

Fault Line Blues

The Jedi Temple on Coruscant was generally regarded as a monastery, both by the Order and by outsiders. Certainly the spired ziggurat itself, crowning a mountain peak and surrounded by older, historic shrines and grottoes, did little to contradict this opinion. And in many ways this was correct; the labyrinth of the Temple held meditation halls, cells for contemplation, libraries for study, gardens for active practice of the ways of the Force, and severe quarters for those who lived there.

But the Temple was also the nerve center of a galaxy-spanning peacekeeping and educational organization of thousands. As with any large organization, this required a certain amount of practical work and bureaucracy. And so, in addition to all of the more spiritual chambers and courts, the Temple also contained a great many private meeting rooms for Jedi to conduct official internal business in. They were used constantly.

On this day a largely routine conference had been scheduled concerning one of the Temple's Initiates, or Younglings as most called them. Hundreds of these were held every year; the Order took a keen interest in its future and their development.

Four figures sat around a circular table. The first was instantly recognizable, by his size if nothing else. Grand Master Yoda appeared to almost be dozing, eyes shut, face relaxed. The others knew better.

The second was thumbing through a datapad, a faintly bemused expression on his rough, spiked face. This was Master Ima-Gun Di, one of the more unconventional of the Order and a frequent instructor in the Temple when not leading military expeditions on behalf of the Republic.

Sitting beside him, engaged in a deep study of the surface of the table, was a senior member of the Council of First Knowledge, the Cerean Master Ga-Olo-Namen, the current Keeper of Sight. Her long face bore a look of mild interest, as if she could see things in the polished top that no-one else could... which was likely the case.

The final person at the table was by far the least illustrious, although no sign of this was given by the other three in either word or attitude. This was Kibe Quera, Overseer of Dormitory Five, Initiate Clan Heliost, and she was the only one of the group who was not a true Jedi. Instead she was a member of the Jedi Service Corps, whose job was to keep order in the Younglings' quarters and keep a watchful eye on those parts of their well-being that did not include the Force. Kibe had been doing this job for many decades, had seen many of her charges go on to become knights or in one case a master, and the respect given to her by the others was by no means mere politeness.

Her expression, at first pleasant, had rapidly become more and more displeased. Finally she spoke. "Forgive me, but is there any reason we haven't started?"

"I was wondering the same thing," Ima-Gun Di observed.

Slowly Yoda's eyes opened, and he smiled. "Boring you we are, Overseer?" There was a playful tone to his words.

"The longer you leave children to their own devices, Grand Master, the more amazing the situations they conspire to provoke," Kibe replied drily. "My assistant is still very green, and I'm hesitant to be away from the dormitory for too long until he's more experienced."

"Keep you long we shall not. Arrive, our fifth member shall soon. Then, our deliberations we may begin."

"Fifth member?" Master Di raised an eyebrow. "I thought it was a bit odd that Master Namen was here, although given the subject I can see why. Who is the fifth?"

Before any answer could be given, the door slid open and an older human entered the room, shutting it behind him. This was Cin Drallig, a famous swordsman of the Jedi. More prominent, though, was his position as Head of Security for the Order. "Sorry I'm late," he said briskly, moving to take a seat. "A minor disturbance in the hangar bay."

Yoda and Ga-Olo-Namen simply nodded. Master Di looked surprised, and somewhat wary. Kibe frowned. "Why is HE here?" she asked sharply. "We're discussing a Youngling."

"Clear, his presence will become," Yoda replied, unruffled. "Worry you should not. No crime has your child committed."

"I should think not!" Kibe sniffed. "Of all of them, Inmedua's one of the least likely to do something seriously wrong."

"It does seem unlikely," Ima-Gun Di agreed. "Which is why I'm assuming it has something to do with the visions the Initiate is having, which is, after all, what this meeting is about."

"Serve you well, your insight does," Yoda said. "Young Shorereach's visions, concerning they are. And concerning are those of others." His eyes went to Master Namen, then back to Kibe. "Know the Initiate well, not all here do. A brief description, perhaps, you may provide us, from your perspective."

