to the Jade's Fire again.

Corran was the lone occupant of the Jade's Fire cockpit at the moment, and he reached for the comm to answer the Lt. "That's on a need to know, Lt. We only have one more small jump to go in..." he checked the nav-com readout, "...five standard minutes. You'll get the coordinates for the final jump after this next one."

"You don't trust me, do you?" Her voice wasn't as accusatory as it was filled with low confidence.

Corran assured her, "It's not like that, I'hela. It's for security. Sometimes the press can catch the nav-com coordinates through sensory channels on the HoloNet. They can only catch one set of coordinates at a time. So when we set up several jumps like this it confuses the channels and they get gibberish."

"I see. Where is Mara Jade and Master Skywalker?"

Corran said casually, "They're indisposed right now. Taking advantage of the extended trip."

"Oh! I didn't know they were a couple."

It took Corran all his effort to not laugh at her remark. He failed.

I'hela sounded embarrassed. "I take it I misinterpreted your words."

Corran calmed and said, "I'm sorry. I guess I said that too casually. They're busy training."

"Oh, yes. I remember reading that Mara Jade had been trained by the Emperor. I see Master Skywalker is trying to train her to be a Jedi."

"Emphasis on trying."

"It must be nice to have the Force at your disposal."

Corran stifled his own comment. To the world outside of his wife and the Jedi Council, Corran Horn was merely a former CorSec agent turned Rogue Squadron fighter pilot. Someday, maybe the galaxy will know of his Jedi traits. Corran just wasn't ready yet for the galaxy to gain that knowledge. He changed the subject before the nav-com set their next jump. "Did they find Thal's Vigo chit on him or in his house?"

I'hela answered, "No, but they did find a small treasure case. It's locked and I thought that Master Skywalker could open it somehow. But you guys left so quick and I didn't get a chance to tell him. I brought it with me."

"Good thinking. Here's hoping Mahc won't want the chit so bad that he'll start chasing us."

"Does Mara really believe he is Voxan's son?"

"She's not sure yet. She didn't get a good look at him and she said he was hard to read in the Force."

"But she spoke to him."

"He spoke to her mostly. Basically, he was just telling her that he knows we're on to him."

"He's playing us, then."

"Maybe. But we're changing the rules now."

"How are we changing the rules?"

Corran admired the woman's gumption. The NRS was still such a young organization compared to the Jedi Council and the New Republic. He could imagine its members didn't see much action lately. Corran remembered being that young and ambitious starting out as a CorSec agent. I'hela looked to be in her fifties, yet she seemed to retain a youthful desire for knowledge. Just as he had once, and maybe could again. He answered her in a tone that told her he caught her trying to pry. "Good try, Lt. You'll soon find out. We're almost ready for the next jump."

"Roger that. Horizon Star out." Her comm then went silent.

Soon the Jade's Fire sped into the molted star lines of hyperspace and the Horizon Star followed right after.

Lower hangar deck of Jade's Fire

A large room had been designed next to the medium-sized hangar of the Jade's Fire that now housed the Space Run, Luke and Corran's borrowed New Republic shuttle. The large room was originally set up as a barracks for guests and pilots to rest themselves while their ships were nestled inside the hangar. As Mara Jade had no intention of using the hangar for random guests or pilots crossing her path, she converted the room into a training area. At first she kept all of her various weapons she had collected over the years and stored them in the room. Lately, she had now dubbed the space her practice room. Since she had been freed from the mental bonds of the Emperor, she decided to continue her training in the Force. At one point early on, she received help from the Jedi Master himself.

She soon discovered that what Luke was teaching her were the basics that Palpatine had already gone over with her. She, therefore, left his Jedi Academy and began to train herself in the Force.

Since the last leg of their trip was over eighteen hours long, Luke and Mara decided to take advantage of the time and use it to train. They challenged each other to a duel and soon Luke and Mara were ready in a sparring match.

Luke held his green lightsaber in a low defensive angle while Mara clenched her grasp on the handle of Luke's old blue-white saber...his father's. Mara suddenly lunged a thrust forward but Luke calmly parried. Blue clashed with green in sparks of super heated energy.

"Your focus is on the blade," Luke critiqued after they each released their sabers from each other.

"Yeah, funny thing, that's usually where my focus is in a duel."

"But your focus is only on the blade. And I blocked it rather easily."

"You're too quick."

Forgetting the fact that she just gave him a rare compliment, he further analyzed her reaction. "Don't think of it as quickness, Mara. I countered it because I knew where your next move would be going. I focused on what you were planning, not where the blade was going to end up."

"You mean you anticipated my move?"

"Not exactly. Anticipation still implies a form of guessing. Focus on where my thoughts will take my moves and you will be a step ahead of me. If you want to beat me to the finish line, simply be there already. Understand?"

"I think so."

"Good. Let's try it again." Luke repositioned his stance in an attack form with his lightsaber hovering at a high angle. He could feel Mara focus on his thoughts, yet he could also feel her conflict to focus on the blade too. Luke stayed dormant for several moments until she completely focused on him. Luke then made a series of sudden slashes and thrusts from various angles and Mara met each one with an almost automatic precision.

He stopped and unlit his blade. He glanced at her and froze in a distant memory. Mara wore the same surprised accomplishment as he did after Ben Kenobi taught him to "see" the remote with his feelings on board the Millennium Falcon all those years ago. He resisted to tell her that she had just taken a small step into a larger world. Mara Jade didn't take to such sentiment. He was about to acknowledge her feat when he felt her notice that he had been listening in on her thoughts. Instantly, her mental walls went up and he could feel nothing from her. Typical Mara, he thought.

Mara didn't speak of it, of course, and she went on to say in a monotone voice devoid of emotion, "That seemed to work."

"Of course it did. Do you still believe that I can't teach you anything new?"

She shut down her lightsaber and said, "Stop the chrono and it's officially twenty-nine standard hours before you ask me back to your Academy."

Luke mentally cringed. "Would it be as bad as you think?"

"We've been down this road before, Skywalker. You know how I don't like repeating myself. I don't need remedial classes in the Force."

"Don't trivialize this, Mara. When it comes to the Force, even the most experienced Jedi are still students. Myself included. You just experienced an alternative way to duel. You should have seen your face once you realized it. I could feel your exhilaration."

Mara warned through gritted teeth, "I've told you to stay out of my mind, Skywalker."

"How can I enter it when you have it blocked? You shut yourself down and deny yourself so much, Mara. You can't even allow yourself the thrill of learning something new."

Mara's tone turned indignant. "And I suppose you're the only one who can save me?"

"No. I can't do that."

"Why not? You saved your father."

"My father was deep into the dark side. All I did was show him the light within himself. In the

end, it was he who saved himself. And me. If he hadn't had acted...if he had shut down his emotions like you are, I would have been dead and the Empire would have lived on. And you would still be the Emperor's Hand playing the puppet that he made you into. You would still be alone. No friends. No emotions. No soul."

Mara turned away swiftly and walked over to a tool bench. She dropped her lightsaber on the counter. "Don't try and analyze me, Skywalker. Your head will hurt."

Luke shrugged casually and stated, "My head does hurt but I think it's from playing substitute babysitter for my niece and nephew last week."

Mara let out, "And stop with attempts at humor."

"So much for lightening the mood." He glanced at the counter and asked, "Do you know why I gave you my father's lightsaber?"

Mara turned to face him. "Because you didn't feel like making one for me?"

"Nothing of the sort. I gave it to you because I believe that someday you will earn it. You have so much potential for greatness, Mara. It seems to me that your throwing it away."

Mara suddenly snapped, "What if I don't want that greatness? What if I'm fine where I am now? I will never have the amount of Force ability that you have, Luke. You are the son of one of the most powerful Jedi in history."

"It's not about being the most powerful, Mara. This is about you moving on. You've been alone for so long that you don't know how to adapt."

"I know how to adapt, Skywalker," she hissed.

"Maybe to things outside of yourself. But you can't adapt to you. The real you. Every time we're together I catch a glimpse of your true identity. The closer I get to it, the more you shut it off. You block out everything that would allow your true identity to come through. Maybe over the years of blind servitude to Palpatine you've forgotten who that is. Don't be afraid of being yourself, Mara."

Abruptly, Mara grabbed her saber off the counter and exclaimed as she stormed out, "If I wanted a psychological eval of myself, then I would have gone to a professional, Doctor Skywalker!"

The door to the hangar swished closed. Luke muttered to himself, "Thanks for proving my point, Mara." He sighed heavily and shook his head.

After the final jump inside the Jade's Fire cockpit

The molted star lines started to dissolve into real space. Corran and Mara looked through the Jade's Fire viewport and saw ahead of them the distinctive red shape of the former Imperial II-class Star Destroyer now named the Errant Venture. As they continued to gaze at Booster Terik's creation, Luke entered into the cockpit.

Before he could speak, Mara glanced at him. "What have you been doing all this time?"

"I was in a Jedi meditation trance in the rear lounge."

Corran quipped, "You should know by now, Mara, that is Jedi speak for taking a nap."

Mara gave no reply. It had been hours since Luke's talk with her before she stormed out on him in her training room. At that moment in the cockpit, there was no evidence within the woman that his talk ever took place. Had she listened to him? Or was she ignoring him? Either way, he couldn't tell. Her barriers were well in place. Luke decided to temporarily quit while he was behind with Mara Jade. "I sensed our approach and came up."

Corran noted, "Your timing is perfect. She's right where she should be." Corran gave an exaggerated sigh of disgust. "Ah, just where I wanted to be after what I've been through in the past year...in the presence of my father-in-law."

Luke assured him, "We shouldn't be here too long. If this goes as smoothly as I plan, we'll have no problem in weeding out our killer."

Corran remarked, "There's your first mistake, Master. Smooth and Booster Terik are two words that don't combine."

Mara added, "You should have heard him when Mon Mothma ordered him to do this."

Corran said, "Believe me, I can imagine."

As they approached closer to the Errant Venture, Mara uttered, "I can't believe that shade of red. Booster actually made a literal mockery of something the Empire made. Somewhere Captain Drysso is turning over in his grave."

Corran snickered. "If you think that's bad, you should see the inside. He's got a gambling casino in there that'll rival any on Ryloth."

Mara noted, "He did say he has a full house."

Luke gasped. "He has guests in there now?"

Corran replied, "I'm sure he does, Luke. Booster's got to eat and pay his crew too."

Mara sneered, "As well as paying for the upkeep of that hunk of durasteel. That thing was on its last legs even when it was in the Empire's service."

Luke cursed himself. "I didn't realize he would have guests at this time of the season."

Corran said, "Relax, Luke. Probably all middle class anyway. Trader's Alley would be getting all the attention. I doubt anyone would know we're here."

"That may be, but it'll be harder to see who's coming and going." Luke sighed. "I've got a bad feeling about this."

Mara shot back, "You always say that."

The comm gave a short burst of static and then the voice of Lt. Broadwater appeared and said, "Horizon Star to Jade's Fire. Do you read?"

Corran reached for the comm. "Acknowledged, Horizon Star. Welcome to the party, I'hela!"

"What system are we in? I don't read any planets in the vicinity."

"Because our destination isn't a planet, Lt. It's straight ahead."

"What? That's an Imperial Star Destroyer!"

Corran joked, "I see they teach Observation 101 well in the NRS. And just for the record, how many Imperial Destroyers do you know of that aren't colored flat gray?"

"What are we doing here?"

Corran glanced at Luke and switched off the comm. "Would you like to take that one, Master?"

Luke nodded and Corran switched the comm back on. "Lt., this is Master Skywalker. I'm sorry for our secrecy before, but it was necessary that very few knew about this. I made arrangements with Mon Mothma to bring all the remaining ex-Vigos on board the Errant Venture courtesy of Booster Terik."

I'hela wryly asked, "And Booster complied with no complaint?"

"I wouldn't say that exactly. Nevertheless, he has complied."

I'hela replied, "You're using the Vigos as bait."

Luke admired the way I'hela cut through to the essence of his plan. "In a sense, I am. With Mara and myself on board we can protect them long enough to lure the killer here."

"Smart. Who's going to tell them that?"

"I am."

"I don't envy you having that conversation. Are they all on board yet?"

"Not sure. I don't think we're in their comm range yet."

Mara took a glance at the console and uttered, "Oh, we're in range all right. They're probably listening in already."

Corran switched frequencies on the comm and burst out with, "You catching all of this, Fyg?"

The voice on the other end sounded like a tiny-voiced human male. "It's Kruqr, Horn."

"Kruqr? Why you've surely come up in the world. Did Booster not trust your skills as a casino guard?"

"There was an incident with a Wookiee bounty hunter and I don't want to talk about it."

"I wouldn't either."

"Booster thought my skills here would be more..."

"Safer?" Corran supplied.

"Useful."

"Where is Booster?"

"He's busy making your guests comfortable. Really, Horn, what have you gotten us into this time? Bringing in the scum of the galaxy on our respectable establishment?"

"Respectable? You're on the wrong ship. Are they all there, Kruqr?"

"Almost. There's a few stragglers. Then there's you."

"Speaking of us, where are we landing?"

"There is a small matter of a docking fee."

"You're not serious. Booster's going to charge his own son-in-law?"

"You do get a relative discount. Sending the estimate now."

Corran looked at the screen and his eyes popped. "Kruqr, that's three times the normal docking fee."

"High profile guests. You pay for secrecy."

Corran glanced at Luke, who shrugged in surrender, and Corran announced to Kruqr, "All right. Transmitting account data now."

After a few moments, Kruqr replied wryly, "Got it. Thank you for your patronage. You may commence to Hangar BK-7."

Corran cried, "You're putting us on the Black Level?"

"Where else are you going to have any privacy? By the way, Booster wants to speak to Luke as soon as you land."

Corran answered, "We'll be right there."

Kruqr emphasized, "He wants to see Luke alone."

Corran turned to Luke and quipped, "Aren't you honored?"

"I heard that, Horn," Kruqr announced.

"Just send us the landing coordinates. Jade's Fire out."

As soon as Corran switched frequencies so I'hela could hear on the comm, Luke gave their orders. "While I'm talking to Booster, I want you and Mara to help with getting our guests settled. I'm sure there's going to be complaints. Just tell them the truth. Their lives may be in danger but assure them that we will do everything to keep them safe. Try to convince them that bringing them all here is more secure than letting them stay at their publicly known residences."

Mara said, "If they've heard about Rousch and Thal Nolog then they may be scared already."

"Good point. That may give us the advantage. They'll trust whomever will protect them."

Corran suggested, "Some of them may still not trust anyone in the Jedi Order. New or Old. Black Sun and the Jedi were at constant odds back then. I'm sure these old gangsters won't forget that."

Luke simply stated, "If they don't trust us, that's their choice. I'm really the only one here whom their anger may be focused on. They're familiar with Mara and as soon as they see she is on their side they may think differently about complaining." He switched gears and addressed the NRS Lieutenant. "I'hela, I'd like for you to keep a watch on anything approaching from space. Like you said, there's no systems near here, so the only reason they'll stop here is to gamble."

"Or murder some ex-Vigos," Mara muttered.

I'hela asked, "Isn't that the job of the main comm guard of the Errant Venture?"

"Yes, but I'd like for you to keep a special watch on anything out of the ordinary. Contact us immediately as soon as you do."

Mara asked, "What do we do after we get all the Vigos nicely tucked in?"

Luke stated, "I want you to start researching Voxan again. We've got the holo-vids that T'ryas had. You might start with the last known Voxan murders. Maybe we can find something to track him down with."

Mara shot back, "And if he tracks us down first?"

Luke replied, "Then we'll deal with him. So far he's dealt with defenseless ex-gangsters and less than adequate guards. We'll see how he handles a few Jedi."

Mara reflected, "Yeah, we'll see."

* * * * *

Chapter Seven

On the Errant Venture: Booster Terrik's office

Booster Terrik had an intimidating appearance for those who first met him. With his sandpaper voice and his trademark fur-lined sleeveless vest he could lean negotiations in almost any deal his way. There were only a handful of people who were immune to his rough nature. An automatic inclusion was his own daughter, Mirax. She had enough of her father's traits to counter his own methods. Another one was Corran Horn, who Mirax just had to make her husband. Even though Corran did have the Force, no one else in the galaxy could see through Booster Terrik more than Luke Skywalker.

Luke now sat in Booster's office with the Captain of the Errant Venture sitting across from him. Outside of the office they could still hear the pandemonium of eleven ex-Vigos from Black Sun and Black Nebula voicing their complaints. Mara and Corran were busy settling down the mix of alien and humans.

Booster nodded to the door and spoke in his gruff voice, "Sounds like Corran has his hands full. And my daughter isn't even involved."

"Mara is helping him," Luke stated.

Booster gave a deep chuckle. "With her here I'm confounded at who will shoot first."

Luke said plainly, "Mara's not like that anymore."

Booster grunted. "Once an Imp, always an Imp, if you ask me."

"I wasn't asking you."

Most who mouthed off at Booster would have gotten a leg full of blaster. With the Jedi Master Skywalker, Booster just laughed. "You know, Skywalker, you're just too fun to have around. I know it seemed like I gave you and Mon Mothma a hard time when you first proposed this idea of yours to me. When I had time to think about it, I'm actually getting a better deal."

"Of course. You are being well compensated, as Mon Mothma promised."

"True. But that's not the sweeter end of the deal. See, this isn't like when Bel Iblis more or less demanded I turn the Venture into a facsimile of a working Imperial Star Destroyer."

"Your services were well appreciated. The results were acceptable."

"Maybe for the New Republic. All I got was a new paint job and a new turbolaser battery. The term upgrade was turned into middle-grade. There's still problems on this ship that Iblis ignored. We have a faulty guidance system, for crying out loud. Sure, we have state of the art turbolasers but we can't see what we're shooting at!"

Luke gave a short laugh. "We have an NRS agent on board the Jade's Fire who will be assisting in watching who's coming in. You don't mind if she takes over for your Communications Officer if your guidance system is not adequate?"

"Do I have a choice?"

Luke assured, "I understand your frustrations, Booster. I didn't mean to have all of this dumped on you, but your ship was the most obscure place I could think of."

"Well, this time you actually played to my advantage."

Luke crinkled his brow. "I don't follow."

Booster folded his huge arms and leaned them on his desk and leaned closer to Luke and said, "You may believe that moving the top scum of the galaxy to my ship will stay a secret, but it won't be for long."

"I'm actually counting on it."

Booster stared at the Jedi for a few moments. He could read almost anyone's expressions except Luke Skywalker's. He let out a heavy breath and sighed, "Looks like I may have a serial killer on the way."

"Mara and I will handle him when he comes."

"Let's hope he doesn't go after my guests."

"I don't think that's his plan."

"Well, they're my concern. When my competition finds out I harbored the last remaining Vigos, it will be priceless."

Luke smiled. "You're expecting word of your bravery will expand your business. Recognition and money."

"Emphasis on money. I may be able to gain enough to run Diamond Level on a regular basis."

"And that's why you didn't mention that to Mon Mothma."

Booster nodded. "The amount she's giving me for all of this is will be petty cash compared to what I can get from high profile gamblers."

"And you didn't want that information leaked to the ex Vigos who may warn your competition. Which is why I'm in here alone."

Booster gave a rare smile. "I knew you would understand. Now, I have bunks set up down here for them. I'm having food and drink sent down. You don't have to worry about the riff-raff from Traders Alley coming down here. They don't even know this level exists."

"What I'm afraid of are the ones who do know about this level."

"If they do, they know not to cross me to come down here."

"Still, we'll want to keep watch on all the passages down here."

The noise outside of the door rose and suddenly there was a thump against it.

Booster remarked, "I think Mara and Corran need some help out there."

"Sounds like it." Luke got up as did Booster and approached the door. Booster opened it and there was a older human male wearing an elaborate Idiacia gown leaning up against the door. When the door slid all the way over, the male's torso slumped into the entrance of Booster's office.

Luke looked up to see Mara Jade standing a few meters away in a defensive stance.

She announced with clarity, "You better think twice the next time you attempt to flirt with me!"

Luke looked over at Booster and said, "I think Mara's got it under control."

"Apparently," Booster agreed. He bent over the old man who Mara threw at the door and uttered, "Still can't keep off the beautiful woman, can you Jarvis Wasine? This time you really picked the wrong female to mess with."

As Jarvis got himself up, he muttered, "Ask me if I care."

There were eleven of them. Only three were human. Two were Rodian. The rest consisted of a Bothan, an Ithorian, an Ayth, a Devaronian, a Neimoidian, and the ever mysterious Anzati species with its coma enducing tentacles coming out of each face cheek. One of Booster's protocol droids named T-2C was close by for translation purposes. Immediately after the comotion over Mara versus Jarvis died down, all the attention was focused on Luke. They voiced their complaints and concerns in each of their languages. The silver-gray protocol droid could hardly catch up with the multiple tongues speaking all at once.

Luke called upon the Force to instill a feeling of patience into them. It worked to some extent and he took the advantage to address all of them. "Quiet down, please. Thank you. I understand that all of you have questions and concerns, but let me address them at once. I don't know if you're aware of your recent situation. If you've paid attention to the HoloNet you know there has been some brutal murders of ex-Vigos within the past several days. Let me be blunt. It is my belief that this murderer will keep on killing until you are all dead. Your lives are in danger as the NRS agents who led you here may or may not have warned you. It was my opinion that your safety would have been compromised had you stayed in your individual homes. Therefore, I set up this undisclosed location to ensure your safety."

The Neimoidian burst out, "How are we safe here? That murderer can find us and kill us all with

one stroke." Murmurs of agreement rang throughout the crowd.

Luke exclaimed before it became a roar. "Should the murderer find his way here, he will have to deal with the likes of myself and Mara Jade here. The killer has yet to encounter such opposition."

"Why he kill us?" cried one of the Rodians in broken Basic.

The human Jarvis broke in. "Revenge! Don't you see?"

"Why now?" asked the Devaronian. "Why after all these years?"

Jarvis barked, "The best time to set out for revenge is after your enemy forgets about you. It's like I said earlier. It's a conspiracy against us and what we used to be a part of. The galaxy wants the remnants of Black Sun and Black Nebula to disappear. In fact," he glared at Luke, "I wouldn't be surprised if the Jedi were in on it."

Shouts of accusations toward Luke followed but Luke lifted a hand and stated calmly, "I can promise you that is not the case. Both myself and Mon Mothma have dedicated ourselves to stop this monster. He is handing out his own brand of justice. The Jedi have always been committed to protect any and all citizens of the New Republic."

Jarvis sneered, "No matter what kind of scum we represent?"

Luke looked straight at Jarvis and emphasized, "Any and all."

Jarvis spat out with sarcasm, "Thanks for thinking of us, Jedi."

The Neimoidian cried out, "How long are we to stay here?"

It was a question that Luke didn't have an answer to at that moment. His goal of bringing the victims together in one place in order to avoid chasing the killer all across the galaxy had been met. What now? Luke tried to answer as best he could. "We will have to play this as we go. Mara and I will be researching further in our investigation to possibly find more about our suspect. We will keep a careful watch of traffic going in and out of this ship and keep track of who comes aboard."

Jarvis gave a snort. "From what I hear this ship couldn't detect a rancor in a gundark's nest."

Booster spoke sharply at Jarvis. "This ship has more surprises than you have pickup lines for the ladies, Jarvis."

"Ask me if I care," Jarvis replied.

Luke stepped in before another scene broke out. "Let us accept our situation as it is now, gentlemen. As I understand it, Booster has made arrangements for food and drink to be delivered down here. He has also set up each of you with your own bunks."

One of the other humans was an elderly man and he asked, "Can we at least have a sabacc table set up? We may be here a long time."

Booster nodded. "I can arrange that, Azil. Provided that you bring your ego to the table so I can shoot it down in a game."

Azil gave Booster an icy stare and Luke continued. "For your own safety, we ask that you stay on this level of the ship."

The Devaronian cried out, "What? We can't be stuck down here with just a Sabacc table. They have Barr'aca slots in Trader's Alley."

"How do you know that, Trock?" questioned Booster.

Trock gave a wide smile. "You'd be surprised at what I know, Booster." He glanced at Corran and added, "Like how your daughter married the son of the hack CorSec officer who sent you to Kessel."

"You kriffing..." Corran lunged forward but Mara turned her body towards him to block him.

Mara snapped, "Corran! Ease up. You don't want to start anything with this crowd."

After Corran eyed Mara and settled down, Luke reiterated, "I want to elaborate that the reason we can't have you on the upper levels is because we can't take the chance that someone up there will recognize you. And that is information that we cannot afford to be leaked. Now, if there's no more questions, I'll let Booster and his men get you settled in. Thank you."

As the crowd dispersed with grumbles, Booster and his men tended to their guests. Luke went over to Mara and Corran. "You all right?" he asked Corran.

"You tell me."

Luke glanced at Mara. "Nice block."

Mara replied, "Hey, I can't take them all on. That was a good bit of control there, Luke. No one got shot, so that's a plus."

Luke asked in a hushed voice, "Is I'hela set up on the Jade's Fire?"

"Yes," Mara spat. "I don't like strangers on my new ship, Skywalker."

"I know. But this way they don't know about her. They think we're using the Venture's guidance system. If they leak that out our killer may get that information and think it'll be easier to sneak on board."

Mara noted, "You seem to be inviting our killer here."

"I agree," Corran said. "Almost like you're drawing him into the fight. Solo style. I like it."

Corran gave a quiet laugh. "Still, this is a whole steaming pile of risks, Luke."

"Maybe. But they're worth it when it throws off our killer's plans. Nothing wrong with thinking outside the cube."

Mara retorted, "Unless you get trapped inside of it."

The protocol droid, T-2C, came up to them. He looked similar to Threepio except for the silver-gray color and the head being more square. T-2C was a more recent model than C-3PO. His voice was masculine with a slight effeminate quality, yet deeper than Threepio's. "Would any of you like some refreshments?"

"No thanks, Too-See," answered Corran.

"Are you sure, Sir Corran. It would be no trouble."

"Positive. Go on and see if any of the Vigos need anything."

"Oh, yes sir. I am so thrilled to speak to the Anzati. His language is most peculiar. A very awkward dialect for his species. I must say the accent..."

"That's nice, Too-See. If you don't mind, we have some important business to discuss here," Corran cut in before Two-See could go on.

"Certainly, Sir. I am sorry I interrupted."

As T-2C waddled away, Corran looked to Luke and asked, "Do you think I'hela will be all right working alone?"

Luke replied, "I don't see why not. She's dedicated for sure. Maybe I'll check on her later."

Jarvis Wasine stumbled up to them, or rather to Mara, and ignored the men standing next to her. In his hand already was a can of Gizer ale, supplied by Booster. He spoke to Mara with way too much sugar in his voice. "Don't count me out because of my age, Ms. Jade. I may look as old as a geezer, but I have the wildness of a vornskr."

Mara stated firmly, "I've killed a few vornskrs in my lifetime. Keep it up and I can easily add another."

Jarvis laughed after taking a swig of his Gizer and repeated, "Ask me if I care."

"Mr. Wasine," Luke said to him with a wave of his hand, "you will go back with the rest of your fellow Vigos and leave Mara Jade alone."

Jarvis had a sudden dazed look and he recited absently, "I'll go back to my fellow Vigos and leave Mara Jade alone." He turned around and headed back to the group without a second thought.

"Now, why didn't Mara think of that?" Corran asked.

Luke replied before Mara and shrugged, "Difference of execution?"

Mara joked with more than a hint of sarcasm, "Oh, yeah. This is going to be fun."

The Jade's Fire cockpit

A few hours later, the sabacc game had started and the ex Vigos were now starting to enjoy themselves. They couldn't remember the last time they had all been together and they began to reminisce.

Luke took the time to enter the Jade's Fire cockpit to keep Lt. I'hela Broadwater company. As

he came in, I'hela was looking very attentive to the readouts of the Fire's scanners. There was nothing in the space around them to report. She was so focused on the screen that Luke came up behind her and she jumped.

"Oh! You startled me," she gasped.

"Sorry. Thought you might like some caf." He set down a hot cup of the black liquid on the console near her.

"Oh, thank you, Master Skywalker." She reached for the cup and took a careful sip of the hot, but refreshing drink. "I've been thirsty ever since I found some packaged Karkan ribines in Mara's reefer unit. Hope she doesn't mind."

"I'm sure she wouldn't want you to go hungry. If she says anything, I'll say I ate them. Karkan ribines are my favorite. Did she have any tomo spice?"

"No. They were pretty bland. At this point I settled for just satisfying my hunger and not my preference."

Luke let a small silence in before he asked, "Nothing more to report?"

"Just the two smugglers racing in their fancy ships. Other than that, nothing. And here I thought space couldn't be more dead. I've maintained my obscurity from the Vigos as you ordered. I hid the Horizon Star in the back of the hangar here. I assume you got my silent message to you about the hot-rod smugglers."

"Yes. Though, I admit that I had a regressive moment when I read it," Luke reflected with a nostalgic smile.

"Why is that, sir?"

Luke plainly answered, "Because if this was a few decades ago, I would have been out there racing along with them."

She gave a surprising smile and questioned, "Really? You? I can't see you with that big of an ego."

"Well, I was a different person then. Becoming a Jedi calmed my ego quite a bit."

"I just can't imagine you being like that."

"You didn't know me then. Of course, I haven't totally dismissed that part of my life. It's a part of my past and I've accepted it to be part of my future."

I'hela suddenly stopped smiling and turned back to the empty screen. She sipped more of her caf, which was cooling off now.

Luke could catch a flicker of something in her emotions after what he said. He didn't have time to feel it because it disappeared as quickly as it arrived. He tried focusing on her mind but it went back into hiding behind her mental walls. It was peculiar that I'hela's block of her mind was nearly as strong as Mara Jade's. He was amazed at the stamina it would take for a woman with no Force potential like I'hela to maintain that mental block.

She quickly changed the subject. "I'm impressed with the guidance systems Mara Jade has on this ship. Very state of the art. And some of the modifications may be illegal. Don't worry. I won't report her."

"I would strongly advise against doing that anyway."

"I especially like the transponder cloaking. Those smugglers really thought I was speaking from the Errant Venture when I warned them to stop."

Luke only nodded as he asked, "Back at Nolog's home on Rhen Var, you mentioned that you had a late start in your career. What did you mean by that?"

I'hela answered silently, "I suppose you've noticed that I'm a bit older than most cadets coming out of the NR Academy. In the days of the Empire, I could have never passed the durability test to advance to Carida."

There it was again. The sharp ping of emotion. The opening of her mental wall. Luke pounced on it. "Just like your father, who failed it as well."

She turned her head so sharply at him that he almost flinched. She snapped, "How did you...oh, I

forgot. I'm dealing with a Jedi. And the Jedi at that." She went back to the empty scanner but her mind wasn't paying attention to it. She sighed and admitted, "It's true. My father was one of those who tried out for the Academy on Carida and came up short. He didn't pass the test but he showed enough intelligence and instinct to become a security officer at the Imperial Palace. Back then, that was considered a sideways promotion. He avoided being cast out as a failure."

"What happened to him?"

She shot back, "Why don't you tell me? You seem to know the answers already."

Luke calmly stated, "I can only read emotions, not details."

I'hela reflected, "He died almost a standard year ago. He was so sick. I had to take care of him."

"Hence, your late start."

"Yes. My career was put on hold. I dropped out of the NR Academy when he started deteriorating several years ago. After he died, I picked up where I left off. I didn't graduate with honors like I could have if I hadn't quit. But I wouldn't trade honors for time with my father for anything."

"I know how you feel. What about your mother?"

"I never knew her."

Luke nodded. "Just like me."

I'hela questioned, "I thought you didn't know your father either? Wasn't he some great Jedi killed in the Clone Wars?"

Luke sometimes forgot that the people outside of his circle of friends was not aware of his true heritage. Luke swallowed and replied, "Can I tell you something in confidence, I'hela?"

I'hela's attention was now completely on Luke as she confirmed, "Of course."

"My father was Anakin Skywalker. He was a great Jedi during the Clone Wars along with General Obi Wan Kenobi."

"I've heard of them. But I was taught that Kenobi was part of the Jedi conspiracy against Palpatine."

"I'm not surprised. If your education was done in Imperial City they wouldn't have made my father and Kenobi into heroes. Palpatine saw to that. What history also doesn't tell is that Anakin fell to the dark side of the Force. He therefore became a member of the Sith Order."

"But I thought the Sith were wiped out thousands of years ago."

"They made a comeback. The Emperor himself was a powerful Sith Lord. His apprentice was Darth Vader."

"I've heard of Vader. Wow, that brings the Empire in a whole new light."

"It does. But there's more. You've heard of Vader, but he was once a great Jedi himself who had fallen to the dark side. He sustained serious injuries during a lightsaber battle with Obi Wan that forced him to wear the environ suit and his breathing mechanism."

I'hela's eyes went wide and a horrified look was on her face. "No! You mean...Anakin Skywalker..."

"Was Darth Vader. He ceased to be Anakin and became a whole new identity deep in the dark side."

"Oh, my stars. Darth Vader was your father."

"Right." Luke let that information set in her thoughts. He didn't need to relay that story very often anymore. He was amazed at how short the story was. Of course, there were many more details that Luke saved from I'hela. He went on to say, "Look, I'hela, I know you may think your talents are wasted here by doing tedious work, but just know that it is an important part of this mission."

"I understand. I would never complain about orders, Master."

"Luke. Just Luke, if you could."

"Ok."

"You and I are alike in a way, I'hela. We both got a late start on our careers but we came out all right anyway." Luke stood up and said, "I have to get back. Have to make sure no one is killing each other back there. That'll just make our killer's job easier. You alert me by silent comlink if you see

anything out of the ordinary."

"I will." Phela nodded and went back to the screen. When he was about to leave, she stopped him and said, "Thank you...Luke. For the caf."

"Don't mention it."

The Errant Venture - Black Level hallway

"What?" the Devaronian, Trock, whispered his exclaim. "Lohl Ch'la was murdered?"

Jarvis Wasine walked with the Devaronian in a quiet section of the Black Level. It had been hours since the Jedi Master's speech and almost all the Vigos were either asleep, passed out, or lying awake in worry. Trock and Jarvis couldn't sleep so they walked around the level's hallway. When Jarvis made sure they were alone, he disclosed the information he received from his source about Lohl Ch'la. Jarvis answered Trock in a hushed tone. "That's what my source said. It was on the HoloNet but they said it was a suicide. There's many poisons that can leave no trace and look like a suicide. We of all people should know that."

Trock muttered, "It makes sense. If you ask me, poisoning was too good for Ch'la. If I knew he was on Lianna, I would have taken care of the traitor myself."

"As would I. Lohl cost us too many leaders and clients with his selfless act. That aside, there is another rumor my source tells me. It's about the suspect the NRS and the Jedi are looking for."

"Who is it?"

"You're not going to believe it."

"Just tell me, Wasine."

"The man who was supposedly behind the infamous Vigo suicide pact. Remember? After Xizor died?"

Trock's red eyes widened and his horns twitched. He whispered, "Voxan? Surely he must be dead by now."

Jarvis gave a small chuckle. "There was a time when I thought Skarce Voxan was immortal. Still, there can be many reasons for it to be true. There was a hint of a son."

"I heard that one. There also could be cloning."

"That's a more dreadful thought."

"If that's who it is then these Jedi have more than they bargained for."

Jarvis spat out, "The Jedi seem to believe they can take on Voxan. They have a rude awakening. You don't mess with Voxan. No matter what form he's in."

"True enough. Do you really believe he was involved in the pact?"

"I don't know. There's no longer any proof left anymore. I was still in line for Vigo under Sraje Gherit at the time, so I wasn't invited."

"I am not ashamed to admit it now, but I was invited. But I knew what tradition called for at the edge of Black Sun's dissolution. I fled and exiled myself on Duros all these years."

Jarvis patted Trock's shoulder. "You weren't the only one, my friend. There's a fine line between tradition and reality. The old Vigos never realized that."

"Of course, if Voxan was involved it brings a whole new perspective on the pact."

There was a sound heard at the other end of the hallway and Jarvis made a shushing gesture.

Coming through the opposite end of hallway was T-2C. He greeted the man and alien as he approached. "Master Jarvis. Master Trock. A pleasure to meet you here. Have you both completed your sleep cycles for the night?"

"No, we don't sleep," answered Jarvis roughly.

"Really, Sir? It was my understanding that humans such as yourself required a mandatory amount of hibernation."

Jarvis smiled mischievously and said with humor the droid did not detect, "I'm not human, droid. In fact, I'm a figment of your imagination. Now move along and leave us alone."

"That is strange, Sir Jarvis. My photo receptors are working in proper order. And my auditory

sensors are receiving your voice very well. I don't see how you could not exist in front of me."

Jarvis and Trock laughed. Jarvis said to the droid, "Maybe you're broken and you don't even know it yet."

"Perhaps you are right," answered Two-See seriously. "I shall head to maintenance at the earliest opportunity to run some diagnostic tests. I have not had a full overhaul in quite some time."

Trock cried out, "Why wait? Can't you leave now?"

"Of course," the droid answered. "I shall leave you both at once." Two-See started to walk past them.

Jarvis repeated his phrase, "Ask me if I care."

The droid suddenly stopped in its tracks and did an about face in front of Jarvis. It stayed silent.

"What? You going to say something?," Jarvis taunted. "Hey, why are your eyes red?"

That was all he got out before Two-See suddenly retracted its heavy metal alloy arm and swung it quicker than expected across the side of Jarvis' head. The blow knocked Jarvis to the metal floor of the hallway with a thud. He landed with a bloody contusion on the side of his head and was too stunned in pain to react. Trock did react as he swiftly tried to reach for Two-See's deactivation switch. Two-See simply brought up his arm and back handed the Devaronian across his nose, sending him down on the floor as well. Whereas Trock brought his hands up to his nose in pain, Jarvis stayed still from feeling too much pain. Trock then yelled in an ear-piercing call for help.

Two-See didn't stop. It went over to the semi-conscious Jarvis and reached for his neck with its metal fingers. It grasped the man's neck and started to squeeze. Jarvis started choking with what oxygen he could gasp at. Two-See started to pick Jarvis up by his neck and squeezed tighter. As Jarvis continued to choke, Two-See suddenly froze and its grip on Jarvis loosened. The man's head slumped to the side and his limp body dropped once again to the floor unmoving.

Corran Horn came from behind the protocol droid with his hand hovering in the air. He had used the Force to depress Two-See's deactivation switch. He looked over at Trock with a bloodied nose. "You all right?"

Trock could only give a nod.

Corran looked at the scene before him. Jarvis Wasine looked to be on the verge of death. His head lay on the floor in a pool of blood. He stared at the dormant droid frozen in an act of murderous rage. Corran muttered, "Two-See, what did you do?"

Errant Venture - Droid Maintenance Bay

Luke and Mara entered the bay while Corran and Booster were already there. They were watching over a lean young man wearing a loose white lab coat. He was busy working on a disassembled Two-See.

Luke addressed Booster, "You called us in?"

Booster replied, "Yes, Luke. Close the door."

Mara flipped the controls behind her that brought down the bay's door. "What's going on?"

Booster started, "First thing is that Trock is all right. He's got a nasty bacta patch on his nose, but he'll live. Jarvis...died on the operating table. The blow to the head combined with the suffocation was too much for him to survive."

"Tarkin's Ghost," Mara uttered. "Was it a malfunction?"

"Not exactly," Corran answered darkly.

"What do you mean?" Luke questioned.

Booster stepped aside to present the young man working on Two-See. "I'll let Soj tell you." He turned to the young man and called out, "Soj." No answer as the man continued working on the droid. "Soj!"

With a head jerk, Soj looked up and snapped, "What...oh." When he looked up, they could see he was wearing oversized magna-glasses that made his eyes look as big as dinner plates. He flipped them off and the young man with unkept dark blonde hair stepped out from behind Two-See. He was

obviously nervous. He didn't seem comfortable to be the center of attention. "Sorry. I've been the busy boy today."

Booster announced, "This is Soj Nodew. He's the Chief Technical Supervisor on the Venture. He found some interesting things with Two-See. Didn't you?" Soj only stared in silence. "Didn't you?" Booster loudly repeated.

"Oh, yes. Yes. Uh...wow...um, let me just say...Luke Skywalker. I'm a big fan of all of your...things you've done, which is to say....everything."

"Soj," Booster grumbled, "get on with it."

"Oh, yes. Uh, Two-See's little murdering incident was not an accident."

Luke asked, "How is that?"

Soj said with no small amount of pride, "Well, I could get technical, but I'm sure you wouldn't..."

"Try me," Luke cut in.

"...have a problem in understanding. Ok. Someone reprogrammed Two-See's power coupling. It was bypassed into an old circuit board that has never been used. His LSC," Soj paused to translate, "his Locomotive Servo Controller, was diverted to an alternate communication module."

Mara spoke at once, "All right, I'm not up on my droid-speak like Luke here. Translate that into Basic."

"In short, Two-See was converted into an assassin droid."

"Who could have done this?" was Luke's next question.

"That, I so do not know. I'm as confused about that as Commander Raleigh was with the Space Drones."

"Who?" Mara asked.

Corran supplied with, "It's from a fantasy program on the HoloNet. WarTrek."

Soj emphatically pointed out, "It's not a fantasy show. It's science drama."

"Shall we move on?" Booster impatiently sighed.

"Oh, yes. Uh...who could have reprogrammed Two-See? Basically, anyone with a working knowledge of protocol droid systems and their history. There aren't many. I, myself, am honored to be one of them." He smiled proudly for a moment and then an awkward pause passed until he frowned. "It's...not me. I'm not a killer. Except on the HoloNet gaming site."

Luke interrupted, "What did you mean by history?"

Soj explained, "Well, virtually all protocol droids are capable of violence. Some of the earliest models were designed for battle. Two-See's model was later but that command has always been sitting there all along doing nothing. Just sitting there all by its lonesome. Basically, someone woke it up. When you think about it, protocol droids are perfect for wetworks."

"Diving?" Luke gasped.

"Assassinations, Farmboy," Mara corrected.

Soj confirmed, "Yes, that's what wetworks is. I mean, look at a protocol droid. They're sleek. They mimic human mannerisms better than any other droid. They're unassuming. They can blend in."

"Protocol droids don't exactly blend in," Corran countered.

"True, but...not to counteract your...uh...counter, but I think we all agree that protocol droids are ignored because they're rather...uh...annoying." He gave a nervous laugh then stopped abruptly.

Booster added, "Tell them what else you found."

"Oh...yes. In Two-See's language vocabulator, I found a small recording. And that was hooked up to the communication module when it was activated. It was linked to the power coupling which basically told Two-See its target."

Mara asked, "What was the recording?"

"Well...here...listen to this." Soj backed up behind Two-See and reached into its head and the sound of a voice was heard. It was clearly a recording of a familiar voice and phrase.

"Ask me if I care."

Corran stated the obvious. "Jarvis Wasine. He was targeted. When he said his favorite phrase

Two-See was activated into an assassination droid."

Mara uttered, "There goes the accident theory."

Luke asked in wonder, "How long would it take to do all this?"

Soj looked in the air to calculate and said, "If they already had the recording, and knew exactly what to do...I'd say five...ten standard minutes tops."

Mara noted, "That recording had to have been imprinted since Wasine's arrival with the droid already here."

Luke looked to Booster. "Two-See's duties didn't take him anywhere else but Black Level?"

Booster answered, "No. I had him on serving duties and as acting translator for the alien Vigos. As far as I know, Two-See hasn't been up past Black Level tonight."

Corran looked closer at Two-See's face and asked, "Why are his photo receptors red?"

Soj answered, "All protocol droids have infrared lenses. For some reason they went active. Maybe it was from switching power couplings. I...don't know everything."

Luke reassured, "It's all right. No one asked you to be perfect."

"Yes, but I now consider myself a lesser god."

Luke gave a laugh and restated, "Jarvis was singled out. Who else but an ex-assassin would know how to reprogram a droid into a killer?"

Corran replied, "We can't prove that, Luke. For all we know, it could have been any one of the other Vigos. Maybe they had an old grudge with Jarvis. He was annoying himself."

Soj cut in, "Actually, I may have some proof. I found something on Two-See's servo motor plating. I didn't know what it was. I thought it was a manufacturing etch, but it looks too fresh." He beckoned them around to see and he pointed out the etching. He took the huge magna-glass and hovered it over the plating. "See there? It's a series of Aurabesh symbols but they don't seem to be saying anything. There's the symbols for the numbers one and ten with a symbol I can only translate into 'open'."

Luke examined the symbols and thought aloud, "Not open. One...over..ten, maybe? No, that doesn't make sense."

Booster looked carefully and after a certain point his memory kicked in. "No, that middle symbol isn't the usual Aurabesh. That's the Old Republic version of the Aurabesh alphabet."

Corran added, "Which the Empire did away with and formed its own version. We use new-Aurebesh now days."

Mara asked Booster, "So do you remember what that last symbol means?"

Soj added with humor, "Too bad we can't ask Two-See himself." They fell silent looking at him and he said, "I'm not gonna. Don't worry, I removed his violent tendencies."

Corran said, "I don't think that's a good idea."

Booster said with sudden remembrance, "Ah, that's the symbol for 'go'."

"Go?" Soj questioned. "As in, Go, killer?"

"No," Mara uttered. "As in one down..."