"Certainly, Grand Master." Kibe thought for a second, then spoke. "Inmedua is one of the older members of Dormitory Five. She'll be with us for at least a year more. Very active, very enthusiastic, particularly for Heliost Clan. The other children consider her in the running for best

in the dormitory with a lightsaber, although again, this is Heliost Clan." There were looks of faint amusement around the table; Heliost prized itself on its members' insight, and while the Clan had contributed more than its share of Jedi Masters, it had a somewhat lower than average history of producing great swordsmen. "She's helpful, proactive, cheerful, keenly aware of the rules. More rarely for a youngling, she seems to have an understanding of the reasons for the rules... too many of the highly obedient ones just follow blindly. Most of those never make Padawan."

"Indeed. Always questioning, a Jedi must be. No final answers there are." Yoda nodded. "Cheerful, you would say?"

"Yes, Grand Master. A very positive attitude, which is all the more exceptional because she's so careful. A sort of... calm, mindful happiness. An ideal mindset for a Jedi, I would say."

"Upset her, these visions have not?"

Kibe considered that. "I would say she is worried but not alarmed or afraid. The visions she described to me were very frightening, especially for a child, Jedi training or not. I'm sure she felt fear during them. But she seems to have faith that the Masters will be able to help her work through them, and that many Younglings have alarming visions through the Force as part of growing up and developing their power. So I would describe her mental state right now as still cheerful, but eager for this situation to be resolved."

"You are sure about this?" Ga-Olo-Namen spoke for the first time, her tone questioning. "You describe her as unusually serene for a Youngling. It is... not what I expected."

"I have been the caregiver to over forty years of Initiates. I have gotten to know literally thousands of children over the years, and I feel I am fairly good at gauging the emotional state of my charges." Kibe's tone was dry and assured. "At that age they tend to be an open book if you know how to read it. Inmedua is just naturally calm and social, as well as having a rather more mature attitude towards most things than the average child of her age."

"Great experience indeed, Kibe Quera has," Yoda stated. "A task of heavy responsibility, laid on her, the council has. With unswerving dedication has she carried it out. Trust in her words, we should."

Smiling, Kibe gave him a fond look. "Thank you, Grand Master."

"You seem to think highly of her," Cin Drallig said. "Would that be accurate?"

"Yes, I would say so," Kibe responded. "There are a few Initiates every year who I can tell will go on to pass their trials and become Padawans. Inmedua is one; she has all the virtues we look

for in a Jedi. She's also quite likable, which is not something I would say of all of the little success stories. And more of a help than a burden to me, usually."

"Has she ever committed a major breach of the rules? Or even a noteworthy minor one?" Drallig leaned forward intently.

"Yes," the Overseer answered immediately. "She regularly violates the curfew to go out to one of the balconies and practice with her training saber."

Master Di gave a snort of unsurprised amusement. Drallig frowned. "And you haven't put a stop to this?" he asked.

"To be frank, Inmedua displays so little willingness to break the rules in great or small ways that I felt that reining her in on the one occasion that she felt it was worth doing so might do more harm than good," Kibe replied seriously. "She's going to be leading troops into battle eventually, and a good commander needs to know when to disobey no longer relevant orders and have the will to do it. I have someone monitor her quietly on her little nighttime practice sessions."

"Fond of the lightsaber, young Shorereach is," Yoda observed. "Aggressive, do you feel?"

Kibe thought. "I would rather say energetic," she finally said. "Inmedua prefers acting to waiting. I spoke to her about that once. She said, 'If we act, the situation may get better or it may get worse. If we wait, the situation may get better or it may get worse. If we act, we have a chance to help decide which one it is. If we wait, we do not.' That's pretty typical of her thinking. She also seems to be very keenly aware that she's going to be fighting a war in a few years time, and I think she feels a need to be as proficient with a blade as she can as quickly as possible in order to survive long enough to pick up the more philosophical parts of the Force."

"I would concur with the Overseer's assessment," Ima-Gun Di said. "I would add that the Initiate is a bit of a slacker when it comes to studying doctrine, mostly because it comes so easily to her. She's good with a saber, no question there, but she has to work a lot harder for it."

"Unfortunate it is, that children must seek what which they need to survive over that which they need to thrive." Yoda's voice was heavy, sad, perhaps even holding a trace of guilt. "A dark time, this is. In the Force, trust we must. Yet as young Shorereach concluded has, trust also we must in our skill at arms."

"No argument there," Cin Drallig said. "You've been her primary trainer, Master Di?"

"I suppose so," Ima-Gun Di replied. "I see her regularly for lessons, at any rate."

"How would you evaluate her as a student?"