"Ten to go," Luke finished. He gave a heavy defeated sigh. "Looks like my efforts here are wasted."

"Why do you say that?" Corran asked.

"Because," Luke said, "our killer is already on board."

* * * * *

Chapter Eight

Jade's Fire cockpit

Defeat was a concept that Luke Skywalker was all too familiar with. From his destruction of his

Skyhopper on Tatooine to his failure at confronting Vader for the first time in Cloud City, Luke recognized the taste of defeat. Over the years he had learned to turn his mistakes into opportunities for future victories. His latest challenge was turning his failure to allow a serial killer on board the Errant Venture into a victory.

The message that Soj Nodew found etched on the droid told them a few things. At some point, their killer took the time to reprogram Two-See into an assassination droid. Before that, the killer would have had to supply the droid with the recording of its target, Jarvis Wasine. Add to the fact that the etched message was meant to taunt them. This was proof that who they were dealing with was someone with skill and arrogance. A person like that would have a specific past that would make them like that. If there were two people who knew all about their past forming their future, it would be Luke Skywalker and Mara Jade.

Mara was currently searching on the HoloNet into the past of Skarce Voxan. There wasn't much. She used all of her resources she built over the years as the Emperor's Hand and as Talon Karrde's second-in-command and nothing specific turned up. Her frustration was getting to her and at one point she nearly had the urge to pull the computer out of the wall. Then, Skywalker entered. She never knew a reason why, but it seemed that whenever Luke Skywalker entered a room, hate, anger, and panic vacated the area.

"Anything yet?" he asked, knowing full well the answer. Mara considered that Skywalker sometimes asked questions not to get answers, but a reaction of how the answers were given. It wasn't the first time that Mara thought Luke could have been a decent interrogator.

"A few things I scratched from the surface. Unfortunately, the surface is all you're going to get when researching Skarce Voxan."

"I can't believe a person can just disappear that easily."

"It's not that easy for someone untrained. For assassins, it's second-hand knowledge. I should know. I disappeared from the galaxy for a time."

"Yes, but only a handful of people knew who you were. Voxan's name has been synonymous with the boogeyman for generations."

"You had never heard of him before now," she countered.

"Have you seen the desert I grew up in? Not exactly a wealth of information there."

"I don't know. I would think the smugglers and various scum in Mos Eisley would mention Voxan at some point."

"I didn't exactly hang out in Mos Eisley."

Mara went on. "Well, look at your Ben Kenobi. One of the greatest Jedi to live and all he does to disappear is only change his first name. Always wondered how Vader never found him."

"He wasn't looking. Tatooine would be the last place Vader would want to revisit."

"I got that from him too. Confusing then. Understandable now."

Luke shifted gears. "So, what did you find?"

Mara sighed. "Found some old data on Voxan's last known victims. It matches the data on that old holo of Obi Wan mentioning that family, the Helans. I dug deeper and found an old private holo of the family. The Helans were having a Life day party for one of their sons. Doesn't tell us much, but at least..."

"It gives us a face to the victims."

"Something like that. Here it is. Do you want to see it, or are you going to stare into space?"

"What? Oh, sorry. Just thinking of what Obi Wan had said about them. Go ahead."

Mara started the holo and a blue-white image appeared of a family sitting at a kitchen table. One son was at the head of the table with his brother and his father sitting on each side. Coming into the frame was the mother carrying a flat tray containing a cake. It showed her setting it down in front of her son. There was no sound but it was obvious that they were singing to the boy. Their happiness did not need to be heard. The Helans' future was perfect in this moment in time. After this holo was shot, their future was not as promising.

Luke broke his own thoughts to ask Mara, "Where did you find this?"

Mara answered casually, "I still have access into the Empire's archives. What's left of them, anyway. There's not much else on the Helans. I did find some data on that Deponent Program of Kenobi's." She was about to shut down the holo when Luke stopped her.

"Wait. Do you notice something about the mother's belly?"

"Yes, she's pregnant. Good eye, Luke. You'll make a good detective someday."

Luke reflected without acknowledging Mara's sarcastic compliment, "Their youngest wasn't even born yet. They were so happy then."

"Yes, and they found themselves in a mess with Black Sun and got themselves killed."

Luke looked at her. "That's a rather cold view, Mara."

She shrugged. "It is what it is. In both of my lines of work, before and after Endor, attachments got in the way. Your Old Republic Jedi were on to something when they banished them. Friendship, romance, family...all lead to pain that I wouldn't wish on my worst enemy. And you know that I have quite a collection of worst enemies."

Luke wanted to argue her view. He wanted to tell her that his victories were because of his friendships and family he developed over the years. It wasn't the time for that discussion. He skipped the argument to ask, "Why were the Helans the last victims?"

"Didn't say they were. They're just the last known victims. And even the connection to Voxan is sketchy at best."

"What did you find on the Deponent Program?"

"Just basics. Found a list of the volunteers. Black Sun would have loved to get their hands on that. Mostly the names are single men or women. Lohl Ch'la included. The Helans were the only family to enter the program."

"How did Voxan find the family and not Ch'la?"

"It's like Kenobi said in your holo. The lower the number of people involved the easier it was to hide them. Try hiding a whole family of five versus one single man. They would have stuck out like sore thumbs no matter what their new names were. I couldn't find a date when the program actually ended. I can tell you there were no more volunteers after the Helans."

"Because the Old Republic had a war to fight."

"A war in which they lost. And all the old archives were destroyed. Well, not all."

"Can you dig deeper into that archive?"

"I can, but I don't know how long I'll have before I'm spotted. I can't guarantee some tech in Bastion will be asleep at the controls."

"Just try until you can't anymore. We have to know who we're dealing with."

Mara nodded in agreement but changed subjects. "Did you see them take the body of Jarvis away?"

"Yes," he answered solemnly.

"Did you notice what was still on him?"

"Sorry, I wasn't into details at the time."

"His Black Sun chit. He was still wearing it."

"Meaning our killer didn't take it."

"Of course not. When he made the droid into his killer, he didn't have a chance to take it."

"Maybe he plans to take it later."

"No. That means he's getting sloppy. Careless. The worst thing an assassin can do is to improvise. Without the meticulous planning, mistakes are made."

"He still got his man."

"Maybe so. He had to revert to making a protocol droid do his work for him. You changed his plans, Luke. I know you've been discouraged since we realized he snuck on board. Trust me when I say that you are getting to him."

"All right. How do we get him out in the open here on the ship? He won't go for any bait we

give him."

"I don't know. He somehow knew where we would be. He knew when everyone was on board. The only two ways he could get that information is physically or mechanically."

"We already scanned everyone for transponders. And Booster has alerts if one is spotted."

"So it has to be someone giving him the data somehow." Mara thought a moment and asked, "Do you know what a data trail is?"

"Heard the term before. Never was involved with one myself."

"We can try that and see where it leads us."

"Who do we start with?"

"I have a few suspects. One of them has to do with something else I found." Mara turned to the computer and typed in some commands until she reached the right screen. "This just came in a few standard hours ago."

Luke checked the screen and asked, "Is this correct? You verified this?"

"Talked to the source himself. Don't worry, I used a secure channel."

"I don't believe this. I can't believe this."

"And there goes your application for spy. You're too trusting, Skywalker. Still, I do say there are two sides of any story."

"Maybe you should handle this. You're better at it than I am."

"Couldn't have said it better. I'll get to it on the first chance. Right now, let's get Corran and work on the data trail."

Errant Venture - Black Level storage facility

Waiting. That's what I do in the name of justice. The bowels of this ship are dark and quiet. Patience is called for in this situation. It will be worth it. My source had been correct. The Anzati is down here alone. He must have convinced the Jedi that he needed time alone. How careless of them. And for what? Religion. The Anzati has to pray to his god. They are a mysterious alien race. Such devotion, yet dangerous to deal with. The Anzati are a paradox.

This plays into my hand perfectly. Skywalker may have changed the game, but I have adapted well. My source came through, as usual. It will be a sad day when I have to confront and kill that channel. The source is also the beginning. And it shall be the end as well. In due time. All will be dealt with by then. The last to be served my justice.

It has been a standard hour and not a soul has been down here. The Anzati is alone. Time to act. It will be a pleasure to deal with this one personally. I was robbed of my satisfaction at ending Jarvis Wasine's life. That task I gave to the droid. It almost seemed impersonal. Separate from the joy. I didn't even get to collect his chit. The Black Sun chit is the symbol of all the Vigos' roles as puppets. Father used to tell me the stories of their cowardice behind their power. And how they planned to use that power to eliminate him. You showed them, father.

Stop it! No emotions! That will surely give away my location to the Jedi. Damn Skywalker for changing the rules. He has proven to be a worthy adversary. Like his own father. Now there was a man who I would have loved to confront and defeat. The next best feat would be to destroy his son. The weakness in the son is different from the father. Jedi Skywalker's weakness will be easy to exploit. He is so full of weak emotion and passion. All it would take is to inflict pain of those he loves. One in particular. Not yet. Not until I am finished.

Enough sentiment. Time to act.

I must be cautious when I approach the Anzati. I can't look at him directly. They have a telepathic ability that renders their victims motionless. The tentacles on their cheeks have a proboscis that can suck out brain matter through the nose. Not an experience I want to endure. I almost wish the Anzati would attack first. I can sever his tentacles with my blade and that would weaken him. His death would be mine to take. At least I can collect his chit.

There he is. Alone. Sitting. Praying. It will soon be his last prayer. His back is to me. Can it be

this easy? Hand on my blade. Ready for anything.

Including him standing up. Does he know I'm here?

He turns his head. Yes, he knows. I forgot how ugly Anzatis are. Rough pink-gray skin. The lumps of flesh on each cheek that are home to the tentacles. Stay back. Don't make direct eye contact. He speaks.

"Welcome. I have been waiting for you."

The Anzati accent is peculiar. Hard to fully understand at first. I got the message. He knew I was here. Telepathic, indeed. Too bad I have to end his life. I wonder what his role was in Black Sun. I don't even know his name. So mysterious.

He prods for my response. "What? No greeting? That is all right. I am glad to finally meet you."

"The feeling's mutual," I say.

"A vocoder. Don't want me to hear your true voice?"

I gesture to my blade. I make sure he sees how shiny it is before I cover it with his blood. I tell him, "This is my voice. I make it speak for me. It speaks for justice. You were a part of an organization that formed its own justice. Now it's my turn to show you mine."

"Is that so? I see you have your hood over your eyes. You've done your research. I can't affect you without eye contact. Nice get up, by the way. That tight black tunic with the hood makes you look like a hybrid of Palpatine and Vader."

"I'll take that as a compliment."

"Just so you know, your reign of terror is over."

"You cannot defeat me. I know how far your tentacles extend. Go ahead. Try it. I will slice both of them off like they were roast ronto."

The Anzati started to laugh.

Oh, he will receive extra pain for that.

He continues to taunt me. "You see, I actually have the advantage here."

"You have no training that can defeat me. You don't know what I am capable of."

The Anzati chuckled. "There is much that you don't know."

He starts to step closer. I back away. Keep your distance. Wait! The steps are spaced too close together. Unnatural. Clever. Very clever, I admit. "You are not an Anzati."

"I was wondering when you would notice."

"What are you? A changeling?"

"Not quite. Allow me to introduce myself." All of a sudden, his features dissolve. The pinkish-gray skin becomes more pink flesh. The lumps on his cheeks flatten. Dark brown hair replaces his short blue-black hair. A goatee forms on his chin and around his mouth. A human. He finishes his change and says, "I am Corran Horn."

My shock almost defeats me. Horn. Interesting. "How did you do that?"

Corran shrugged. "I have some hidden talents. Though I must say not all Jedi can master the art of deception."

"Jedi? You were once a mere CorSec agent."

"I was. I found out that I have other traits which were descended from my father. Same as you."

"Me?" I reply innocently.

"Don't play games. Skarce Voxan is your father, isn't he?"

"Why ask questions you know the answers to? I suspect you have one of my names courtesy of Mara Jade?"

"Mahc Teirnan."

"Resourceful woman, that Jade."

"She is."

"You still cannot defeat me." I check the distance from me to the storage room door. As soon as I thought it, the door shut itself on its own. I turn back to Horn. He has his hand raised in a casual wave.

"You're not going anywhere, Mahc."

Clear my mind! Shut it down. He can feel it. No emotion.

Horn continues. "I know what you're doing. You can't hide from a Jedi. I have some questions for you. Easy ones first. How did you get on board undetected?"

"Stealth and distraction," I reply.

"Hmm..stealth is easy enough. You have a cloaked ship. What was the distraction?"

"The only activity in space in the past twelve hours."

Corran's eyes lit up. "The pirate race. You hired them so you could slip in under them. We may have had an infrared detection system. How did you know we wouldn't use it?"

"Ignorance." I took that moment to throw a dimonium cap on the floor. Penetrating mist filled the room. It made Horn step back in confusion. That was my chance. I turned to the door controls and opened the door to exit the room. I ran.

Horn recovered from the burst quicker than I could imagine. I could hear him yell after me. "I can read you! I know where you're headed!"

Shut it down! No emotions!

I spotted the ventilation shaft where I entered the level. He'll know where it is and where I'm going. If I can just get into a crowd. I climb up the shaft and ascend to the upper level. Is this panic I'm feeling? No! Shut it down! Panic induces errors. Keep going. Not long now. There. Climb out of the shaft. Traders Alley. Many minds to add to the confusion. Can't hear Horn anymore. Doesn't mean he's not there. Determination is his passion.

Need to find a physical disguise. There! A human gambler. He's heading to the 'fresher. Alone. He looks drunk. All the better. Check the layout. No one following him. Everyone is busy drinking and gambling. Get behind him. Grab his head in a choke hold. Snap the neck. Your gambling days are over, my friend. Set it down in a stall. Nice oversized tunic. Excellent cover. Push hood down under new tunic. Vocoder off. I hate feeling this exposed. Damn the Jedi! They will pay for this!

Stop it! They can feel your hatred! Shut it down!

Now for the mental half of my disguise.

Focus. Concentrate. Your motivation is now greed. I need to gamble more. I kriffed away a hundred credits. Only have twenty more. No more sabacc for me. Too rich for my blood. Ah, there's a Barr'aca slot. Perfect. I need another drink first. I have to wade through this crowd to get to the bar.

"Fogblaster!" I yell at the Bith 'tender. He sets my drink down. He goes back to his many other patrons. I search through the crowd. I nudge the rodian sitting next to me. "Hey, isn't that Corran Horn?"

"Who wants to know?"

"Nobody. I'm jusht wondering what he'sh doing here."

The rodian scoffs. "You don't know much, friend. Or you're too drunk to realize anything. Horn is the Captain's son-in-law."

"Ah, I shee." I watch Corran Horn pass me by without a second thought. I feel a smile of elation coming on. I need more money. To the slots, I go. Here. This one's a winner. I can feel it.

Jade's Fire lounge

"He disappeared?" asked Luke.

"I'm sure he didn't disappear, Luke. He's still on board. His mind disappeared. I can't explain it any better than that. I followed him through the ventilation shaft. I felt his panic. Then...nothing. No emotions from him. By then all I could read was the thousand or so thoughts of greed and frustration from the gamblers."

Luke uttered, "I knew that all those guests would be a problem."

"What can you do, Luke?" Corran questioned. "Booster can't exactly ask them to leave."

"We could stage an evacuation."

Corran scoffed. "And induce more panic? The whole ship already knows about the dead guy in the 'fresher. Staging an evac now would create too many more questions that can lead to the press. We

might as well tell everyone there's a serial killer loose on the ship."

Luke said, "At least the guests in Trader's Alley only know about the one death. For all they know, the man got too drunk and fell to break his neck." He looked over at Mara on the lounge chair across from him. "You've been quiet, Mara. What do you make of Mahc's mental disappearance?"

"Strong mind," she replied. "He did the same with me ages ago on Tepasi. I followed his mind one minute, and the next it blended in with the crowd. A skill like that has to be trained. He disguised himself physically and mentally."

Corran wryly asked, "Is that an assassin's skill?"

"It can be. I could do it at one time in my youth and get away with it. I'm not as young anymore. The difference with Mahc is that I haven't been tracked down by many Jedi."

Luke muttered, "C'Baath?"

Mara reiterated, "Any normal Jedi."

Corran sneered humorously, "Are you trying to say my Force tracking abilities are inadequate, Ms. Jade?"

"No, Mr. Horn. I'm saying Mahc has quite a skill. I would have lost him too."

Luke suggested, "What if I had been chased him?"

"I don't know, Luke. That ability gives him a whole new identity. It'll be hard to weed him out."

Corran nodded in agreement. "There's something else. Mahc took a long time to finally enter the storage room. Before that, I could feel his anticipation to act. Underneath that, I could feel a hatred I can't describe. It was a mix of hatred and regret."

"Perhaps that's linked to his reasoning," Luke said.

"I have no doubt," Corran said. "I've never felt that much hate in someone who wasn't deep in the dark side."

Mara quipped, "Good thing the prerequisite for being in the dark side is to be Force sensitive."

Luke shot back, "Evil acts don't always have to involve the Force, Mara." He ignored her look of disdain at him and suggested, "Mahc knows we're on to him now. He can't go anywhere. We have his ship."

Mara warned, "Don't think he's just going to end this just because he escaped our trap. He will find a way to try and end this."

"All right. Then we should take shifts in guarding the Vigos. We can't let them out of our site."

Mara nearly screamed as she leaned forward in her chair, "Did you not hear me when I said I'm not playing babysitter to a bunch of ex members of a crime syndicate?"

Luke's voice matched Mara's intensity. "You're in this now, Mara! You're the only one with a connection to this man. But if you want to keep bickering and leave, then you know where the exit is. I'm sure you have better things to do. Just remember that you'll be allowing this madman to run loose and kill freely. I know these Vigo aren't exactly law binding citizens. That doesn't mean I will allow them to die on the whims of a murderer. If you think you can live with their deaths, then go ahead and leave."

An awkward silence followed before Mara flashed a rare grin and said, "Getting cocky over the years, Skywalker."

He fired back, "I've always been cocky. I just hide it well these days."

Mara softened her voice to state, "Look, all I'm saying is my role in this would be better for research and not guard duty."

"Fine. Then I wish you can find me a third guard."

At that moment, I'hela entered the lounge. Her demeanor was down with her shoulders slumped in defeat.

Mara looked at her and then at Luke and raised her eyebrows. "Your wish is your command, Master."

Corran then smiled and uttered, "Hey Luke, could you wish in a few million credits now?"

"What are you all talking about?" the NRS agent asked.

Corran replied, "Nothing, I'hela. How is Booster?"

I'hela sighed. "Mad as hell. Screaming. Cursing."

"So, basically the same," Corran quipped.

A smile lasted a few seconds on I'hela's lips and then went back to a frown. "I heard from Booster that you lost our killer."

"I didn't lose him. I know exactly where he is. Somewhere on this ship."

"I guess you already know they found Mahc's ship. Parked right under the sensor array."

Corran nodded. "An old smuggler's trick."

I'hela took a deep sigh and stated, "I feel so responsible for letting him on the ship. I'm sorry I didn't see him."

Luke assured her, "It wasn't your fault, I'hela. Mahc used those pirates to stage a distraction."

"But I could have used the infrared system."

Luke countered, "You didn't know it was there."

"But I should have. I wasn't familiar with your set up. Plus, I didn't know I would need it."

"Always expect the unexpected," Mara stated. "They didn't teach you infrared systems at NRS Academy?"

"Not your system. It looked rather homemade to me."

"Benefits of strong connections," said Mara proudly.

Luke suggested, "Corran and I are going to talk to Booster about our watch on the Vigos."

"And to possibly calm him down," Corran added.

"Why don't you let Mara show you her infrared system?"

"Skywalker, there's probably other duties I'hela can do. Didn't you say you needed a third guard?"

I'hela brightened, "Yes, I can do that. I will do anything to help and make up for my mistake."

Luke shook his head slightly and decided to stop reassuring the woman. "All right. We'll get back with you on the specifics of the watch. While we're talking with Booster, you can help Mara with the research on Voxan. The more information we have on him the more we can use against his son."

Mara reluctantly nodded and addressed I'hela. "Come on."

As Luke and Corran left the room, I'hela followed Mara to the Jade's Fire comp station where she had previously kept watch on the activity in space several hours earlier.

Mara told her, "Sit at the main console and I'll show you my modifications to the infrared systems. I trust I don't have to go over the basics of detection of infrared with you."

"No. Basic detection rely on measuring the electromagnetic waves around a ship. A cloaked ship hides the waves but infrared reads the outline."

"Right. The problem with that method is that most traditional infrared systems can confuse the electromagnetic waves surrounding a ship with those of an asteroid. The infrared system I have can see under those waves and see the ship itself."

"How did you manage to get that equipment?"

Mara uttered smugly, "I don't reveal my connections. I did have prior knowledge of cloaking devices when I was with the Empire. Palpatine made its development a priority. Thrawn managed to actually produce a prototype but it sacrificed durability for invisibility."

"Did you find out what type of ship Mahc has?"

"I glanced at the specs and it looks like an old Cloak Shape fighter."

"A Cloak Shape? I thought Kuat discontinued those years ago."

"They did. Mahc's ship was heavily modified. Advanced weapons, double-plated hull, extra mobile thrusters. With all of that it probably won't make lower than .7 on the hyperdrive. You give up speed with a cloaking device."

I'hela whistled. "He must have had deep pockets to finance all of that."

"Or deep connections. Now, go ahead and bring up the guidance system. Ok, see that symbol for infrared? Punch that in."

I'hela followed Mara's instruction expecting a screen for steps on infrared detection. What

clicked on the screen was something else. "Oh. I must have hit the wrong button. This looks like a report of some kind."

"No. It's correct. Read."

I'hela proceeded to read the screen and her reaction turned from confusion to anger within seconds. She uttered, "You kriffing liar. What is this?"

"I was hoping you could tell me. What I see there is a NRS restriction order from your Chief Holt banning you from this case. Any idea why he would issue that?"

I'hela scoffed in anger, "He's being overcautious."

"Why would he have to be?"

"I have no clue."

"Oh, I think you do." Mara allowed a pause and then asked, "Do you know what a data trail is?"

Confused as to the purpose of the question, I'hela started to answer, "Yes. It's a method to find out where an information leak..." She stopped suddenly upon realization. "You think I am the leak?"

"We told our suspects about a Vigo needing to be alone in the storage room for his religious beliefs. Each of our suspects were informed of a different Vigo. Corran stayed down there disguised as each Vigo. No one showed up until he was disguised as the Anzati."

"You informed me that the Anzati needed to be alone in the storage room. You didn't trust me?"

"It's not a matter of trust, I'hela. It's a matter of facts. We only told you that the Anzati will be down there and Mahc appears on that information. Then there's this restriction on you from your Chief."

"That is another matter."

"I believe they're related."

"It's not possible."

"Isn't it? I didn't give it much thought until after this restriction came through. It doesn't say exactly why your Chief wants you off this case. I have my theory. I just need to prove it."

"How?"

"I'm going to ask you a question and I expect an honest answer." Mara leaned into the woman who backed away while still sitting in the chair. Mara stressed her next words. "And I will know if you're lying."

"All right. What's your question?"

Mara asked, "Is there a connection between you and Skarce Voxan?"

I'hela gulped and answered at once, "Yes."

* * * * *

Chapter Nine

Errant Venture - Booster's office

"Calm down, Booster," Corran said.

"Calm down? How do you expect me to calm down when I have a killer running around on my ship? This was exactly what I was afraid would happen. He's already killed one Vigo using my own droid as his assassin. Then he kills a random guest. A paying guest, mind you!"

Corran assured him, "Everyone assumes the man got drunk and fell."

"And what happens when there's another death? And another? Pretty soon these accidents won't look like accidents anymore." Booster gave a gruff sigh. "You know, I'd almost prefer dealing with one of your Sith lords. At least they don't kill randomly."

Luke wasn't going to argue with Booster on his wrong assumption about Sith lords. It wasn't the right time to argue with Booster in his current mood. He understood the Captain's worry. Mahc Tiernan had to improvise when Corran cornered him. In his desperation he murdered an innocent gambler in Trader's Alley. That was one less gambler to supply credits into Booster's establishment. Luke tried to

keep Booster positive. "We can contain him to Trader's Alley. We can post guards at each of the ventilation shafts where he got through to Black Level."

Booster sneered, "You already told me you want guard duty assigned to the Vigos non-stop. Now you want guards at more than a dozen vents. You're running out of guards. And I'm not sure I want my crew involved in this anymore." He cleared his throat and added, "Not to mention what you plan to do with Lt. I'hela Broadwater."

"What do you mean?" Corran questioned.

"I'm talking about the restriction order from her Chief to take her off this case."

"How did you..."

"Let's not pretend I don't have the resources for information the same as Karrde, Corran. Her Chief sent the alert in a broadwave across the HoloNet. That means he doesn't know where she is."

"It also means she didn't report our position," Luke stated.

"But the killer is here anyway."

Luke replied, "Which is why we can't let her leave now. It's too dangerous. Even if she avoids the press, they can still get information from the NRS. Regardless if it's the truth or not."

"Do you really think I'hela is the killer's source?"

Corran answered, "Mara is getting an answer for that as we speak."

Booster grunted, "Hope there's something left of the poor woman."

Luke reiterated, "We are certain that Mahc received the information we gave I'hela somehow."

Booster uttered, "We already did a sensor sweep of everyone as they came aboard, and there was nothing on the Lt. Broadwater. Data trails may tell you the who, but never the how."

"Either way, we have Mahc's source plugged. I don't think he will make anymore direct moves against the Vigos without us knowing."

"Can you guarantee that, Master Jedi?"

"Nothing is guaranteed, Booster."

"Then I have to make my move. As much as I hate to do this to you two, especially, I have to look out for my own concerns. As of now, the deal is off. I want those Vigos off my ship immediately."

Corran snapped, "You can't be serious?"

Luke pleaded, "Booster, think about this. They'll be sitting ducks if they leave now. We don't know if that will play into Mahc's plans."

"I'm sure you can sense my lack of concern. Besides, you've confiscated his ship. He's trapped."

Corran said, "He's also resourceful. He can kill for another ship. Or for his own."

Booster asked, "There was nothing on his ship?"

"No," Corran replied. "Anything he brought is with him now. The log has been erased. No ident codes. We don't have much to go on, Booster."

Luke continued, "Mara is getting information from I'hela about her involvement with Mahc. She's also been researching information on Skarce Voxan himself."

"Bet there's not much," Booster muttered.

"Not yet. There may be something in Mahc's past that we can use against him."

"That's pretty thin, Luke."

"It's all we have right now. And I understand your concerns. We shouldn't ask more of you, but we're trapped too. Right now it's a stand off. We can't exactly go up there and listen to every mind. Especially when he's expecting it."

Corran asked, "So how do we chase the invisible man?"

After a moment of thought, Luke replied, "Maybe it's time I meet him."

Corran tried not to laugh but failed. "And he's just going to meet you out of the kindness of his black heart?"

Luke answered in a most sinister voice, "If properly motivated."

The way he answered sparked a hesitance in Corran. The phrase sounded too familiar. He had heard it on holovids from the Empire when officers mysteriously died of asphyxiation. The voice wasn't

human. It was amplified with a vocoder. Vader's.

Luke must have caught Corran's thinking just then and turned fast at him. "That's not the motivation I meant, Corran. I believe Mahc sees us as a challenge. His intrigue is too much for him to ignore."

Corran asked, "So how do we use that?"

Luke stated, "I'll need to think on it." He turned to Booster. "That is, if we have some time."

Booster sighed heavily. "Very well. Sounds like you have a plan. I can give you some leeway. I'll give you forty-eight standard hours. After that, I start ejecting Vigos one by one out of a space lock."

Corran spat, "I can see why Mirax avoids business deals with you."

"Hazards of nepotism in the business. A trait she received from me."

Before Luke could negotiate the limited time that Booster gave them, his comlink went off. He answered it.

"Luke, it's Mara. I've got I'hela's story."

"And?"

"It's better if you hear it for yourself."

"On my way."

Jade's Fire lounge

Luke entered the lounge area on the Jade's Fire to see Lt. I'hela Broadwater sitting in a chair opposite Mara, who was sitting on one end of a sofa. There was no evidence of forced violence on I'hela. Not that Luke expected any. Mara seemed to have an unfortunate reputation for being violent in her interrogations. Booster assumed it. Luke figured that assumption came from her being associated with the Empire, an organization that was famous for their violent interrogations. Luke had been witness to Mara's methods. They were subtle, which was opposite of the Empire's methods. Mara could glean information from someone without them even knowing they gave it.

As Luke greeted both woman respectively, Mara questioned, "Where's Corran?"

"He thought it best to begin the watch on the Vigos. With all the commotion they've been alone too long." He glanced at I'hela, not with an accusing look but with a concerned one. He could be subtle too. He sat on the sofa on the opposite end from Mara. "So, what is your story, I'hela? What is your connection to Skarce Voxan?"

The blonde woman looked at Mara and tried to plead, "You're going to make me tell this twice? You can't just give him the specifics?"

Mara stated, "Because I know it already. And I'll be able to detect any discrepancies from the first time you told it. So, go on."

I'hela huffed. "Fine." She faced Luke and started. "My connection to Voxan is not what you think."

"I don't think anything now, I'hela. I listen."

"All right. I have to start at the beginning," she said as she glanced at Mara, "again. My family is originally from Tepasi. My father was a prominent Senator representing Tepasi in the Old Republic. I was too young to remember our life there. I barely remember my brother and mother. I only have mental images of them."

Luke suddenly reverted back several years before on Endor. He asked Leia about what she remembered about her true mother. Just feelings really...images.

I'hela continued. "My brother was considerably older than I. We survived the Clone Wars, mostly because Tepasi wasn't deeply involved."

Mara injected, "Tepasians have a reputation for not getting involved."

"More or less," I'hela agreed. "Father became a representative in the Imperial Senate once the Empire was established. Then, all Hell broke loose. Not long after the Clone Wars, father discovered incriminating evidence that would have linked some Senators with Black Sun."

Luke nodded, following ahead. "Enter Skarce Voxan."

Without verifying nor denying, I'hela went on. "I don't remember much. I was maybe two, three standard years old. But I remember one evening after dinner, I was playing in my toy speeder. And I fell off. My father had to take me to the med center. I had a sprained ankle but it was treated quickly. We weren't gone long." I'hela took a long gulp. "Turns out it was long enough. When father and I arrived back on our street, the blast went off. Our house. Destroyed within seconds. With my mother and brother inside. Dead." She breathed in deep. "My father was frantic, naturally. But I saw him. Standing nearby on the street watching the destruction. Almost like he was proud of it. My father saw him too. He shouted at him. I remember seeing him turn to see us still in our speeder. He must have known we were missing. My father still cried out to him. I don't remember what he said, but you could imagine.

"Then, I saw Voxan raise his arm. He had the biggest blaster I'd ever seen. He aimed it at us. Father tried to speed away, but it was too late. He only fired once. It wasn't like a blaster shot. It was like a mini canon."

Mara supplied with, "Must have been a X-5 Proton Launcher. BlasTech made a good one back then. It could vape a fighter from the ground and leave nothing left but particles."

"Maybe," I'hela said. "I was too young to know. I remember my father grabbing me and jumping out of the speeder just as the shot hit. We were blown forward from the blast. Somehow, my father picked me up and we ran into the woods. You're right, there was nothing left of the speeder. It must have made Voxan believe we were gone. But we watched our house burn. I remember father telling me 'It's all right. It's just the two of us now. We'll be strong.' Even as a toddler, I knew we wouldn't be."

"What did you do then?" Luke asked.

"The HoloNet said we were all killed in the blast. It was blamed on a generator malfunction. Since there was no evidence of the speeder, it was thought to be part of the main blast. Voxan's name was never mentioned."

"And it wouldn't be," Mara said.

"Where did you and your father go after that?"

"Coruscant. We could no longer be us. Father had to change his appearance. I don't even remember what he looked like before the blast. We became the Broadwaters. Eran was my father's name."

"You don't know what your name was on Tepasi?" Luke questioned.

I'hela slowly shook her head. "Broadwater is the only name I've ever known. Father would never tell me for my own safety. He said the people who survived that explosion on Tepasi no longer existed."

Luke commented, "And because he couldn't have a background check hurt his chances to get into Carida. Or any other security position." Luke raised an eyebrow at her and she gave an apologetic look.

"He did work in the Imperial Palace, like I said. Just not as a security guard. He was a janitor."

Mara asked, "How did you avoid a background check to get into the NRS?"

"Well, but then, we were legally the Broadwaters. But I was up front with my supervisors. I told them what happened to us and that Skarce Voxan was involved. They gave me the benefit of doubt with mentioning that name."

Luke prodded, "But your father never stopped mentioning the name, did he?"

I'hela looked down at the floor as if in defeat. "No. I had nightmares of that man. That image of Voxan standing by our burning house just watching...gloating...has haunted me since my childhood. My father never did stop mentioning Voxan. He swore revenge against him. All the time I knew my father, he wanted vengeance until his dying day."

Luke surmised and said softly, "And by living with him all those years, you've adopted that vow to catch Voxan."

"I suppose so. I suspect that was Chief Holt's reason for my restriction on this case. From my NRS Academy days and throughout my career, I've always talked about what I'd do if I ever caught Voxan. The truth is I never got close. All the research I did turned up nothing on him. He may not even be alive anymore. Though I did hear a rumor that he had a son. Is Mahc really Voxan's son?"

Luke stated, "We haven't officially confirmed that yet. Even when Corran directly asked him he was evasive."

I'hela admitted, "As soon as I found out that Voxan could be a suspect in these Vigo murders, I volunteered for the assignment. When Chief Holt denied me, I pulled some strings with other Chiefs who were more...sympathetic to my situation. And here I am." She leaned in closer to them in her chair. "But I want you to know something. I would like nothing more than to have a Voxan spend eternity in the Kessel mines or greeted with the end of a blaster barrel. I have no idea how Mahc would get information from me."

Both Luke and Mara could feel I'hela's genuine honesty behind her words. They pondered as to how Mahc knew that the Anzati would be the one who would be alone.

As if on cue, I'hela said, "You know, a data trail isn't always accurate. We used to run drills with them at the Academy and they would be sixty to seventy percent effective."

Mara stated, "It got you to open up."

"Only because my Chief sent the restriction on me. Speaking of that, what are you going to do with me?"

Luke breathed before stating, "Officially, we have to disarm you, take your badge, and send you back to the NRS."

Mara added, "But we can't do that."

I'hela said sincerely, "Thank you."

Mara replied, "Don't thank us too soon. The only reason we can't let you leave is because of your connection to Voxan. If you have a past history with Voxan, then Mahc knows it too. More to the point, we can't afford another death with the guests knowing. That would make the HoloNet news quicker than a Hutt can cheat."

I'hela asked, "What is your next move with Mahc?"

Luke explained, "Whatever it is, we have to do it within the next forty-eight hours."

"What?" came the shout from Mara.

Luke nodded. "Booster doesn't want the Vigos here. They are a magnet for Mahc to keep murdering innocent gamblers. In a way, I can't blame him."

"That doesn't give us much time," I'hela remarked.

"Us? You expect us to keep you involved with our case?" Mara asked.

"I told you, I don't know how he got the information from me. You scanned everyone before they came on board. Including me."

"And the fact remains, Mahc did make a move on the data given to you."

Luke said in his famous calm voice, "Mara, give the woman a break. I don't feel anything from her that suggests she's lying. And neither do you. She just rehashed her traumatic past twice. You're just mad that we have no more leads."

"I've warned you about analyzing me, Skywalker." She stood up and made to leave the lounge. She announced as she left, "I'm going to check on Corran."

Once Mara was out of earshot, I'hela looked back at Luke and said, "She doesn't trust me now. And neither do you, I suppose."

"Any reason why we should? You defied your own Chief so you can be on this case. You've told me of your desire to seek vengeance on anyone named Voxan. I can't have you acting blindly on your revenge."

"Because it's morally wrong. Right, Jedi?" Her sarcasm was in full bloom.

"Not only that. Also because revenge always leads to one path. Death. Even if you succeed, your soul is still lost. It's still filled with hate, and when it's completed, what then? You can still carry your hate with you for the rest of your life. Like your father did. And that makes both of you no better than Voxan himself."

I'hela whispered in a hoarse voice, "My father was a shell of a man even before he contracted Mitzell's disease. I can't even imagine losing both the love of your life and your only son to a madman."

He would constantly talk about what he was going to do once he caught Voxan."

"Same as you did through the Academy."

I'hela smiled humorlessly and said, "A chip off the old block. Except he died before he had any resemblance of chance. When I heard who your suspect was, I thought I'd have at least a chance to confront Voxan. I owed my father that chance. My father's trait of hating Voxan had been descended down to me. It's all I have left of him."

Luke sighed and said with no small amount of sorrow, "You know, I'm somewhat familiar with losing a parent or two. Although, I have yet to imagine the horror of losing a wife or son, simply because neither applies to me. Yet. My aunt and uncle were slaughtered by Imperial troops. All in the name of the Empire."

"But you blew up their Death Star," she said almost proudly.

"Not out of revenge. Out of necessity. If I failed, then millions more would have died. I used to think about those men who died on the Death Star because of me. But they had a choice. With that thought, I moved on." Luke paused and said, "It seems to me that your father couldn't let go of his grief for losing his wife and son. He turned that grief into rage against Voxan. It consumed him. Not unlike the dark side."

I'hela was confused. "But father couldn't use the Force. Not like you can."

"You don't need Force potential to fall in a the dark side. Voxan himself has proven that. Your father had his own dark side. The same will happen to you if you follow his path. You say his hate is all that you have left of him? What about his love for you?"

"He didn't give it to me," I'hela said sadly.

"The fact that you put your own career on hold to take care of him tells me that he gave you plenty."

Errant Venture - Black Level computer station

Luke entered the small alcove that housed a comp station. Corran was on watch of the Vigos, who were busy with another sabacc game. There were still mumbles of what happened to Jarvis. Some believed it was the droid malfunctioning, others believed it was hardly an accident.

Luke approached the red-gold haired woman at the station who was working diligently. "So, how's Corran?" he asked wryly.

"Fine."

"I thought you'd be here. Checking out her story?"

"Didn't have a chance before. As a rule I don't like to verify a person's story while they're looking over my shoulder. And using the Star Destroyer's comp has its advantages."

"Such as?"

"I can access more data from Bastion and Yaga Minor without looking suspicious on their end. I use my old access code that's embedded into every Star Destroyer built during the Empire's reign. I did have to mask the ident codes of the Errant Venture."

"Hope you didn't tell Booster."

She looked at him sideways and said, "What he doesn't know can't hurt him. Where's I'hela?"

"She's resting now. I told her to. She's been through a lot rehashing her past twice like that."

"I will admit she was more emotional with you. That whole bit about nightmares of Voxan and her father's talk of vengeance wasn't even mentioned the first time."

"Must be your cool demeanor."

"I'll take that as a compliment."

He waited a moment to say, "I plan to still use her. A woman with her training? How can I not use her?"

"So, restriction be damned?"

Luke shrugged and repeated, "What her Chief doesn't know can't hurt him."

Mara stopped researching and looked at him. "Who are you and what have you done with Luke

Skywalker?"

Luke chuckled and motioned to the screen. "You find anything?"

"Actually, yes. Fairly easily." She clicked on a screen that showed an old HoloNet article. The subject was about a generator explosion that took the life of a Senator from Tepasi along with his wife and two children.

Luke stated, "I guess she was right."

"That's not all." She paged down the screen further into the article. "There's the names of the family. Should we tell I'hela what her true name is?"

After a long pause, Luke answered, "No. She already has a name. The only one she knows."

"My thoughts exactly."

Luke turned his head slightly to her. "But you think something is wrong with this information."

Mara sighed. "I wish you wouldn't do that."

"Sorry. Habit. What doesn't add up?"

"The fact that they never found any bodies. They assumed the explosion was so intense that it obliterated them. Generators can't produce that kind of blast. Plus, an explosion doesn't fit somehow. It just seems...I don't know."

"Very un-Voxan-like?"

She hesitated at his correct analysis and said, "Yes. He would never use a simple explosion to kill. It would be over too quick. No pain. No torture. No proof that he was there. There's no display of bodies."

"There's no mystery to it like his other victims. You knew it was him but you couldn't prove it. With this, the explosion can be easily explained."

"Exactly. And something else. I think it's strange that the last place I found Mahc was on Tepasi."

"But that was how long ago? I'hela and her father would have already been on Coruscant for years."

"Maybe he was trying to find them. But that would indicate that Voxan or his son knew that I'hela and her father survived. And if that's the case, why take so long to chase them? And what does Black Sun have to do with all of this." Mara put her head in her hands and exasperated a long frustrating sigh. "Ah, my brain hurts on this one. Thanks for getting me involved, Skywalker."

"Maybe it's you who needs a rest."

She took away her hands from her face and looked back at him. "I don't rest."

"That could be your problem."

"You're entering dangerous territory, Skywalker. How are we going to find Mahc on this ship?"

"I'll think of a way. Maybe we need a more direct approach."

"Oh, sure. Let's call out his name and see if he answers." She was sarcastic but she looked over at Luke who gave his most devious smile.

Errant Venture - Trader's Alley

"From my NRS Academy days and throughout my career, I've always talked about what I'd do if I ever caught Voxan. The truth is I never got close. All the research I did turned up nothing on him. He may not even be alive anymore. Though I did hear a rumor that he had a son. Is Mahc really Voxan's son?"

"We haven't officially confirmed that yet. Even when Corran directly asked him he was evasive."

"As soon as I found out that Voxan could be a suspect in these Vigo murders, I volunteered for the assignment. When Chief Holt denied me, I pulled some strings with other Chiefs who were more sympathetic to my situation. And here I am. But I want you to know something. I would like nothing more than to have a Voxan spend eternity in the Kessel mines or greeted with the end of a blaster barrel. I have no idea how Mahc would get information from me. You know, a data trail isn't always accurate. We used to run drills with them at the Academy and they would be sixty to seventy percent effective."

"It got you to open up."

"Only because my Chief sent the restriction on me. Speaking of that, what are you going to do with me?"

"Officially, we have to disarm you, take your badge, and send you back to the NRS."

"But we can't do that."

"Thank you."

"Don't thank us too soon. The only reason we can't let you leave is because of your connection to Voxan. If you have a past history with Voxan, then Mahc knows it too. More to the point, we can't afford another death with the guests knowing. That would make the HoloNet news quicker than a Hutt can cheat."

"What is your next move with Mahc?"

"Whatever it is, we have to do it within the next forty-eight hours."

"What?"

"Booster doesn't want the Vigos here. They are a magnet for Mahc to keep murdering innocent gamblers. In a way, I can't blame him."

"That doesn't give us much time."

Mahc switched off the data pad with the recorded conversation between Master Skywalker, Mara Jade, and I'hela Broadwater. Yes, you don't have much more time.

He sat in a darkened corner of the gambling floor. The crowd barely knew he was there. Their minds were on making more money and drinking. Every so often, he would think the same way just in case the Jedi were listening in. Although, he was among a thousand or more beings in the room. Even Jedi don't have the strength to weed out one single mind out of a crowd that large. Despite the overwhelming odds, he still didn't want to take a chance.

He chose a table in the corner to listen to his latest recording. He listened carefully to I'hela's past. The past that she remembers, anyway. It was strange to him how a traumatic event could affect memory. Mahc remembered that particular night on Tepasi differently. It was his first job with father. But father wouldn't let him do it alone. He had to come along and supervise. But that's not why Mahc was mad at him. He had to bring his precious love with him. His father found himself in a commitment that he didn't want out of. He wanted to throw away the talents he had taught his son. All for her.

Mahc was told by his father on several occasions that love destroys. Personal attachments were the barriers in their profession. His father had adhered to that philosophy very closely. Until he fell in love with her. She destroyed everything they had. She was the beginning of the end. She was the wedge that came between them. How he threw himself at her. It was sickening to watch. Mahc ended their father and son relationship that night. Father was so mad. It was the last time they spoke.

Now the fractured distance was being mended. Posthumously. I am fulfilling your dream of vengeance on those who shunned you, father. I am sorry about our differences. You made a choice and I didn't honor it. The least I can do is honor your goal after your death.

Stop it! Think of gambling. If I get enough credits from the slots I can get back into a hand of sabacc. And then I will win big.

His feigned thoughts were interrupted by an announcement over the PA system.

"Would Mahc Tiernan please come to the front desk. There is a message for Mahc Tiernan."

His first thought was that they found him. No. They're guessing. If they knew where I was they'd be standing in front of me by now. They plan to draw me out. He had no plans to actually fetch the message in person. That would be too easy for them.

He looked around the gambling floor. He spotted a young man who looked barely old enough to gamble and drink. Probably faked his ident card. Not like this place cared. As long as the credits keep flowing, age doesn't matter. The boy was playing a slot machine and judging by his intense glare at it, he was losing. Perfect candidate. Hungry for credits.

Mahc prepared a Corellian accent. It was one of his many lessons from his father. An accent disguises better than any piece of clothing or accessory. "Hey, kid. Over here."

The boy looked in his direction and hesitated at the old man.

"Yeah, you. How'd you like to make twenty credits?"

Money spoke volumes and the boy eased through the crowd to reach the dimly lit table in the far corner. He still had the high-pitched voice of pre-puberty. "What do I have to do?"