"Hm. Exceptional bladework. She has a solid mastery of Form I and has made a good start at Form IV; whoever instructed her in the saber early on decided it suited her better than Form III, which I can't argue with. Not overly adept at the aerial parts of it. Not terribly exceptional in her ability to command the Force in most regards; I would rate her average or perhaps a little below average. Extremely adept sensory ability, though; her perception of the Force is excellent, her usage rather less so. She is not what I would call a natural leader; she is helpful and unselfish and thinks for herself, but she gets uncomfortable when called upon to give commands and step to the fore and loses some of her usual initiative. That may prove a problem if she has to command a clone unit. Probably her greatest strength is her insight into the Jedi Code and the Force; I've never had a student who sees past words and mantras to actual meanings and reasons so quickly. A few times it's led her to questions that I wasn't completely sure of myself." Master Di smiled. "Sometimes the teacher learns as much as the pupil."

"So a Form IV practitioner," Cin Drallig said. "Is she content with that, or does she have other forms she prefers?"

Master Di nodded. "She has been seeking to win entry into the Form V classes. And she has been familiarizing herself with Form II, although she seems to have less of an interest in practicing that as she does with being well acquainted with it."

Drallig frowned. "The Form V classes are only for Padawans, with the permission of their master. There's a reason for that."

"So I've told her. She seems hopeful that if she applies herself hard enough, an exception may be made." Ima-Gun Di shrugged. "I can understand why it appeals to her. It offers a mix between defense and offense against multiple opponents. That makes it perfectly suited for her expected needs, especially since, as I said, she is not overly skilled at the aerial aspects of Form IV."

"It is also a very aggressive form," Ga-Olo-Namen said sharply. "Focused around overpowering your opponent and crushing their will. That is not the proper attitude for a Jedi."

"I wouldn't go that far," Cin Drallig replied. "Form V's a perfectly respectable path for an experienced Jedi to walk. It does, however, require more mindfulness than many of the others." He frowned. "Has she asked about Form VI? Or... Form VII?"

"I tried to interest her in Form VI, as I practice it myself," Master Di said dryly. "She informed me very seriously that none of the Form VI users who took part in the Battle of Geonosis survived the engagement, and respectfully hinted that I should consider refocusing my expertise on Form III."

"Well. I won't say she's wrong," Cin Drallig said. "And Form VII?"

"She mentioned once that she hoped to study it after the war. I asked why after the war, and she said that she didn't expect the war to last longer than it would take for her to grow experienced enough to safely learn Juyo."

Drallig grunted in surprise. "That's realistic. And responsible."

"Fairly typical of her," Master Di replied. He then glanced across the table. "Master Yoda, you've trained her as well, of course. I'm curious as to your own impressions."

Yoda stroked his chin. The Grand Master had taken part in the training of nearly every Youngling in the Temple, both in classes and in one-on-one instruction. "Gifted, young Shorereach is. Wisdom she has, and a good heart. But strong in the Force, she is not. Held back by attachment she is, more than most. She must learn to let go of what she holds dear, or a great Jedi she will be not."

"And the visions, Grand Master?" Kibe asked. "She told me you had spent some time meditating with her on them."

"Yes. Saw them, I did. But concealed, shrouded. A strong female warrior saw I, a bounty hunter or mercenary or pirate. Frightening she was to young Shorereach, wrapped in darkness, heavily armed. Glowed, one eye did. Flame red, it was." Yoda nodded. "Pursued young Shorereach she did, implacable."

"Red. A Sith?" Cin Drallig asked tensely.

"No lightsaber saw I. Only blasters."

"And there's nothing in her history to cause nightmares of such a person?" Ga-Olo-Namen asked.

"Nothing at all," Kibe replied. "She's been at the Temple since she was one and a half years old. She's known people who have died or been seriously hurt, but that's been at the hands of battle droids, not a mysterious thug."

Ga-Olo-Namen nodded. "Then very likely this vision is a warning of an adversary who she will face in the future, perhaps years from now."

"Logical, your conclusion is," Yoda replied. He seemed less than completely convinced, though.

"I can't really put out an alert on such a vague description with an undetermined timeframe," Cin Drallig said. "I was told there was something else?"

"Yes," Ga-Olo-Namen replied. "As you know, I..." She hesitated, glanced at Kibe Quera, then glanced to Yoda.