"You hear that announcement before."

The boy shrugged. "No."

"Of course not. You were too busy. There's a message for Mahc Tiernan at the front desk. That's me. The problem is that I got myself into a little mess with some debt collectors from Ryloth. They may have a spotter out here looking for me. That's why I'm in the corner here. That message may be my contact to get me out of here. See, I can't go up there as me or they'll see me. All I want you to do is to get my message and bring it to me."

"Won't they know you'd do this? What if they catch me and ask me where you are?"

"That's the risk, kid."

"Since I'm taking the risk in getting it, I should get thirty credits."

"Hmm...smart boy. All right, thirty." Mahc took out a pile of credits and laid a portion down on the table in front of the boy.

The boy grabbed them and counted. "Hey, this is only fifteen."

"Half now, the other half when I get my message. Now go."

The boy scrambled through the crowd. For a split second, Mahc thought the kid would settle for fifteen and run off. But he watched the boy go up to the counter. He watched as the clerk passed the boy something. It was too far to see from that distance. Finally, the boy ran back through the crowd and ended up back at Mahc's table.

"Here ya go, Mr. Tiernan." He handed Mahc a folded piece of flimsi.

After Mahc took the flimsi, he said to the boy, "Thank you, kid. You even showed respect by calling me by my surname. You're going to go far."

"Whatever. How about the rest of those credits?"

"Quick, too. Stubborn and arrogant. I was the same way when I was your age. Here ya go. Don't go spending it all in one place."

The boy grabbed the rest of the credits and made a beeline to the nearest open slots.

Mahc forgot him for now. He would remember his face when the time came. Mahc couldn't have a loose end like that. Poor kid. But that would be later. He unfolded the flimsi and there was a neatly written message.

"North Slingball court. Thirty minutes."

A devious smile formed on Mahc's lips. He muttered to himself, "Finally."

* * * * *

Chapter Ten

Errant Venture - Blue Level

The area was desolate and abandoned. For the time being, no one was required to be there. Construction had begun on two slingball courts on the Blue Level. Booster prided himself on the location because it had previously been an Imperial interrogation facility when the Errant Venture was property of the Empire. Because Booster gave the construction workers a few days off before he got involved with the Vigos, the area was devoid from any crowd noise.

It was the perfect place for a secret meeting.

Mahc Tiernan walked through the vast area cautiously. Not only was he alert to find the Jedi Master but he was careful to avoid the construction equipment that the workers left. Mahc had shed the clothes that he took off the drunk man who he killed. He wore his black tunic with red lining. His hood

was up and over his head obscuring his face. He tried to keep his boots quiet as he stepped but because of the empty area every step echoed.

Mahc moved slowly checking every corner and wall. There was no one else here. Where was Skywalker? Was he playing a game?

"I don't play games," announced a sudden voice from behind him. Mahc did an about face quickly to see the Jedi Master standing stoically near the opposite wall of the floor. Mahc had seen the Jedi several times through holovids and had heard him on recordings. This was the first time he had ever been in his presence. He didn't look so tough to Mahc. Then again, Mahc asked himself how he suddenly appeared. Mahc kept his voice low when he asked, "You weren't there before."

"Perhaps you weren't looking. As you can see, I have some mental skills of my own."

"I'm sure Corran Horn told you about mine."

"He has. I admit it's impressive. Except my skills are more...mystical, shall we say." When Mahc didn't reply, Luke went on to say, "Mahc Tiernan. We finally meet. You've been a nasty pest for several people in the last few days." Luke edged closer to the man and took note of his attire. "Nice costume. Dark and ominous. The hood does well to hide your face. Gives your victims a sense of mystery."

"That is the desired effect."

"It also indicates that you don't like who you are. You're hiding from you."

Mahc chuckled. "I see you wear the same black."

"Anyone can wear black. It's their intentions while wearing it that makes the difference."

"I suppose you're going to scold me for my intentions. Make me see the light? Show me the right path?"

"Only if that's what you want to hear. By the tone of your sarcasm, I'd say that's not the case. I'm not here to judge. You may very well have the best intentions. But when those intentions involve murdering innoc..."

"Innocents?" He pointed down. "Those ex gangsters down there are not innocent. They were part of something that ruined my father."

"Just so we're clear, your father is Skarce Voxan?"

"Was. Mara Jade already figured that out."

"She only suspected."

"I'm sure you'll agree that Mara Jade's suspicions are more accurate than other people's facts."

Luke didn't reply but gave a hint of admiration in his face. Mahc caught it.

"Ah, and there's the denial of wanting her to be more."

"I think you're misinterpreting."

"Am I? See, I don't need the Force to read people. I observe them. I've watched the two of you together and I've observed how you both deny your feelings toward each other. Now who's hiding from themselves?"

"You know nothing about me."

"Aw, come on, Master Jedi. I can see it in your eyes whenever you look at her."

"Shut up."

"Yes, I know what you desire. It's not like she's unattractive. That flowing red-orange hair. Her statuesque body. Tell me you've never wanted to see under that skin-tight black tun..."

Before he could finish his thought, Mahc suddenly had trouble breathing. He was starting to choke. Luke held up his hand at him and said almost too calmly, "I said shut up." Within seconds of realizing what he was doing, Luke immediately let go of his grip on Mahc. "I'm sorry. I...didn't...mean to do that."

Mahc coughed and gasped for air before he started to laugh. "Reverting...to your anger. Just like a...a Skywalker. Next thing you know you'll be breathing through a environ suit."

"What do you know about that?"

"I know Vader was your father. Tough break. And I thought I had daddy issues. We're kind of alike there, Master Jedi. Both of our fathers terrorized the galaxy. Yours just did it with a little more

finesse."

"How could you possibly know that?"

"I have my sources."

"Thela Broadwater was one of them."

"Not on purpose."

"Thela has quite a story involving your father."

"I'm sure she's told you. The past, though, isn't always what it seems."

"She's had a hard time letting go of her past."

"Doesn't everyone? Now tell me you didn't arrange this meeting to talk about Ms. Broadwater."

"No, I did want to meet you. And I wanted to tell you that since we have confiscated your ship and that we have the Vigos guarded, you are out of options."

"I always have options. Don't think you have me trapped. I will find a way to finish with my mission."

"Whose mission? Yours, or your father's?"

Luke could hear him scoff. "You're not getting into my mind, Jedi."

Luke did try to enter Mahc's mind. He may have had better chances at reading Threepio. Just like Mara, he thought. Mahc's mind was shut tight. Luke tried to open him up. "I can see why you would be against Black Sun. I assume they didn't treat your father well."

"Are you kidding? During the Clone Wars there was nothing. No work and no pay. They froze his accounts and left him penniless. They were done with him so they threw him away. He was so desperate that he tried to go to the Jedi for help. They refused. They knew who he was and what he did. They even tried to kill him."

Luke reiterated, "Your father was a hired assassin. How would they know to trust him?"

"They didn't even try. Very un-Jedi like, wouldn't you say?"

Luke stated, "I wasn't there. I don't know all the facts. But that explains why the Jedi are involved in your vendetta. Now you're killing everyone remotely involved? Lohl Ch'la was part of that?"

"He was part of it but he, at least, escaped. He deserved an honorable death."

"And the Jedi? You plan to take us all on?"

"No." Mahc reached into his tunic to pull out the hilt of a lightsaber. He held it in front of him and ignited the blade. The snap-hiss sound reverberated in the vast empty space. The blazing white blade hummed in anticipation of action. Mahc positioned himself into a combat stance and said, "One at a time."

Luke wryly questioned, "You are not serious."

Mahc performed an honor salute with the blade and held it upward inches from his covered hood. Mahc baited him. "Come on, Jedi. Let's see what you've got."

Luke sighed as if he were bored and casually said, "Very well." Luke reached onto his belt to unfasten his own lightsaber. He ignited the green-white blade and waited for Mahc to act.

For a long moment they each circled around each other trying to gauge when the other was going to attack. Finally, Mahc went into a series of high slashes that Luke blocked with ease. Still, Luke was impressed with Mahc's knowledge of dueling. Mahc swung at an awkward arc from above after Luke blocked the last lunge. Luke had to spin around low to reach back up to block Mahc's latest blow.

Mahc paused and said, "Classic Form III. I was actually skilled at Ataru Form IV once upon a time. My age has forced me to use Soresu or Niman."

"I don't understand. You have no Force abilities yet you wield a lightsaber and like an experienced Jedi."

"I have many other skills that don't require the Force. I certainly don't follow Jedi doctrine. Like my father, I was disillusioned by the Jedi."

Luke pleaded, "Whatever happened to you, Mahc, I'm ready to listen."

Mahc gave a thrust that was so quick that Luke almost missed parrying it. Mahc came back with a level swing that Luke ducked to avoid. Luke went into a forward roll and came back up at an upward

arc so his green saber clashed with Mahc's white.

Mahc said from under his hood, "No, you're not ready."

Mahc began again with a succession of attacks from alternate angles. Luke had just enough time to block each one. Luke did manage to get in a few thrusts that Mahc parried with no small amount of effort. Mahc was getting tired. After Luke paused to allow Mahc catch his breath, he admitted, "I admire your technique. You've been well trained. I'm curious...who was your teacher?"

"The only one I can ever trust. Me."

"I'm impressed. With your mind shut down I can't anticipate your next moves. Well done."

Mahc's voice suddenly sounded suspicious. "You're giving me a lot of compliments. What are you hiding?"

"The fact that you have to ask is your disadvantage." Luke suddenly rushed at Mahc with his saber at a high angle. Mahc prepared for an attack from above. At the last possible moment, Luke used the Force to leap up and over Mahc, which made the man swing at air. Luke performed a twist mid-air and landed with Mahc's back to him. Instead of using his lightsaber, Luke reached out in the Force and pushed Mahc forward hard. He ended up several meters away landing face down on the floor. Mahc's lightsaber extinguished once it hit the floor.

Luke came over to the fallen man. "You forget one important detail, Mahc. A Jedi uses the Force in conjunction with the knowledge of lightsaber duel. Something a non-Jedi would have a hard time to defend." Luke edged closer to the man who was just now turning over. "Your mission is over, Mahc. You will be in our custody until..."

The blow came at Luke's chest from Mahc's boot. He kicked hard with such a force that Luke tumbled backward, but he caught himself with the Force. Mahc stood up quicker than Luke thought and came at him with his fist. Mahc swung at Luke's stomach with a hard punch that sent the Jedi Master down to the floor.

Mahc cried out, "What you forget is that assassins will use all of their skills at any given time." He then kicked Luke in the stomach. "Heh, not as strong when you're down, are you Jedi?"

From the floor, Luke used the Force again to send Mahc flying in the air until he hit the opposite wall. Mahc crumpled to the floor. Luke got up reeling in pain and went over to Mahc again. Incredibly, the man still struggled to get up as he got on his knees to face Luke.

"I'll tell you when I'm down," said Luke.

With a grunt of anger, Mahc formed a fist to hit Luke but the Jedi was quicker this time. He caught Mahc's fist in his right hand. Immediately, Mahc cried out in extreme pain.

"I thought...Jedi weren't supposed to act...aggressively in the Force."

"I'm not using the Force. If you knew that much about me you would have known that my right hand is rather less than human. Give me your other hand." Mahc complied. Luke reached behind him on his belt and grabbed a pair of binders. Luke took both Mahc's wrists side by side and fastened the binders. He then took Mahc's hood and removed it. Underneath was an ordinary looking man with deep set eyes and hardened face. Bruises and scars were scattered along his cheeks and neck. His age showed in the gray of his grizzled stubble. Luke remembered the image of Skarce Voxan on the holo vid he bought from T'ryus Dane. The resemblance made Luke remark, "Yes, you are Skarce Voxan's son."

Errant Venture - Black Level cell block

Luke had on occasion in his past to escort a prisoner in binders to their cell. He had taken captured stormtroopers and an occasional Imperial officer to their cells with minimal contact from the Rebels who were watching him. Back then they were at war. The Rebels were civil enough to not antagonize their prisoners.

As Luke brought in Mahc Tiernan towards the Black Level cell block, word must have leaked that the murderer was captured. Many of the ex-Vigos seemed to line up single file to witness the son of Voxan being taken into custody. Luke had never experienced such disgust and hatred toward a prisoner. The Vigos shouted out threats and accusations in all languages. There were some who started throwing

small items such as pieces of flimsi at Mahc. The son of Voxan walked in front of Luke and didn't even flinch at the backlash he was receiving. In fact, when a Vigo shouted out that he killed Jarvis Wasine, Mahc muttered in reply, "Technically, the droid killed Wasine."

"Keeping your sense of humor, I see," said Luke from behind him.

"That's all I have left. You've confiscated everything I own."

Luke reached the cell block and entered it. He shut the door to block off the boisterous crowd. Already inside waiting was Corran and Mara. I'hela stood to the side with a scowl and her arms folded across her chest. Her eyes were fixed on Mahc.

Luke approached Corran and announced, "A prisoner for you, Officer."

Corran rolled his eyes at Luke and shook his head. "Show off."

"Hey, it wasn't that easy. He challenged me to a duel."

Corran looked at Mahc. "You challenged the Jedi Master to a lightsaber duel? You're crazier than I thought."

Mahc answered with pride, "I did manage to take him down to the floor."

"Only because you fight dirty," Luke defended. "Seriously, he fights like Han."

"Then I really sympathize with you," Corran dead-panned.

Luke went on. "He taught himself lightsaber techniques. He knows the fighting Forms. I was surprised."

"I'm not," said Mara. "Many assassins know lightsaber Forms. There are other people than Jedi who are skilled in it, Master Ego."

Luke ignored Mara's remark and asked her, "Do you remember how to put someone in one of these cells?"

"As long as Booster didn't change the entry codes. Which I'm nearly positive that he didn't. What use would he have for the cell block down here?"

"True," Corran noted.

As they spoke, I'hela edged herself between the entrance of the cell hallway and Mahc Tiernan. She addressed the prisoner. "You are Mahc Tiernan? The son of Skarce Voxan?"

Mahc replied, "And you are I'hela Broadwater, daughter of Eran Broadwater, if my memory serves."

"Your father destroyed my life."

"My father destroyed many lives, including my own. But I remember yours. I had a hand in helping him with your mother. Father put her through fire first. Do you know what fire can do to living flesh?"

The punch from I'hela was swift and hard across Mahc's jaw. His head jerked backwards and Luke caught him as the momentum pushed him back as well.

"That was for my father!" I'hela cried. "You deserve so much more for what you've done."

Corran went to grab I'hela's arm while Luke eased Mahc back to separate them. Luke looked at I'hela directly into her eyes and said, "Not this way, Lt."

"Then what way? Yours? You know the worse penalty he'll get is the Kessel mines or the fiery Hell of Xian."

"But justice will prevail, I'hela."

"Justice," she spat the word. "If there was any justice it would be letting him free among all those gangsters out there. I'm sure they have their own brand of justice."

"I'm sure they do. That doesn't make them any better than Mahc or Voxan. I know your grief and your pain, but this isn't the cure for either of them. He will pay for his crimes, I'hela. This isn't the path to have that done. You understand?"

After I'hela slowly nodded, the sound of sudden laughter was heard. It was Mahc. Each of them stared at the man in disbelief.

Mahc imitated I'hela, "'That was for my father!'" More laughter. "Better make sure of that, sister."

Mara came up from behind Mahc and whispered coldly in his ear, "If you don't shut it now, you will wish for a punch in the mouth."

"Mara Jade," Mahc started to say. "Still dishing out the same old threats, I see."

"Not threats. Promises."

Luke commanded, "All right, enough. Corran, get I'hela out of here. I'll handle Mahc. Mara, get one of these cells open so that we can stash him in it."

When Corran started walking with her by the arm, he asked quietly, "Did that punch feel better?"

I'hela answered back with a cryptic smile, "You don't know the half of it."

"Oh, yes I do."

Before I'hela and Corran were out of earshot, Mahc called out to notice, "I see you're still wearing it, I'hela."

I'hela stopped and turned back at Mahc. "Wearing what?"

"The jewel. You fastened it to a necklace. It was your mothers."

I'hela was slightly shocked when she demanded to know, "How could you possibly know about that?"

Mahc answered, "She wore it that night. Father must have taken it after she was..."

"You kriffing monster!" I'hela attempted to lunge at the man but Corran held her back. Instead of fighting him, I'hela broke down with tears on Corran's shoulder. Corran put his hand gently against the back of her head as she wept.

Luke barked to Mara, "Get him out of here!"

Mara proceeded to enter the codes to open the nearest cell and Luke shoved Mahc in without taking off the binders. Mahc simply smiled back with confidence. Too much confidence. Luke watched him disappear as the cell door shut.

Luke breathed out, "He's a handful."

"That's putting it mildly," Mara agreed. "What's our next move?"

"First thing is to get I'hela calm."

Corran shouted out, "I've got that, Luke."

Mara uttered, "She shouldn't have been here when you brought him through."

"And you just thought of that now?" Luke asked.

"Don't start with me, Skywalker. At least we have him. We can start sending the Vigos home."

"I'll have Booster set up a shuttle to fit them all in."

"Then what? We taxi them all home individually?" Mara asked.

"It'll be quicker."

Corran replied, "Booster will like quicker."

Luke watched I'hela who was calming down on her own. Corran moved to have her sit by the computer console and he sat beside her. Luke stated, "I'll contact Mon Mothma to tell her we have our man." Luke let a pause in before he looked at Mara from the side. He spoke softly. "Do you think I'hela's right? Is Kessel or Xian too good for Mahc?"

"I am so disqualified to answer that, Skywalker. I used to be Mahc at one time."

"You never set out for revenge for your own vendetta."

"I almost did. I was commanded once by my boss to kill for his own revenge. Turns out it was the last thing he wanted me to do."

Ignoring the fact that it was himself who was the subject of Palpatine's revenge, Luke assured her, "You were doing your duty, Mara."

"Orders from the galaxy's most famous psychotic. Now I can't decide who was more of a madman. Palpatine or Voxan."

"Flip a coin." Luke paused before he said, "I'm going to check on I'hela."

"I'll come with you. I wanted to ask her about something."

Luke stopped and pleaded, "If this is about Mahc, can it wait?"

"The more we know will help put him away longer."

Luke made a face at her.

Mara huffed. "If she's still upset, I'll ask her later."

Luke nodded and they both went over to where I'hela and Corran were sitting. I'hela was drinking water from a cup that Corran got for her. She was much calmer but tear stains were still evident on her cheeks.

Luke asked her softly, "You all right?"

"Yes. I'm sorry for my outburst. I can't believe I lost control of my emotions."

Mara smirked. "You're preaching to the choir with this company, woman."

Luke grinned and said to I'hela, "No apology necessary."

"I suppose that won't help my case when you report to my Chief."

"What report?" feigned Corran. "You were confined to your quarters since we were alerted of your restriction."

"Thanks. Have you figured out how I was Mahc's source without my knowledge?"

Luke answered, "We'll be questioning him soon on that. Among other things."

"When?" she asked eagerly.

Luke gave a small shrug. "When he's not surrounded by so many enemies."

"Good luck with finding that spot in the galaxy," Corran remarked.

Mara saw that I'hela was acting more normal and she said to her, "We may have some questions for you later that may help us."

I'hela was steps ahead of Mara's true question and said, "You want to know about my mother's jewel."

Mara smiled. "It would help."

I'hela put down her cup of water on the edge of the console and reached behind her neck. It looked like she was unfastening the clasp of a necklace. She pulled out the necklace from under her uniform. Attached on the end of it was a ruby-colored and star-shaped gem that had diamonds encrusted at each point. I'hela held it up so they all could see it. Her voice was full of pride. "This was my mother's. My father gave it to me before he died. I've hardly ever taken it off since."

Mara asked, "Do you mind if I examine it?"

"I...I guess. I don't know what you expect to find. Mach just mentioned it to get a rise out of me. And it worked."

Once I'hela carefully handed Mara the jewel into her palm, Mara uttered, "It's the mere fact that he mentioned something so trivial. It is beautiful. Looks valuable."

"I've never had it appraised. It's worth so much more than a pile of credits to me. Ironically, that's how father said he found it. He always thought it was lost when mother died. He happened to be on the HoloNet and found it there. He recognized it and bought it."

"Hate to see the price tag on this," Corran remarked.

"He would never tell me. But soon after he handed it down to me he was too sick to tell me anything."

Mara took note. "Yet, Mahc said he saw his father take it that night of the explosion. That means Voxan brought his son with him to a job."

Corran chuckled humorlessly, "Gives new meaning to Bring Your Son to Work Day."

Luke followed the thought. "Voxan must have taken it and sold it on the HoloNet."

Mara questioned, "Does that sound like something an assassin would do?"

Corran offered, "A crazy assassin, maybe."

Mara examined the jewel closer. "There's something familiar about this jewel."

Luke asked, "Have you seen it before?"

"Yes," answered Mara, but then added, "and no."

Corran looked at Luke exasperated. "Time for a Mara Jade translation, O' Wise One."

Mara glanced at Corran with only a dirty look before she translated her own words. "I've only seen this in a holograph. But where?" Luke and Corran could feel Mara's frustration as she searched her

memory. She ended the strain on her mind and asked I'hela, "Do you mind if I examine this further in the Jade's Fire?"

"If you promise to be careful with it. It is precious to me."

"I know. And I'll take good care of it."

"Whatever will help. I still don't know what you're going to find."

Mara shrugged. "Call it a hunch."

Luke reverted back to what Mahc had said about Mara's suspicions being more accurate than other's facts. He shoved those admiring thoughts to the back of his mind for the moment. He switched to the business at hand and told Mara, "We have to first get organized. I have to contact Mon Mothma on where to transfer custody of Mahc. We also have to get with Booster to arrange for a shuttle for all of the Vigos to get off his ship."

Corran uttered, "I can feel his joy now."

"Why don't you speak to Booster, Corran. I'hela, are you able to help? Unofficially?"

"Sure. Just so you don't put me on Mahc duty."

"Don't worry. I won't let you near him. Mara and I will handle him. I'hela, go with Corran for the time being." The NRS Lt. gave a quick nod and walked behind Corran who was heading to see Booster.

Luke looked over at Mara who was securing I'hela's necklace in her tunic. Luke's went into a daze as his mind reverted back again to Mahc's gloating him about his admiration of Mara. She wasn't just attractive physically. Mara's intelligence and insight made Luke admire her for more than just her beauty. In time, she could very well become his...

"Staring at my assets, Jedi Master?" Mara suddenly interrupted his thoughts with no shortage of humor.

Luke shook himself out of his daze and tried to cover his true thoughts. "What? No..I was...just thinking."

"Uh, huh. I know what you were thinking. You don't hide embarrassment well, Skywalker, so don't try. Anything you want to say to me?"

Luke quickly began to suppress his memories of what Mahc said to him about Mara deep into his own mental wall. Just like Mara. He finally answered her, "No. Nothing."

Errant Venture - Black Level hangar

Luke had contacted Mon Mothma, who arranged for a transport on Bestine IV to officially take Mahc Tiernan into New Republic custody. Luke found it convenient that Mon Mothma chose a place as public as Bestine. More chance for the press to cover among the ocean tourists. Luke had to fight the urge to stay on the exotic island planet for a much needed vacation.

Instead, Luke and Mara began the process of escorting Mahc into the Jade's Fire for the trip to Bestine. Mara had been anxious to study the gem of I'hela's that Mahc mentioned out of the blue. Booster's men had already scanned I'hela when she first came aboard but nothing showed. Granted, the scan wasn't as thorough as Mara would have liked. Luke reiterated to her that the priority was to get Mahc into custody and each of the Vigos sent to their homes. Luke did point out to Mara that research on the gem wasn't necessary since they already had Mahc in binders. Mara Jade couldn't leave it that open.

Booster was overjoyed as they perceived. He would finally be allowed to go back to business and the serial murderer was leaving with three Jedi. Not to mention the chance he was given to kick a group of gangsters off his ship. He arranged for their departure immediately in the form of the only shuttle cruiser large enough to accommodate all of them at once. He made sure that it had enough fuel to take them to their respective homes.

Luke assigned I'hela and Corran to help with getting the Vigos settled into the shuttle. He and Mara took Mahc out of his cell and walked him out single file to the Jade's Fire. Luke led them out and Mara walked behind Mahc. They entered the hangar with no screams of accusations or objects being thrown. All of Mahc's detractors were already on board the shuttle.

The Jade's Fire was resting in the hangar along with I'hela's SIE starship and Mahc's own ship, which was being carefully guarded. Booster had the shuttle brought in from another level and it was on the other end of the hangar. I'hela and Corran were just outside of the shuttle's ramp overseeing the last of the Vigos inside. Just beyond the shuttle was Mahc's mid-sized freighter. As Luke and Mara walked him to the Jade's Fire, Mahc eyed his ship.

He nodded his head toward it and said, "I assume you will take care of the Paradox Fate."

"Sure," Mara answered. "You won't be needing it wherever you're going."

"Confident as always, Jade. You still have questions, though. Like what I was doing on Tepasi when you saw me last."

"That's easy. I tracked down one of my leads where Voxan could be found. Rumor had it that he had been seen on Tepasi once. Turns out it was true but it was only because he was doing a job. The Broadwaters. Or whatever their names were then. Old Republic records would have their real names but Palpatine had them destroyed. I only found you because you had unfinished business on Tepasi. You were tracking down the Broadwaters who got away. I'hela and her father."

"That's one version. Have you studied that jewel yet?"

"Not yet. Been busy hauling your sorry behind around. I'm sure there's more to it than being beautiful. You had to have some means of recording to play on that data pad we found on you."

Mahc chuckled. "You know I almost forgot about it. I didn't know what father had done with it since he took it. Seems it's been returned to its rightful owner."

Once they reached the Jade's Fire ramp, Luke turned and faced Mahc. "Cut the chatter. Save it for the record."

"Shall I go on record about your secret desires, Master Jedi?"

Luke looked at Mara. "Can you shut him up?"

"I'd like nothing better. I have several methods. All involve pain."

Mahc sighed. "Idle threats as usual."

Luke lifted Mahc's bound hands and said, "Unfortunately, thanks to Galactic law, I have to take these off of you in transit."

Mahc smiled. "Because safety regulations forbid prisoners to be detained with binders while traveling in space. Must be terrible to always follow the rules, isn't it, Jedi?"

Luke stepped closer to Mahc's face and uttered in a dark tone, "We have other ways to detain you without binders."

"I have no doubt."

Luke proceeded to take off the binders and say, "And we will be watching you very carefully."

"I'd expect nothing less. Kind of ironic, don't you think, Mara? An assassin catches another assassin."

Mara was enraged and replied through gritted teeth, "Ex assassin."

"Oh, that's right. You've discovered your moral compass by fraternizing with the Jedi. What would your old boss say to that?"

Mara eased closer behind him and whispered into his ear, "I don't care. He's stone cold dead. Any other distractions you care to lay on us? I really do hope you have more. I have plans for our future talk."

"What if they don't work?"

"Don't worry. I have back up plans."

"So do I."

Mahc immediately jerked his head back hard against Mara's forehead sending her to the floor in a sudden daze. Before Luke realized what he did, Mahc went forward with his head hard against Luke's forehead. As Luke went down, Mahc knew he only had seconds to act. He moved behind the Jade's Fire ramp and took a quick glance at the Vigo shuttle. I'hela and Corran were making their way back towards him. They were too far to see Luke and Mara down. He couldn't wait. Mahc took his newly freed hand and reached at the end of his tunic and found it. He depressed the mechanism.

The force of the sudden blast was deafening. The shock from the explosion was enough to send both I'hela and Corran to the floor. The hangar was in chaos from the debris coming from the destroyed shuttle. Thick black smoke filled the area to make visibility nearly impossible.

Unless the chaos was anticipated.

Mahc moved swiftly from behind the Jade's Fire ramp to head directly toward the fallen I'hela. She was comatose and had several cuts along her body but she would live. He lifted up her body and hoisted it over his shoulder as he moved forward. He waded through what was left of the shuttle that had carried the ex-Vigos. The shuttle was more or less intact. The blast was contained to the perimeter of the shuttle. There would be no survivors inside. He walked past the semi-conscious Corran Horn. As Mahc neared the shuttle, he found dead guards scattered about the hangar's scarred floor. He bent down to pick up one of the dead guard's blaster.

"You won't be needing this anymore, thank you," Mahc uttered to the deceased guard.

He wasted no time in heading towards his own ship that was situated yards away from the shuttle. There was some minor carbon scoring damage to the Paradox Fate but nothing to permanently hinder its future journey. It had been secured by two guards. One had been gutted by a piece of shrapnel from the shuttle. The other was alert and was about to address the oncoming Mahc Tiernan carrying a comatose woman.

The remaining guard held out his arm with the blaster at the end of it and demanded weakly, "Stop! You are not authorized..."

Those were his last words as Mahc took the stolen blaster and fired a shot clean between the guard's eyes. He was dead before he hit the floor.

Mahc said as he kicked the dead body away from the ship's ramp, "You will find that I am authorized. Everywhere." He carried I'hela into the ship and eased her into a back bunk.

"Almost settled in, my dear."

Mahc reached into the cockpit and sat at the controls. He knew he didn't have time to prepare the ship for a proper take off. He chose to fire up the primary repulsors cold. He had done it before in the past. And it worked. Paradox Fate was aptly named once again. He directed the ship out of the hangar and quickly set a minor jump into hyperspace.

Mahc Tiernan smiled at completing his mission, however improvised as it was. As the ship lurched into the molted star lines of hyperspace, he glanced behind him to see the unconscious middle-aged woman lying in his ship's bunk. She was an unanticipated bonus. Finally, after all these years, he could sit down with one of his father's most damaging victims.

* * * * *

Chapter Eleven

Jade's Fire - The lounge hours after the disaster

"I can't believe he did a reverse head-butt on me. I shouldn't have been that close behind him. The oldest kriffin' trick in the book and I fell for it. But he had me gloating. Serves me right."

Corran sat on the opposite sofa from Mara with his left leg suspended. He was still tending to a cut he received from the blast. Through his physical pain, he cried out his mental anguish at listening to Mara beat herself up. "I heard you twice the first time, Mara. Ow."

Mara looked at the long scrape along Corran's outer thigh. "Never took you as one who couldn't take pain, Corran, with all that you've gone through. I told you I have some stronger bacta patches."

"That's all right. I cleaned it well enough. Besides, I'd rather feel the pain right now. A reminder of our failure."

"Now who's crying in their ale?"

Before Corran could react, Luke came in through the door to the cockpit. He walked over to

them and announced, "I've set the navi-computer for a jump to Bestine IV. We just have to set up a time when we're going."

Corran asked incredulously, "Mon Mothma's still meeting with us? She does know we don't have a prisoner anymore. And that he has I'hela."

Luke nodded. "She knows. She wants to meet us on Bestine in person."

Mara remarked, "That can't be good."

"It wouldn't be like that," Luke assured. "Mon Mothma isn't one to scold for failures. She learns from them." He paused for effect. "As should we."

Corran frowned and asked, "Any word on the surviving Vigo?"

"The Ithorian? Booster said he's critical. He may not last another day."

All of them fell silent as they thought about the people who they swore to protect. All but one were dead. The last remaining ex-Vigo was barely alive. Not to mention the loss of at least a dozen of Booster's own guards, including the one whom Mahc Tiernan shot dead to get to his ship. To say Booster was furious at them was redundant. He literally ordered the three of them off of his ship. With what they had put him through for nothing, they complied. Mara retrieved I'hela's SIE fighter and put it into the Jade's Fire hangar and they left.

Luke had to state the obvious. "We have to go forward from this. We have to figure out where Mahc would take I'hela. He took her for a reason. Maybe to kill her."

"No," cried Mara. "Not yet. I think I know where he's going."

"How can you know?" Corran asked.

"Because he has a mission he has to complete. The Broadwater's were Voxan's failure. The father and daughter escaped. They were supposed to be home but little I'hela got hurt. Voxan couldn't anticipate that kind of unforeseen accident."

"And now he's finally found the last Broadwater," Corran surmised. He looked at Luke grimly and stated, "Who knows what he'll do to her."

Luke replied, "I'hela's a trained NRS officer. She can handle herself."

Corran shot back, "She hasn't been trained to deal with a psychopath intent on violent revenge."

Luke breathed in and said, "We'll just have to put our heads together and find her before he..."

"Oh, kriff the Jedi positive assurance, Skywalker!" Mara snapped. "You've been underestimating Mahc this whole time. He's been trained to kill. And if he's been trained by the most notorious assassin in this galaxy's history then he has skills that you don't want to know about. Why can't you admit defeat? Mahc beat you. He beat us at his game."

Luke was taken back by her outburst and tried to explain, "I...I just couldn't believe..."

"And that was your failure, Skywalker. You couldn't believe he was better than a Master Jedi."

Her words reminded Luke of those spoken to him long ago on Dagobah when he once again admitted that he didn't believe. That is why you fail.

Mara went on. "Look, I'm not holding you alone responsible for what happened. We were all at fault at not seeing Mahc's plan."

Luke looked at her. "His plan?"

Mara stared back at him with an almost pitiful look. "Farmboy, wake up. Mahc knew which shuttle was large enough to fit all the Vigos. He knew Booster wanted them all off as soon as possible. He set a remote charge on the shuttle probably before he met with you. Maybe even before he had the droid kill Jarvis. He released the detonator after he took us out."

Corran questioned, "Where was the detonator? We confiscated everything on him down to his chrono."

"His tunic," she answered. "Probably disguised as a button or cuff link."

Corran considered. "Ingenious."

"Not really. Standard for an assassin to make detonators out of ordinary objects. I've had many hair clips made into detonators several times." After a pause, she turned towards Luke to continue her point. "He knew that you would eventually take him down in a duel. He was counting on it. Once he

was captured, he knew Booster wouldn't waste any time in getting them all off his ship."

Corran sighed in frustration, "He meant to be caught."

Mara sounded self-mutilating. "And we provided him with his out. We got too close. Literally."

Luke took in her words as he thought about Mahc's escape. And taking I'hela with him. Why her? He crinkled his brow as he remembered something.

"What?" Mara caught his realization.

"Mahc knew I'hela was wearing the necklace."

Corran supplied with, "He probably saw it when she passed by him."

Knowing where Luke was going with his thought, Mara countered, "No. That necklace was under her uniform. He couldn't have seen it."

Luke asked, "Then how did he know it was there?"

Already ahead of what Luke was intending to do, Mara said, "The gem is over at the comp station." She went over and Luke followed her.

Corran announced, "Don't mind me. I'll just stay over here in my pain if you two don't mind."

Luke and Mara both ignored him as she took the gem out of a hidden compartment inside of the computer console. She reached over to grab the magnifying lens. "I've scanned this several times and nothing comes up."

"That doesn't mean anything, does it?"

"Not when you're dealing with two related assassins." She used a pick while keeping the lens stable to touch the ruby-colored gem. She poked at one of the six diamonds at each point of the star.

Luke warned, "Careful, Mara. You promised I'hela you wouldn't break it."

As soon as he said it, the diamond she fooled with had cracked and came out of its fitting from the jewel. The "diamond" crumbled into pieces.

"Great, Mara. Way to keep your promises."

She sighed heavily. "When are you going to stop being so naive, Farmboy? Guess you haven't been around many diamonds living on a desert planet. They're not supposed to break that easily. Hold on." She took the pick and started to run it across the ruby gem. An off-white scratch mark was left behind. "How many gems do you know of that can scratch that easily, too?"

"It's a fake," Luke concluded.

"Nice of you to catch up."

Corran said sadly, "Poor I'hela. Her father must have seen it on the HoloNet and thought it was his wife's."

"Unless hers was a fake to begin with. Or not." Mara started picking at each diamond in turn and nothing was under them. Until the fifth diamond. Under it was a small mechanism that was blinking rapidly. "Well, I'll be a ranchor's aunt."

"What is it?" Corran asked from the sofa.

"A recorder. One-way bandwidth. It records at a command remotely. Mahc records and then listens on a datapad later."

"Why wasn't this detected?"

She pointed. "See that flashing light? It's constantly transmitting on a low frequency. It's in a loop. It's always on. Or it's been recently triggered on."

Corran noted, "Low frequency. Means it acts like a comlink wave."

"Right. That's why it wasn't detected. The scanner mistook it as a comlink. No warning for that."

Luke straightened up. "So wherever I'hela went, Mahc could hear every word surrounding this."

"Pretty much. It probably doesn't have a great range, but it would be passable for his purpose."

Luke uttered under his breath, "That's how he knew about my father. I told I'hela in private."

Mara eyed him from the corner and asked, "That is what you're worried about? I'd be more worried that he knew where we were going and that we were on the Errant Venture."

Corran added, "And how he knew it was the Anzati in the storage room. We told I'hela."

"And we essentially told Mahc," Mara supplied.

Luke thought again and asked, "How did he get this into the jewel?"

"It was probably in there all along," Mara answered.

"But that would mean I'hela's mother would have had this the whole time."

"I don't think it's the same one," she replied. Upon their looks of confusion, Mara explained, "Voxan never left any survivors on any given job. That's true of most assassins. But where most professionals wanted to avoid having their presence known, Voxan wanted the opposite. He wanted you to know he was there and what he was going to do. And he didn't stop until he was finished. There was an old saying about him that said if Voxan failed to kill you one day, he wouldn't fail on the next. The two Broadwaters, I'hela and her father, did manage to escape him. And his son."

Corran cried, "Are you saying Mahc was an assassin-in-training?"

"Perhaps," Mara replied. "Voxan would have sworn to find the remaining Broadwaters. He couldn't."

Luke stated, "A testament to I'hela's father for hiding them so well."

Mara added, "The only leverage Voxan had in finding them was through the jewel. Mahc did say his father took the necklace off her mother."

Corran tried to follow Mara's thought. "So Voxan makes a fake, places the bug in it, and sells it on the HoloNet."

Mara said, "It'd be easy enough. I've seen this design in jewels before. It's from a Coruscanti design maker. Star-shapes were their specialty. With the device hidden inside, he just waited for the right buyer. The one who would sell anything to get it."

Luke nodded. "Eran Broadwater. Why didn't Voxan follow up on Eran after he bought it from him?"

"That's unknown. Maybe he died before he could act on it."

Corran said, "Leaving his son to do the dirty work."

Mara nodded. "Mahc must have made a killing at being an assassin over the years."

Luke rolled his eyes at her and she smiled. "Cute. But he never made himself known like his father did."

"No," Mara replied. "He didn't want the publicity. That's the difference between father and son. Less showmanship."

Luke stated, "There may have been some tension between the two. Did any of you sense a difference in Mahc when I'hela mentioned his father?"

"Kind of a tough relationship, I gather," Mara figured.

"What father-son relationship isn't?" Corran flashed a grin at the son of Vader. "Right, Luke?"

Ignoring Corran's remark, Luke asked, "Would the HoloNet keep records of sales over the years?"

"I imagine so," was Mara's answer. "We don't have a direct time frame."

"We can look it up by item," Luke suggested.

"It'll take longer." Mara was at the computer typing. "Let me get all this data out of the way first." As she typed, flashes of data rushed by as they each were being copied to a file.

"What is all that?" Corran asked.

"Information I gathered on this case. Voxan, I'hela Broadwater, and Black Sun history."

Luke watched the images go by until one caught his eye. Something in the Force told him something. "Stop! Go back."

Mara did stop, wondering what Luke saw. "Where?" She started to click backward slowly.

"There." Luke pointed.

"But that's just..."

"I know. But look there."

Mara leaned closer as she followed where Luke was pointing. She immediately saw it.

Her mouth gaped open as she slowly uttered, "Great...Tarkin's...Ghost!"

The Paradox Fate

She was finally aware. She could hear the rumbling of a hyperdrive that sounded like it would break down at any moment. It wasn't deafening. The sound created a sonic rhythm that almost lulled her back to sleep. There was a smell of ancient grease combined with rust. It wasn't totally unpleasant but it kept her awake. What truly prevented her from sleeping again was the pain in her leg. It was a dull throbbing that seemed to have been filtered with something. Her immediate thought was that she had been sedated. She slowly opened her eyes to a drab gray steel wall. She started the motion of turning her body over to the opposite side. The dull pain quickly turned into a sharp stab. She cried out in pain.

"I wouldn't move so much if I were you," suggested a gruff voice nearby.

She did manage to turn her head in the voice's direction while keeping her body face up on her back. She spotted a elderly man sitting beside her bunk. His features were familiar but she couldn't place them. She refocused on his image and her memory caught up with her.

"Mahc Tiernan," she spat weakly.

"You know, that isn't my real name. It's just one of my most popular ones. Mara Jade must have told you I've used that name in the past."

"What...am I...doing here?"

"Right now, you're recovering from an injury to your back calf. A piece of shuttle caught your leg from behind. I suspect Corran Horn sustained a similar injury. I patched you up pretty good. It shouldn't be too bad in a few hours. You might walk with a limp for a few weeks."

She bent her head just enough to look down at her right leg to see something white wrapped around it. "Is that a...bacta bandage?"

"It is. I do have some experience in treating blast injuries." He chuckled a bit. "Especially when I'm doing the blasting."

She eased her head back down on the thin pillow and mentioned hoarsely, "The Vigos?"

"All but one are on their merry way to the afterlife. May their souls burn there forever."

His voice was colder than the artificial air inside the ship. She questioned, "One?"

"Yes. The Ithorian. He managed to survive. Barely. He won't last too long. Still, Ithorians are among the hardest to kill. They have such a strong will. Must be their peaceful nature. Well, this one wasn't too peaceful being part of Black Sun."

"You never answered my first question."

"No, no, no...you asked what you were doing here. I answered."

"Great. I have to be captured by a psychotic murderer who's into semantics. All right, why am I on your ship?"

He grinned creepily as he reached closer to her and replied, "You are here on my ship because I want you to be, sister."

She chuckled humorlessly. "What if I have a problem with that?"

"You don't have a choice. But I do."

She tilted her head to glare at him. "What do you mean?"

He reached closer to her. Too close. "Oh, you want a for instance? I did have the choice of gutting you and stretching your intestines around you. You wouldn't have felt a thing until it was too late." He whispered, "I chose not to."

A tear fell from her eye as she asked, "Are you going to kill me?"

He backed away from her and cheerily replied, "Now what fun would that be? After all, I've spent my life looking for you. It would be rather anti-climatic if I just killed you now. It would be over too quick. No, I want our meeting to last as long as possible. Just like our pain will. Father taught me that."

"Your father wasn't just a paid killer. He was a maniac."

Mahc nodded his head. "And? Is that all you can say about father?"

"What else is there to say?"

"He was a family man."

She almost choked from laughing. "Family man? A dysfunctional family at best."

Mahc looked down at the steel floor and said softly, "You don't know how right you are. For the first fifteen years of my life, I was my father's main concern. Well, at least second behind his work. He never let anyone hurt me. He was the one who could hurt me. He wanted to raise me on his own." He leaned closer and asked rhetorically, "Want to know how badly he wanted to raise me by himself? When he finally found out I was born, he went to the brothel where the woman who gave birth to me lived. He stormed in, grabbed me...and shot her dead on the spot. It didn't matter that there were witnesses. They knew who he was." Mahc laughed maniacally. "So there we were. The two of us."

As Mahc started to reflect, she noted a sense of heavy emotion when he spoke. And maybe even a small hint of regret. He went on to reflect. "Father taught me how to fire a blaster when I was five. I had my first kill with a sniper rifle when I was eleven. Father told me once that a novice in our business always starts out killing from far away. The more experienced they get, the closer they get to the target. When you were as experienced as my father was, a sniper rifle was replaced by a vibroblade. Not only did he teach me the basics, but he told me his philosophy."

"Skarce Voxan had a philosophy?"

"Sure. If you don't have a philosophy, what's the point of living? He drilled his into me everyday. He taught me about pain."

She gulped. "Pain?"

"Yes. Tell me, what was the moment of your greatest joy?"

"I...well, I...guess.."

"Now that's something if you have to actually think about it."

She held her chin up and stated proudly, "The day I finally graduated from the NRS Academy."

"Of course. You were ecstatic. Joyous. You completed something that you worked hard for. You partied heavily after."

"I wasn't much of a partygoer. But I was at my most happiness at that moment."

"But it didn't last did it?"

"No. Nothing ever does."

"I beg to differ. Why was your joy at graduation cut short?"

She admitted with no small amount of sadness, "My father died before he could see me graduate."

Mahc nodded before he got up and tried to lift her leg from below. She immediately let out a yelp.

"What the kriff did you do that for?"

Mahc sat back down and calmly asked, "Do you still feel the pain?"

"Of course, you idiot!"

"Naturally. Your greatest moment of happiness came and went. Replaced with regret. But the pain in your leg will stay with you much longer, especially if someone tries to disrupt the healing."

"Then don't do it again! For the record, I remember that joy I felt at my graduation. It will stay with me for as long as I live."

"Correction: your memory of that joy will stay with you. Not the actual feeling."

"What's the difference?"

"Memories are just reminders sent to the brain so you can recall feelings you felt at one time. The reminders are mostly in the form of images. Images that you interpret. What if you interpret them incorrectly? What if events that happened to you didn't happen exactly the way you thought? Pain, on the other hand, is a direct signal to the brain that tells you something hurts. Pain cannot be interpreted incorrectly. It is always pure. Memories can lie, even if you believe them to be true."