The Grand Master nodded gravely. "Kibe Quera, most worthy of trust you have been for many years. Trust you once more, we shall. What Master Namen reveals, to no-one below the rank of Master are you to tell. And then, only if specifically asked by the Master are you."

"I... yes, Grand Master. Thank you." Kibe looked off balance for the first time since the meeting had begun.

Reassured, Ga-Olo-Namen smoothed her sleeves and continued. "As all of you know, when they reach the equivalent of six years old for a human, every Youngling is taken to the Chamber of Visions by the Council of First Knowledge and takes part in a ritual with the Keeper of Sight. The visions the Keeper receives of their future are then filed, and can be used by their eventual master, should they become a Padawan, to help guide them and avoid pitfalls. The Council may also seek to have such visions unsealed if they see a need."

"Yes, I know of this," Kibe said. "All of the children know of it, although I believe the specificity of the visions and their completeness is greatly exaggerated in their belief."

"That is a great understatement," the Keeper of Sight replied with dark humor. "The truth of the matter is that for the last few decades... around as long as you have been in the Service Corps, Overseer... we have seen a great decline in our ability to see anything at all in the ritual. In fact, for the last ten years, there have only been a bare handful of all the thousands we've seen for who have yielded anything other than extremely near-term visions or nothing at all. Nothing at all, in fact, made up 96% of those who took the ritual this year."

Kibe Quera looked deeply shocked. Ima-Gun Di's eyes widened in surprise. "Is this connected to the other issues with the Force?" he asked.

"We don't know," Ga-Olo-Namen said. "All we know is there's only been a handful of people recently with actual visions worth the name. Anakin Skywalker, Ahsoka Tano, Caleb Dume, Loray Gor-Tasek, Oscroo Kel, a few others. And Inmedua Shorereach. When Master Yoda started looking into the Initiate's visions, he checked with me to see if I'd seen anything. And I had."

"What did you see?" Ima-Gun Di asked.

"I saw a maelstrom of fear. Anger. Hatred. Rage. Grief. Sorrow. Love, but soured. All swirling around Shorereach. I saw her walking deliberately into darkness."

There was silence around the table for a second. Then Cin Drallig spoke. "So the Dark Side. You saw her falling to the Dark Side."

"No," Ga-Olo-Namen replied, shaking her head. "That, strangely, I did not."

"What you describe," said Drallig tensely, "certainly sounds like it to me."

"I've foreseen the Dark Side in other Initiates before," Ga-Olo-Namen said firmly. "It has an unmistakable quality to it. That quality was NOT present. Whatever the meaning of my vision was, it was not a warning of her losing herself to the Dark Side."

"You're certain of that?" the Head of Security pressed.

"One can never be certain of anything in visions," the Keeper of Sight said. "The future is always in motion, and not even the Force can see all ends. But I am confident that in the vision I saw, I was not witnessing Shorereach's fall. Whether or not she might fall afterwards, I cannot say."

There was a long, thoughtful silence. Then Yoda spoke. "Two pieces of a puzzle, have we. When together fit, what make they?"

"Perhaps the emotions you describe belong to this mercenary in her vision?" Kibe offered. "Or to her victims? It is the role of a Jedi to keep the peace; perhaps Inmedua will have to face her in the future."

"I did not get the sense of a violent confrontation," Ga-Olo-Namen replied. "But it is possible."

"If she forms deeper attachments than she should, perhaps this mercenary or assassin kills someone important to her, provoking these feelings," Cin Drallig said. "I know you did not see a fall to the Dark Side, but Jedi have felt the pull of these feelings before without actually going over the edge. Immediately, anyway."

"Possible, both of those are," Yoda said, frowning.

"I don't agree with either of those theories," Ima-Gun Di said, raising his spiky head.

Amused, the Grand Master swiveled his head. "A better theory have you, Master Di?"

"Yes. The dealings with this disreputable figure, being surrounded closely by hatred and fear without being corrupted, the willing walk into darkness... all of this is in accord with something that I've suspected for some time now."

The Keeper of Sight raised one of her tufted eyebrows. "And that is?"

"That Shorereach is destined to walk the path of the Jedi Sentinel," Master Di said simply. "Bearing a covered light into the darkness."

The table digested this thought. "That would seem in accordance with the vision I was given," Ga-Olo-Namen said finally. "That interpretation had not occurred to me."

"Why exactly have you suspected this, Master Di?" Kibe asked, surprised. "Inmedua is not exactly... stealthy."