She sighed. "Are you going to kill me anytime soon, or do I have to listen to your drivel?"

Mahc laughed. "You have some guts, I'll give you that."

"Was there a point to all of that?"

He leaned closer to her again. "You asked why you were here on my ship. You are here so I can

teach you about perception."

"Could you be more cryptic?"

He chuckled as he said, "You'll see. Everything will be clearer soon."

She nodded absently and asked, "Where exactly are we headed?"

He smiled eerily and replied, "We're going home, my dear."

"Home? Coruscant is my home."

"You don't know how true that really is."

"What do you mean?"

Mahc took a moment before he asked her, "Your father worshiped you, didn't he?"

Taken aback by the question, she answered, "Of course. I was all he had left of our family."

"I suppose that was true at that time. But is that a good enough reason to love someone simply because they are the only one left to love?"

"It is in my book. I'm not so sure about yours. Or your father's."

"My father wrote his own book. Much like your own father, I suspect. Yet, with all of his love for you, there was something missing from your father. Wasn't there?"

She swallowed hard to answer, "Yes. My mother and brother."

"Brother." He stated it rather than question it. "What do you remember about...him?"

"Very little. I was too young. I remember distant images of us fighting a lot."

"As brothers and sisters will do. I never had the luxury of having a brother. Father wouldn't hear of it. He took care of me well." Mahc paused and then said, "Even when I made mistakes. I remember spilling my milk on the table once when I was just barely a teen. It went everywhere. He hit me so hard across my cheek I thought my head would come off."

She gasped, "Oh, my stars."

Mahc replied, "Don't pity me. I don't need it. Beatings after my failures were my discipline. It was always me and him. I always knew my place at father's side." His voice then grew into a softened rage. "Until he found her."

"Her?"

"Sweet young thing. She was going to sweep him off his feet. I would no longer be his boy. I would have been an outsider."

She stuttered in disbelief. "Your...father...fell in love with someone?"

"You could say that. He never loved me like he did her. Not that quick."

"Imagine that. Skarce Voxan had a heart."

Mahc erupted off his seat and shouted, "He didn't have a heart! Not for me! Not after he found her. I was going to be thrown out. He decided it all that night. I couldn't have that. So...I left him. In retaliation."

"What happened?"

He sat back down and his voice calmed. "It was the night I helped him finish a mission. I set the charges on a house for the first time. The people inside were already burned by father. Fingernails removed. Basic stuff. I detonated it. The explosion was glorious. Complete chaos. Nothing left but the charred bodies. But I knew someone was missing. So did father. That's when he told me that she was coming with us. She was going to be part of our family. We argued. I wasn't going to add her to our family. I reacted...poorly, to say the least. And I left him. He would have her all to himself."

She listened intently as he continued.

"The mission wasn't over. There was unfinished business. Over the years I searched everywhere. Father was too good to be found. By the time I did find him, he had already died. But he left me a message."

"A message?"

"Yes. Our mission from that night. He died before he could complete it. I don't think he ever intended to. He left it up to me. He died a poor man. He didn't have to. He had been betrayed by his employers. He told me to kill all those who were responsible." Mahc smiled proudly. "I did. Rather

effectively too."

She whispered, "The Black Sun Vigos. Your father's last wish. They turned their backs on Voxan after the Clone Wars. They had a new Empire to impress. You set out to kill all who betrayed him."

"Not just betrayed. Escaped as well."

"The last remaining Vigos are dead and one soon will be. Your mission is over."

"Almost. All are dead." He leaned closer and grinned. "Save for one."

She could barely whisper her realization. "Me. My father and I escaped that night." She sat up ignoring the pain. The revelation was pain enough. "That night...you blew up my house. With my mother and brother inside. All along I had this image of Voxan standing before my burning house. I just had the wrong Voxan. It was you. You killed my family."

"Father did most of it. Your family was already dead by the time I set off the detonator. I just finished the job."

She took her finger to wipe away a tear. "How can you be so cold?"

He leaned in further still holding the grin and replied, "Genetics."

She looked down at her bandaged leg. The pain was lessening now. Her mind was in a whirlwind. One of her thoughts formed into a question that demanded an answer. "How did Voxan find me?"

"Oh, he knew all along. He was just too old to do anything about it. I wasn't in his life anymore at that time. But before he died, he told me how to find you. All I had to do was activate it."

"Activate?"

"A simple device. Small enough to conceal what it really was. Mara Jade has probably figured it out by now."

"The necklace," she gasped.

"Congrats on finally catching up."

"That's how you knew where we were going. And that we were on the Errant Venture. That's also how you knew it was the Anzati who was in the storage room."

"All correct."

"You used me."

"Oh, come on. Everybody uses somebody in their life. You should be used to it now."

The pieces were fitting into place. Her father found the jewel that her mother wore on the HoloNet. But it wasn't her mother's. Voxan made a copy and placed the bug inside. He put it up for sale and waited for the one buyer who was desperate to have it at any cost. Sentimental value had no price limit. A clever way for Voxan to find them. Too bad he died before he could execute them personally. But her father died not long after he gave her the jewel. Voxan didn't have to kill him. Nature did that. It made her mention to Mahc, "I'm the only Broadwater left. After you execute me, what then?"

"Like I said before, I don't intend to kill you. I need some answers first."

"Answers to what?"

"Let's just say I'm going to offer you some clarifications. And you're going to fill in the blanks."

"What in kriffing hell are you talking about?"

Mahc stood up and reached over her. "You'll see. All in good time." In his right hand was a hydro-syringe. "Right now, though, you need to rest." Once she saw the syringe she cried out in a struggle. He was too fast. He injected her arm with the syringe. The sedative was strong. It took effect almost immediately. She slowed her struggle and her eyes started to close. Her head automatically lowered onto the pillow. Within a few minutes, she was out.

Mahc looked over her and mumbled. "You're going to need it."

The Paradox Fate - several hours later

"Stand up!" Mahc demanded.

Her mental capacity was still in the groggy stage. She had been placed in a hoverchair with the

repulsors locked. She looked down at her leg and it was still bandaged. The pain there was now reduced to a mild numbing. Her hearing was coming back as well.

"The engines have stopped," she noted.

"That's right. We've arrived at our destination."

"Where is that?"

"A place that may jog your memory. You should be able to walk now."

She began the action of lifting her leg and getting up. There was no sharp pain, but it was there. She took a step. And another. He was right. She could walk now. With each step on her injured leg she limped. "All right. Where to now?"

Mahc made a gesture that said, "This way."

She followed him through the main area of the flat, square-shaped ship to reach the exit ramp. The bright light emitting from the ramp was evident that they landed on a system where it was currently daytime. He walked down the ramp and she followed.

Outside of the ship, a bright sun shone on the vast area of forest. They were in a clearing. A line of tall green trees made the edge of the forest into a semi-circle. The wind was cool and relaxing. Ahead of them by several meters was what looked to be a pile of scrap. From the weeds and grass growing up through the wood and plasticrete debris, it looked like this site hadn't been touched in ages.

"What is this place?"

"Don't you remember?"

"Why would I remember here?"

"Guess you were too young. No one bothered to build over it. They took away the bodies, of course. Gave them a proper funeral. After that, people in the city left it alone. Treated it like a memorial. It's so far out from the city that no one comes out here anymore."

"What city?" she asked, almost afraid of the answer.

"Unlos Tagge."

She breathed out, "We're on Tepasi."

"More to the point, we're at the ruins of the last home to the Broadwater family."

She looked around the debris as she reached closer. She could now see pieces of wood and some metal that had been charred by a fire. She could see the faint outline of a foundation that at one time had been a house. Her house. She strained to find details about them deep into her memory but she couldn't. Instead, she murmured with a mix of fear, rage, and love, "This was where the memory of my family ended."

* * * * *

Chapter Twelve

Tepasi - Former site of Broadwater home

She continued to gaze at the pile of metal and wood that had been charred and destroyed years ago. The place had been left as it had been then. Like it was forgotten. She could almost still smell the faint odor of burnt ozone from the fire that once blazed long ago. Perhaps in some mystical way, it was still burning. This was once her home. It was also the last resting place of half her family. The only images she could call up from her limited memory was of Voxan standing before the flames and her father helping her run through the forest to escape.

As she found out recently on Mahc Tiernan's ship, that wasn't Voxan who started the fire. It was his son. Mahc himself. The young version of the notorious hitman was standing several yards before her. He was as still as she. Perhaps he, too, was in the process of calling up his own memories. She couldn't imagine what his would include.

After a few more moments of reflection, Mahc called out to her, "You getting anything yet? Are

you remembering more?"

She slowly shook her head at him, her dark blonde curls dancing in the breeze and into her face. She brushed them out of her eyes and yelled back, "I don't remember any of this. I was too young."

"What a pity. Well then, allow me to enlighten you." He started walking closer to her as he spoke. "I was standing not far from where you are standing now. I was out here waiting for father's signal from inside the house. It was quiet in there for a while. And then the screams started. There were several different ones, male and female of various ages. They were subjected to excruciating pain. There were pleas for him to stop. He wouldn't. Fingernails were torn off. Sensitive nerve endings were agitated." As he described the macabre torture, Mahc wore an unusual smirk. Almost as if he wished he had conducted the torture himself.

"Can we please skip the details?" she snapped. "You are describing the torture of my mother and brother."

He chuckled. "Yes. That would be what your memory tells you. Your memory doesn't include your father."

"What are you talking about? Father and I weren't there."

"Weren't you? Where were you?"

"At the med center. I sprained my ankle that night."

"Did you? Can you remember any bandages or a brace?"

"What are you doing? Is this how you treat your victims? By confusing them first?"

"I'm trying to tell you the truth."

"I know the truth. Elan Broadwater was my father and he raised me. And I know that you and your father killed my mother and brother in cold blood."

He neglected to answer her immediately as he walked around her among the tall weeds. He finally mentioned, "Elan Broadwater. A name as false as my own."

"I'm actually quite aware of that. Father had to hide us both physically as well as in name."

"No. He didn't. The Jedi did."

"What are you talking about? What does the Jedi have to do with this?"

"Plenty."

"All right, stop with the cryptic answers."

He paused and asked, "How well did you know your father?"

"That's none of your business."

"Oh, but it is, sister. I'm going to tell you how much it is my business." He spread out his hands and announced, "Let's recap. You don't remember any injuries to yourself that night. You knew your father's name wasn't his own but you didn't know the source of the false name. And I'm betting that you don't even know that your own name is false. In fact, it's backward."

"Backward? Now you're just talking gibberish."

"It would sound like that to you. It will all make sense soon." He gestured to the area beside him. "See, I was standing right here that night. I was waiting for father's signal for me to set off the detonators. The screams from your parents and brothers..."

"I didn't have broth..."

"Hey! Let me finish! Now, where was I? The signal. The screams ended but that didn't mean they were dead. Not yet. Father gave the signal that he was clear and I set off the detonators. The blast went straight up, just like we arranged the charges to do. The fire was blazing."

"And my family was in there!" she cried out in tears. "You are not human and neither was your fath..."

The slap from his hand hit her hard across the cheek. Her head jerked to the side but she didn't fall. He methodically exclaimed, "Let. Me. Finish! Don't worry, there'll be time for questions and comments afterward. Meanwhile, I'd tone down the bad mouthing of my father. So, where was I again. I hate being interrupted, by the way. The fire was burning. In the midst of the blaze, I saw my father coming towards me. But there was something odd. He was carrying something. As he got closer, I

could see he was carrying someone." He looked at her directly as she rubbed her cheek and emphasized, "You."

"No. You're lying. That was my father who escaped with me. What about our speeder? How did it blow up? I do remember that."

"Oh. Well, that was me. See, father and I didn't come to terms when it came to his plan for you. We argued. It came to blows. Can you imagine that? Father and son fighting?"

She remembered her talk with Luke Skywalker when he revealed to her that Darth Vader was his father. She was sure the Voxan and son fight didn't include lightsabers.

Mahc went on. "He said he was leaving with you and I got so mad that I took a DL-Photon Launcher and blew up the speeder."

"You mean our speeder. And what do you mean about his plan for me?"

He shouted at her. "When are you going to wake up? Your father was already a crisp, burnt corpse by the time I blew up our speeder. Along with him was your mother and two brothers."

"That's....impossible. If that's your version...that would mean Voxan..."

Mahc cheered, "Ah, are we on the same page now?"

"No! It can't be! That's impossible. He helped me escape."

"Voxan helped you escape...from me!"

"No. My father loved me. He had a heart!"

"Your 'father' grew a heart once he saw you. Of course, he loved you. You won over his heart. He found compassion after that. All I won from him was his passion for killing. Before this house burned, his work was his life. It was more important to him than his own son. He made an art out of controlled violence. I inherited his trogai fu shontu. His 'traits of descent' as the Hutts call it. The sins of the father are inherited down to the son. But I tried to get closer to him. He denied me. He built a ray shield around him so nothing could ever touch Skarce Voxan." Mahc took a moment to calm down and his voice softened when he said, "Until he met you."

She was speechless. She wasn't trying to make sense of his words. She decided to play along with this crazy man's memories. "What did I do?"

Mahc laughed. "You know what you did? He saved you for last. The rest of your family were lying in their bedrooms inches from death. They were all scared as it was happening to them. But not you. You didn't run away. He was about to kill you. He had a thing about not torturing small children. That was the only evidence of his heart that I ever saw. No, you actually ran to him...and hugged him. See, you did something that no other victim of his had ever done. You showed him unconditional compassion. And that's all it took. He clicked. You, of all people in the galaxy, took down Skarce Voxan without firing a shot. And at age three!"

"No. That wasn't me. I wasn't the 'her' that he fell in love with. You're delusional."

Mahc signed impatiently. "You mean after my emotional outburst you still don't believe me? I guess denial is powerful. No worries. I have proof."

"Proof?"

"Yes. So you two escaped. And you went to live in hiding somewhere. I'm guessing Coruscant. He had to tell you something as you grew up. See, your youth at that time worked to his advantage. Let's see, what could he have told you? The most notorious assassin in this galaxy's history brutally murdered your mother and brother. I can only guess that he had me play the role of himself. After that night, we were dead to each other. So, he borrowed the name of your own father, who, in turn, received it from the Jedi. But he had to be a person of high stature. One who had to have done something so threatening to Black Sun that they would have sent Skarce Voxan after him and his family. A senator from Tepasi, perhaps."

"How could you know that?"

Mahc tapped his head with his forefinger. "Instinct, sister."

"How do you know he wasn't a senator?"

Mahc spread his arms out to present the surrounding area like a showman. "Look around, sister."

The house that once stood here has been reverted to a pile of old, charred junk. Does this look like a place where the people of Tepasi would honor a beloved senator? Especially one that was burned to death along with his family. I think not. This place has been forgotten. By the way, future reference, nobody can be the head of anything on Tepasi without having the name Tagge."

"How do you know that wasn't my father's name?"

"Still not convinced, I see. That's all right. I brought physical evidence." He reached into his vest pocket and produced a old folded piece of flimsi. He held it out for her to take and she did reluctantly.

"What is this?" she asked.

"Open it up."

She started to unfold it carefully as it crinkled with age. When it was completely unfurled, it revealed itself to be a poster-sized chart. There were three names written on top. Below each name were a series of tick marks at various intervals. She whispered, "A Tall Poster."

"You know about them?"

"Father made me one when I was little."

"Well, isn't that a coincidence. As you can see, the children on that poster didn't live to be very tall. Save for one."

"What do you mean?"

"Let's try something. If you would, read off the names on the poster. Left to right."

She shrugged and called out as she read. "Pap. Cho. Alexhi."

"Perfect. Now, turn the poster around to face me. That's it. Hold it up to the sunlight. Good. Now the first two names were obviously boys. I want you to spell the name of the girl as you see it."

She shook her head and obliged him. She started spelling it. "I...H...X...E...L." She started to slow her speech down as she said the last letter. "A."

"Look familiar? Take out the X and you have a name. You see, father just used your father's new name. For yours, he simply took your true name and twisted it backwards. The X wouldn't have made sense, so he took it out and added an apostrophe. This Tall Chart was taken from your house that night. Voxan took it along with your mother's gem on her necklace."

She plopped down into the tall grass, still holding the poster. The weight of truth was too heavy for her to stand. "This isn't real," she said with stunned emotion. "How could I have been raised by Skarce Voxan and not become a monster like you?"

"We'll never know now, will we? Father...our father...is dead."

"He was not my father."

"But you've been calling him that this whole time. All your life, in fact. But your question is valid. Skarce Voxan was a killer for hire who enjoyed killing way too much. The one who stops him from killing isn't a strong warrior or even a Jedi. It's a little girl who shows him love." Mahc paused to reflect a moment and then stated, "Perhaps he was escaping with you after all. Maybe he was escaping from himself."

She spoke in a hoarse voice. "Why are you telling me this?"

"I felt you deserved the truth."

"That's a kriffing lie. You have a plan just like you planned the murders of all those Vigos."

"I found out who you were just recently. Father did hide you both fairly well. I would have never guessed he would take a job as a custodian at the Imperial Palace. In his former life, he would consider that to be several levels below a bum. Once I discovered the name Broadwater and connected it with Tepasi and the Jedi, I formed my mission."

"How am I supposed to take this information? How do I know you concocted all of this?"

"But you know deep inside that it is true. It's too bad you don't have Force potential. Otherwise, you would have no doubts."

"This is too impossible to believe."

"But too close to the truth to ignore. I know I'm not the most reliable source. But I assure you that the events that I described are true. Why would I lie?"

"So you can scare me easier. So you'll have me in such an emotional state that I won't fight back. That way you can kill me slower."

"Well, you have me there."

"Why?" she cried. "If what you say is true then father...your father...would have wanted me to live."

"I'm sure he would. But as you can see, he's no longer here."

She nodded. "You don't want me to live. Haven't you given me enough pain already?"

"You don't know pain!" he shouted. His voice echoed throughout the vast forest. "He never considered my pain after seeing him carrying you! In a speck of time, he gave up a son and gained a daughter. It's what he wanted all along. He threw me out! I was only someone to pass on his name. His legacy. That's all. You were his chance at redemption! I wasn't. Tell me about pain now!"

She gulped. "I'm sorry you feel that way. But it's not my fault. The one who can answer your pain is gone. Be angry at him."

"I am angry! If it wasn't for you, I could have gotten closer. I might have been the one to take care of him in sickness. I could have meant something to him." His voice started to crack with emotion. He was no longer speaking to her. He was talking to a corpse. "Instead, I had to spend years wondering if I could have been raised to be a saint."

"I'm not a saint."

"No? Have you murdered people not just for money but for the joy of doing it? To see that life disappear from victims and enjoy it? That's the passion I inherited from Skarce Voxan."

"You didn't have to be like that. You had a choice. But you chose to be a killer like your father once was."

"But he chose to give you integrity, ambition...and love. Don't you see how both of you have ruined my life? Don't you see how much hate I have for you?"

"Perhaps you ruined it on your own? You made yourself guilty because you didn't have a need or want to change your ways. The ways that your father taught you. So you went out and destroyed all of those who betrayed you, not Skarce Voxan. And then you set out to destroy the one person who finally gave Voxan a reason to live. What you can't stand is that it wasn't you."

Mahc's voice calmed. "Sounds to me like you're starting to believe."

"Maybe not believe. I understand."

"Then understand this. You were part of my mission. You were, in fact, the end to the mission. And I never leave a mission unfinished." He reached behind him on his belt to retrieve a long, sharp vibroblade. "Prepare for your true pain, sister."

Once she saw the silver shiny blade, she knew he meant business. She dropped the Tall Poster and tried to quickly to get herself up and start running. In her haste, she stumbled to the ground first and then broke into a run. And run she did. She headed into the deep green of the forest that lined the clearing for the former home of the Broadwaters. She dared to look back at Mahc. He was coming for her in definite steps with a maniacal grin and his blade held out.

"You can't run anywhere close! There's no one here, sister!"

She turned her head straight forward and ran like she never had in her life. Soon her only obstacles were in front of her in the form of fallen tree limbs and tall grass. She remembered the obstacle course that she tied the best time with in her training days at the NRS. The forest deepened and the numerous tree leaves started obscuring the sunlight. The running panic reminded her of a time with her father on Coruscant. They were both out shopping in a crowd close to the Winter Solstice holidays. She couldn't have been more than seven or eight. The crowd had become heavier and she lost contact with father. She searched all around but all she could see were more people. She panicked. She cried out for him. Finally, she saw him. She ran to him with glee. He was waiting for her to come into her arms as she emerged out of the crowd. They hugged each other and he picked her up. She remembered looking at him and being happy.

This time there was a difference. Father changed. He became older. His eyes deepened. Scars

started to appear on his face. He spoke, but not with his voice. Not the one she knew. This was a cold voice. A voice without remorse. "Hi, honey. You're safe now."

No! I am I'hela Broadwater!

She ran.

Elan Broadwater was my father!

She jumped over a dead log.

Mahc Tiernan is a liar. He only said this so he could kill me easier.

She was determined to run faster.

I won't make it that easy for him.

As she decided this, she came upon another clearing in the woods yet the trees above were still holding the sunlight back. She slowed and finally stopped to catch her breath. She looked up and saw a monstrous building. She started to walk around it's massive size. From the flat square bisected by a semi-circular tank, she surmised that this had been an old hydro-treatment plant. She focused on the closest end of the building. There was a small metal staircase leading into a passageway inside.

Suddenly, she heard a voice coming from the forest.

"I'm coming, sister! You can't escape from me again!"

She muttered to herself, "Wanna bet?"

She darted towards the staircase and climbed up. They creaked as she went up but they held together. There was a doorway at the top. The sliding doors seemed to have lacked a working servomotor for some time. The doors had been stuck open with less than a half meter gap. She had to squeeze through the narrow opening. She was expecting to see complete darkness inside the abandoned plant. The ceiling had partially caved in allowing the Tepasi sun shine in. The metal walls were now a dull orange-brown from the multi layers of rust. There was an acrid smell of dust and decayed water. Above her were a series of catwalks to gain access to the massive cone-shaped hydro processors. She considered them archaic since she knew that the Core systems no longer treated their water supply inside plants such as this one any longer.

She looked up at the catwalk and saw many nooks it provided. Excellent places to hide.

Mahc Tiernan squeezed through the opening of the forgotten hydro plant. Between running at his own pace through the deep woods and sucking in his gut to fit through the small opening, Mahc was very much out of breath. He had maintained a healthy diet over the years that kept himself fit. Age was his enemy now. There was no regime to counter that. After he took several moments to catch his breath, he looked around at the vast empty area. He shouted making his voice echo against the walls and equipment. "Well, isn't this quaint! What a nice little hiding place you found." He added an ingredient of mockery to his words. "This is such a big place. However am I to find you?"

He waited but there was no reply. "Don't think I can't. I have all the time in the galaxy. No jobs coming in. Yes, that's right. I'm unemployed. Funny thing, it seems now that Black Sun and the Empire are no longer in full power, nobody wants to hire assassins anymore. I find myself with tons of free time. Can you imagine that?"

No answer.

"Oh, I get it. The silent treatment. You know, I've been warned about this with women. Wives, girlfriends, and especially sisters. Sisters are the worst at giving the silent treatment. So I hear. Now, I'm not worried that you don't believe what I said is true. The point is that I believe it. So, you shouldn't really mind if I call you sister. I mean, after all, we were raised by the same father."

"Skarce Voxan was not my father!" her voice echoed from somewhere in the age damaged facility.

"Ah, there you are! Finally decided to join the conversation, did you?" Mahc still focused on the echo of her words as if trying to pinpoint their source. He started climbing the nearest ladder that led to a catwalk. He kept on speaking to her disembodied voice. "Now, technically, you are right. Skarce Voxan wasn't your biological father. Voxan took care of him in the house. Typical torture, like I said before. All the torture groups used. Blunt, sharp, hot, cold, and loud. Well, he didn't use loud too much.

Not that it made too much noise. He just considered it too tame. But no matter what the job was, the targets received the same treatment." Mahc grunted as he climbed onto the catwalk. He started walking along the metal grating, and it creaked too but held in place.

He continued to taunt her. "But your parents and your brothers were not quite dead before I set off the detonators. They wished they were. I can assure you that once that fire hit them, they could definitely feel it. They were already in too much pain to scream. But here's the thing." He paused as he eased his way along the catwalk searching the alcoves for her. From above, he could see an enormous circular tank filled with dark, murky, tainted water. He continued on.

"Father told me his brilliant plan when he came out carrying you out. You were actually asleep in his arms. He told me something about your mother that was rather interesting. While she was deep in pain from the torture, father told her that he was keeping her daughter for his own. Do you know what she did? She didn't cry or plead for her own life. No, she smiled at him. Can you believe it? That's a mother for you, I guess. I never knew mine because father shot her to death. Your mother knew she was going to die but she was relieved that her daughter would be saved. And it didn't matter how Voxan was going to raise her daughter. She just was glad that she'd be alive. Wouldn't she be proud of you today?"

"You don't deserve to talk about my mother!"

"Just keep talking, sister. Not long now." He kept searching high and low. She sounded closer. "I can tell I struck a nerve, didn't I? That's okay. When I find you I can sever that nerve. And after that, I'll slice you with small minor cuts. It won't kill you. That's right, I'm going to make you bleed slowly."

"No, you won't," announced another voice from behind Mahc. Mahc spun around to see Jedi Master Skywalker standing on the catwalk a few meters away.

"Well, if it isn't the Hero Jedi. Come to grieve your precious Vigos? How is the Ithorian doing? I lost track for some reason."

"Because we destroyed the device inside the gem. And the Ithorian died a standard hour ago."

"Isn't that a shame? Where's your better half? Her head okay?"

"Down here! And my head's fine." called out a feminine voice from the lower level. Mahc looked down to see the figure of Mara Jade standing with a high-powered blaster-rifle pointed at him. "I know you've always wondered how good of a shot I am, Mahc. Call me that again and you're going to find out."

"Mara, why do you deny your true feelings? You know that you and Jedi Boy up here are a perfect match."

"That's none of your business! And I'm not denying anything."

He leaned on the catwalk railing. "Of course, you are. You were one of the most highly acclaimed assassins in the galaxy. Next to me. Then again, I didn't have a boss like Palpatine. Tell me, did he ever tell you where you were from? Do you even know what system you were born in? Father, at least, made up a past for Alexhi. The truth was too complicated for a three-year-old. Palpatine never supplied you with information on your parents, did he? Hell, how do you know your true name?"

Mara gritted her teeth and shouted up at Mahc emphatically, "I am Mara Jade! That's all I need to know. And this is so not about me. This is about I'hela."

Mahc kept on. "But you two have so much in common. You both have forgotten your true past."

"Not forgotten. I know mine all too well. Now, enough distractions. Where is I'hela?"

"You mean Alexhi."

Luke emphasized, "She means I'hela. What have you told her?"

"The truth. Naturally. By the way, how did you know we'd land here?"

Luke said almost too proudly, "Mara figured where. All we had to do was research the last known residence of Elan Broadwater."

Before Mahc could reply, a sudden joyous shriek came from the catwalk further up. She came out from her hiding space behind the tip of one of the giant hydro processors. "I knew it! He was lying the whole time."

"Thela!" Luke shouted. It was too late.

Mahc broke into a run and then into a forward roll to avoid Mara's blaster fire. After his roll he sprinted toward her. She tried to get away but Mahc was too fast. He caught up to her by grasping a clump of her dark-blond locks and he pulled her back. She yelped in pain as he flipped her around so she would be facing out towards Luke and Mara. Mahc brought his blade up to her neck. "Stop firing, Mara, or you'll be catching her head from down there!" As Luke approached with cautious haste, Mahc turned to him to call out, "And no tricks, Jedi! You already know I'm not weak-minded."

"Don't do anything to her, Mahc," Luke pleaded.

"What? You mean like this?" He took his blade and slashed her right leg. She cried out in more pain as he brought the blade back up to her neck. Her blood was seeping out onto her pants and then to her bandage from her previous injury. Mahc announced in her ear, "That's just cut number one!" He looked at Luke. "I said I'd bleed her slowly."

Luke tried to induce a sense of calm into her. She was crying uncontrollably now. No telling what Mahc had told her. Luke softly called out to her. "Thela. Stay calm."

She shook her head wildly. "No....I'm...too scared."

"Don't be. Remember your training." Luke smiled before he said his next phrase. He was finally given the chance to say it to someone else. "Mind what you have learned. Save you it will."

With that, she stopped crying.

Mahc taunted her again. "Are you going to listen to a Jedi over your brother?"

She stated with emphasis, "You are not my brother." She then took the heel of her left foot and stepped hard on Mahc's left foot. Once he was in pain, he dropped the blade. She then elbowed him in the stomach and he keeled over. As soon as he got himself up, she did a left-sided roundhouse kick that landed on the side of his cheek. His sideways momentum forced him into the catwalk railing, which broke away with age. The pieces of railing fell into the tank of dank water. Mahc started to fall but he grabbed a bottom piece of sturdy railing at the last second. There he hovered over the tank of thick, poisonous water.

Instead of crying for help, Mahc laughed. "Well, I really underestimated you, Alexhi."

She knelt on her good leg. "And you keep calling me that."

"It is your true name."

"How am I to believe that?"

"There's something else that father left me in that message. He wanted me to give it to you. Though, it's in my right pocket. I'm in too much of a situation here to get it."

Luke called out, "Grab my hand, Mahc."

"No! She needs to reach into my pocket first."

She bent over and ignored the pain in her leg for the moment. She reached his pocket and found something. She pulled it out and looked at it. "A safety deposit datacard?"

"I don't know what's in it. But I can guess."

She stared at the card and uttered, "Even in your position now, you're still keeping your story." She looked up Luke instead of Mahc for confirmation. "It's all true. Isn't it?" When Luke frowned and said nothing, it was all the answer she needed. She looked down at Mahc, who was straining to keep holding on to the railing with one arm. "Your mission is over. Give me your hand."

"No. There's one more thing to do. You've proven yourself worthy. Father would have been proud of you."

She uttered, "He was proud of me. And in a strange way, he would have been proud of you, too."

"No, he wouldn't."

"Why not?"

"Because...I don't like who I've become."

With that said, Mahc Tiernan let go of the railing willingly. His body plummeted down and into the dark, contaminated water. The splash was soft due to the density. Ripples came and disappeared.

There were no air bubbles that came up.

There was a long awkward silence after the water calmed. It was somehow a bizarre memoriam for the man who called himself Mahc Tiernan. Whomever knew his birth name were now all gone.

She lifted herself up by a stationary section of the top railing. She winced in pain as she eased carefully on her right leg, now sustaining two injuries in the past several hours. She stared down at the still dark water below.

"Are you all right," asked Luke.

Instead of answering, she said, "You already knew."

"Yes," Luke replied sadly.

"And you tried to get here before Mahc gave his own version."

"We tried but we knew time wasn't on our side."

"How did you find out?" She looked at Luke directly now.

To answer, Luke reached into his own tunic pocket and took out a portable holo-projector and handed it to her. "Mara found this holo-pic of the last known victims of Skarce Voxan." He turned it on for her and instantly a blue-white image appeared above the flat circular device. She stared at it. It showed a family sitting at a table with the mother holding a cake ready to serve. A Life Day cake. She looked hard at the image and shrugged as she started to say, "I don't see anything that would..." And she stopped. She saw just bellow the mother's neck. A star-shaped ruby gem with diamonds at each point hanging from a necklace. She also saw that the mother looked rather pregnant. "Is that..."

"Abri Helan was her name," Luke supplied. "Her husband, Ghill. Her two sons, Pap and Cho. And still inside her was Alexhi. She was born not long after this holo was taken. They were all murdered by Skarce Voxan. Ghill had accidently been witness to a murder on Coruscant committed by a high-ranking Vigo in Black Sun. After his testimony in court, the whole family was placed into a program overseen by Jedi Master Obi Wan Kenobi. The Deponent Security Program. It gave the Helans a new life and name hidden from Black Sun."

"Broadwater was their new name," she stated.

"Yes."

"It must not have been a good hiding place since Voxan found them. It was here on Tepasi."

"Yes. In the house that once stood there." He handed her something else from his pocket that he had unfolded. "I came across this back there. You might want it."

She took the Tall Poster and looked down at the names of the children. Then she looked back at the holo. "He killed them all. Pap. Cho. Abri. And Ghill." She focused on the father's features and saw a familiar shaped nose. "What happened to Alexhi?"

Luke breathed and explained, "It was assumed that the whole family was killed. We checked the original records before Voxan somehow had them altered. They never found the body of Alexhi."

There was a silence as his words sunk in. She popped up her head. "What happened to the Vigo in the trial? The one who Ghill witnessed?"

Luke smiled. "He was tried and convicted. For all we know, he died in the Kessel mines."

She nodded. "Good."

"Obi Wan spoke very highly of the Helans. He said they showed great strength and courage to do what they did." He saw her tears and knew she would have a hard time accepting this. Just as he once did. He changed the subject. "Where's the datacard from?"

She looked at it and read off the top, "First Galactic Bank of Coruscant."

"That bank has been there forever. I wonder what's in the box."

"Guess I'll have to find out." She hesitated before she said, "I now know how you must have felt, Luke, when you discovered that a horrible fiend was your true father. You and I are the reverse of each other. At least you weren't raised by that fiend."

"Voxan didn't raise you to be like that. For whatever reason, you were his chance at a new life."

"Or his redemption. That's what Mahc said."

"Mahc was never given a chance at redemption. He became the fiend that Voxan first raised. I

can see how he could be angry at you."

"I think Mahc was much more angry at himself than anyone else."

Luke smiled and nodded. "A wise point of view. You seem to be taking this well."

She furrowed her brow at him and scoffed, "Then you're not reading me in the Force correctly."

"I know. I just thought you needed some encouragement. I will give you some advice. I wouldn't suggest keeping your feelings hidden inside you. If you ever need to talk, I will listen." He paused and added, "Just like your father would have."

And that was the trigger. She couldn't hold her emotions back any longer. Her tears came in a flood and she broke out in an audible cry. Her head landed on Luke's shoulder and he placed his human hand gently on her head. He let her cry on.

Jade's Fire cockpit - twenty-six standard hours later

"So, she'll be all right?" asked the blue-white image of Corran Horn on the holo-projector.

"I don't know about all right," replied Luke, sitting in the co-pilot's seat. Mara was busy flying her ship. "She needs time. She's taking a few weeks off from her NRS duties."

"Good idea for all of us. Especially after this one."

"I can't take off, Corran. You know I still have students on Yavin."

"Of whom are being taken great care of by Tionne and Streen."

"They do fine. I still miss my students. It'll be a nice change of pace from this past week."

"You got that right. Hard to believe that Voxan was I'hela's father. Never figured him to be the fatherly type. Hope I'hela's taking it all right. Uh, that is what we're calling her."

"That is her official name. Voxan made sure of that. He made it legal."

"Right. Well, I'm taking some time off myself."

"You are? Where will you and Mirax go?"

Corran made a mischievous smile and replied, "Our bedroom seems like an exotic place."

Ever the one to be easily embarrassed, Luke stuttered, "Oh...uh...all right...good luck with that."

"Oh, I will. I'll get a lot of practice."

Changing the subject quickly, Luke stated, "Seriously, Corran, I want to thank you for your help and cooperation on this one. It was rather different."

"Yeah, no Sith Lords or ultra genius Imperial Commanders this time. Though, I will admit Mahc was as much of a challenge for both kinds. Sorry it didn't turn out too well."

"Well enough. Fortunately, the remaining Vigos didn't have much family left."

"And the ones who were left probably figured they should have died years ago. Ah, family. What am I getting myself into?"

"That all depends on how you raise them, Corran."

"Too true, Luke. Too true. Well, I'll let you go. Is Mara dropping you off at your X-Wing?"

"Yes. Thanks for taking the shuttle back."

"No problem. I had to take it back early this morning. If the Rouges found out I piloted that junk I'd never hear the end of it. Until next time, my friend. May the Force be with you."

"And with you as well."

Corran's image disappeared and Luke turned back to Mara, who was staring at him as if she were waiting.

"What? Are we there?"

She replied, "We've been parked in the hangar for several minutes while you and Corran chatted away."

Luke nodded. "Sorry. You know, my gratitude extends to you as well. You were a huge help on this case."

"What does Han always say? Now you owe me one, kid. Wait a moment, if I do my math right, you owe me two."

"I owe you more than that."

She ignored his innuendo. As usual.

Luke spoke more heavily. "Something Mahc said bothered you, didn't it?"

Mara sighed in frustration for a few seconds, and then she was serious. "Mahc didn't die with his true name."

"We may never know his true name."

"Just like we'll never know Mara Jade's real name."

Finally understanding her concern, he started, "Mara..."

"Palpatine always called me that. And Mahc made me wonder. Did he make it up like Voxan did with I'hela? Or did he get it straight from my parents, of whom I have no clue who they are. I never saw my birth certificate, if it even exists."

"Are you done with your self-pity?"

"It's not self-pity." He raised his brow at her. "All right, maybe a little."

Luke assured, "Trust me, nobody can create a name as strong as Mara Jade. Our names alone do not define us. They are not our identity. It's like the Errant Venture. Booster renamed it from whatever the Empire named it..."

"The Virulence," Mara supplied.

"Right. Booster renamed it and made it his own by painting it red. But essentially, it's the same ship no matter what name you give it."

"Yes, but a ship doesn't care what you call it. When we name and rename living beings it gets a little more confusing." There was a silence held between them before she said, "Look, I'm all right. It's just another issue to add to my pile."

He reached out to touch her hand to give her assurance. She retracted her hand way too quickly. He frowned.

He gathered all of his strength to say what he needed to. If he didn't do it now, when would he? "Mara...we need to talk."

"About your departure time. Look, there's your X-Wing waiting for you to take you to your students."

"You know what I'm talking about. We've been dancing around this for quite some time now."

For the first time since he had met her, Mara's mental barriers came completely down. He knew it wouldn't be for long.

She turned to him and spoke in a serious manner. "I'm going to tell you something and it better not leave this cockpit. I know about your admiration of me as well as your secret wish we could be more than we are now. I do...sometimes...think about...us. The simple reason why I don't act on it is that I'm not ready. I've been alone all my life, Luke. I'm not used to people caring for me. I can adjust to nearly anything you throw at me. For some reason, I can't adjust that easily to being with someone serious. At least right now." She paused to add, "I have to find out who Mara Jade is first."

Luke stared at her, even more impressed at her reluctant honesty. "That's understandable."

"Just so you know, I won't have an answer to that in the next week. Or month. Maybe years."

"I can wait."

"No. I don't want you to wait. That's not fair to you. If you are lucky enough to find a good life with someone, go with it."

Luke considered her words and replied, "Maybe I've already found that someone."

Mara turned to stare out at her ship's cockpit. She said softly, "Maybe."

First Galactic Bank of Coruscant - a standard week later

She stepped through the doors of the bank. Finally. It took her long enough to come. After several days of camping out in front of the HoloNet in her apartment, she finally told herself that it was time. There was no way she could go back to her NRS duties this early. She was too much in a mental state. Her chief understood. Staying at home with nothing to do wasn't the best of ideas. It was too much time with her own confusion and doubts. She didn't dare bring herself to visit her

father's...Voxan's...burial site. She had heard from Luke that there was a small memorial to the Broadwaters on Tepasi. That wasn't even a distant thought to visit there yet. Maybe someday.

Her father. She was still calling him that. To the galaxy he was known as Skarce Voxan. He had been a monster to many victims during his time. His time before her. She never saw any evidence of that monster as she grew up. Did she really change him that quickly? Can someone like that switch off the violence at the first touch of a hug? She couldn't begin to imagine that level of power to change someone's personality in the space of a few minutes. Her view of it was that the father she knew was always there inside Voxan. She had somehow brought it out of him.

But to think of all the times her father would curse the name Voxan. The things he said he would do to Voxan once he caught him. Looking back now, he could have been cursing his own son. Voxan made a choice that his son couldn't handle. His son wanted to stay in the darkness.

"Can I help you, Miss?" The short balding teller behind the bank's counter addressed her.

"Uh, yes. I have a datacard for a deposit box here. I just found it. It...it was my father's." How strange it was to call him "father" in public. She had to be careful in public. The Vigo murders were blamed on Mahc Tiernan and the press salivated at the fact that Mahc was the son of the notorious Skarce Voxan. Her story and revelation of who brought her up wasn't disclosed to the public. Only her chief and the Jedi knew and they were sworn to secrecy. She added to the teller, "He died recently."

"Oh, I am so sorry. So you found this card and have no clue what is in the deposit box?"

"Pretty much."

"Why don't I help you take a look. May I see the card, please?" She handed it to him and he inserted it into a wall-mounted datapad. "My, this is old."

"How old?"

"A good forty years."

That made sense to her. She was coming up on her forty-fourth Life Day.

The teller cheered as he suggested, "I can lead you through to the boxes. There's private rooms so you can look inside the box alone. Oh, I just need a name for verification."

"Thela Broadwater," she automatically answered. She gasped and wondered if that would be the name Voxan would put it under. She was about to correct herself but the teller nodded.

"That's correct."

Voxan knew she would find this box someday. Or he knew his son would give her the datacard to it. Her nerves were a wreck with anticipation. What could possibly be inside this box?

"Now, if you would follow me."

She injected, "I hope you'll excuse me if I can't catch up fast enough." She glanced down at her completely bandaged right leg and his gaze followed.

"Not a problem, Miss Broadwater. This way."

She followed him as fast as she could with a limp. He took her through a series of corridors to a back room with walls full of several lock boxes. Each one had a slot for a datacard to enter in. The teller went to the opposite side of the room where the lock boxes looked slightly older. He found the box with the same number on the card and he inserted it. The small door opened and he took out a rectangular metal box from the opening. He held it out for her but stopped as he said, "I'm sorry. Do you need help taking this in your condition?"

"No, I'll be fine. Thank you."

He said as she took the box in her arms, "Then this is yours. The private rooms are across the hallway. Use the datacard to open one." He handed it back to her. "When you are finished, just leave the box where it is and we will take care of it. That is assuming you will be taking the contents."

"I have to know what the contents are first."

"Of course. Bring the card up to my counter when you come up as well, please. Is there anything else I can help you with in your time of grieving?"

"No, thank you. That's very kind of you. I'd just like to get this over with as soon as possible."

"I understand, Miss Broadwater. I will then leave you be. Good luck."

As he left, she found the private rooms and entered. She closed the door with her arm since her hands were carrying the long box. She set it down on the table provided. She sat at the chair and stared at it for several minutes. I've come this far, she thought.

She opened the front lid and looked inside. The first thing she saw was an envelope addressed to "I'hela". There was also a smaller box and a portable holo-projector. She immediately grabbed the envelope. Her name had been hand written. More personal than just a datapad. She instantly recognized the writing as her father's. The father she knew. She opened it up and unfolded the flimsi. More handwriting. She read.

Dearest I'hela,

If you are reading this, I can surmise two things. One is that I am dead. And the other is that you know. Or you think you do. I imagine you are confused. I cannot blame you. You cannot imagine how many times I've wanted to tell you the truth. The real truth. After each year passed that became harder to do. There's nothing much more to say than to tell you that your birth name is Alexhi Helan. Whether you take it as your own or keep the name I gave you, is entirely up to you.

Inside are some items that I thought you may want to keep. One is a family heirloom. The other is proof of your true family. Despite that I ended their lives, I wish them peace in the afterlife.

I cannot blame you if you choose to hate me for the rest of your life. Trust me when I tell you that hate gets you nowhere. I know. I hated for such a long time that it ate at me from the inside. Until I met you. I hope someday you will find it in your heart to forgive me.

To my devoted love of my life and savior,

S. Voxan...your father in spirit.

The last edge of the flimsi suddenly had a tear stain dropped on it. She folded it carefully and placed it back in the envelope. She picked up the small box and lifted the lid. Inside was the gem. The star-shaped ruby with diamonds at each point. She gently picked it up and instantly felt the weight difference from the one Voxan gave to her not long before he died. This one wasn't a fake. It suddenly dawned on her...why would he give her the fake version complete with the audio device? How did Mahc know when to activate the device? She decided it may be a mystery that could never be solved. And, frankly, it didn't matter. She had the original gem now.

But it proved that she could never fully trust the father who raised her. Could she forgive him? Despite his lies to her, he did stop being a monster for her. And she had no doubt that he did love her, even before she read his message to her. Maybe she didn't need to trust him. She would remember him as the father he was to her. As the person who had freed himself from his own violence. And she had a hand in saving him. She would cherish her power until the day she died.

My savior.

She put the envelope and the jewelry box inside her tunic pocket and she reached for the small projector. It was a much older model than she had seen but she figured how to switch it on. A colored image formed. It showed a family of five. Her eyes moved across to each one. Mother, father, and the two brothers. Her eyes then focused on the toddler, who was being carried by the mother. The face was young, yet so familiar. She had seen that face in an older form through a mirror. On the back of the holo, there was type.

The Helans last picture on Coruscant. Abri, Ghill, Pap, Cho, and Alexhi.

With tears she closed the holo and pocketed it in her tunic as well. She stood up and left the room as it was. She limped her way back through the corridors and into the main banking area. She found the teller who took her down and approached his counter.

"Is everything all right, Miss Broadwater?"

"Yes. But that's not my name. It's Alexhi Helan."

THE END