"It is difficult to give my reasons. Yet that is what I feel the Force has been telling me." There were nods around the table at that; most Jedi occasionally had odd feelings or flashes of knowledge that far more often than not proved to be accurate. "Certainly I feel her to be better suited to working with ordinary people than most Jedi, and to solve problems without resorting to an open use of the Force."

"A possibility, this is," Yoda commented. His eyes remained distant, though.

"Did you have a course of action in mind to test this? Or at the very least to resolve the Initiate's visions?" Cin Drallig asked, sounding intrigued.

"Yes," Ima-Gun Di replied serenely. "I propose that we have Skellig take the Initiate for evaluation."

Drallig raised an eyebrow. "Are you sure? Generally we only send Skellig padawans. Not newly-minted ones either. Do you think she can handle it?"

Yoda answered. "Ready to face Skellig's journey, young Shorereach is. Daunt and frighten her it will not. Ready to face journey's end..." The old Jedi Master's eyes glittered ominously in the soft light of the meeting room. "...that, unknown is."

"I'm not sure this is wise," Kibe Quera said. "She's still very young."

"Yes, but older than her years," Master Di replied. "I have confidence in her. Even if she does not have what Skellig seeks, I feel the experience will do her no harm, and hopefully some good."

"I too believe this," Yoda added. "Watchful and wary, Skellig is. Safe with him, young Shorereach will be. If there is any safety. If she succeeds, an answer shall we have. If fail she does..." He frowned. "Then other interpretations must we consider."

"I concur," Ga-Olo-Nimen said agreeably.

Cin Drallig grunted, then shrugged. "Skellig's a good Jedi. He'll be able to handle it. I agree."

Kibe sighed. "If it is the will of all of you, then I concur. I simply hope it does not make matters worse, or have any ill consequences."

Ima-Gun Di leaned forwards. "I wouldn't send her on this journey if I did not think it necessary, Overseer. Sometimes it is safer to charge than to huddle in a corner and wait. Certainly Shorereach herself would think so."

"I suppose you are correct." Kibe nodded. "Very well."

"Then decided are we," Yoda stated. "Contact Skellig, I shall. Arrangements make, will I. When an answer we have, meet again we shall."

There were nods, and the others rose to leave. "Thank you for the vote of confidence, Grand Master," Kibe told him. "I won't let you down."

The old Jedi Master smiled. "This I believe, Overseer Quera. Few pupils have I had more worthy of trust."

A faint blush came to Kibe's cheeks. "I've done my best since I passed the Trials. I'm just glad you approve."

Yoda beamed. "Approve I do. And proud, am I, that you see clearly."

With a smile, Kibe left. The others started to follow, only for Yoda's quiet voice to sound in the small chamber. "Master Drallig, stay if you would."

Drallig nodded and sat back down. As the door shut behind the departing others, he glanced curiously at Yoda. "I hadn't known Overseer Quera passed the Trials. Why is she in the Jedi Service Corps? Would absolutely no-one have her as their Padawan?"

Yoda gave him a look of wry amusement. "Sat I on her examination board in the Trials. Utterly unfit a Jedi Knight to become, our verdict was."

"So she lied?" Cin Drallig's craggy face looked puzzled. "If you were on her board, she had to have known you would-"

"Master Drallig. Unfit to be a Jedi Knight, Kibe Quera was." Yoda's voice was gentle, reproving. "But compassionate, diligent, and practical she was, as well as possessed of great understanding. Few are chosen, the future of the Jedi to watch. Fewer than are chosen to be knights. And with good reason!" Yoda gave the Head of Security a light poke with his stick for emphasis. "One of our best Overseers has she become. Better than you or I would be. More good Kibe Quera has done the Order than manage in a lifetime shall most Jedi. Fail? No,

Master Drallig. Pass her Trials, Kibe Quera did. Pass them most successfully. And wise enough she is to see that."

The Jedi swordsman bowed his head. "Once I thought when I was a Master I would have learnt all there was to know," he said ruefully. "But the lessons never cease, do they."

Yoda grinned. "The title of Master means not that one is done learning. The title of Master means that finally, one is ready to truly BEGIN learning." They chuckled, and then Yoda's mood sobered. "A final thing there is. Unwilling to speak of it before the others, I was."

Cin Drallig's face showed his surprise. Yoda clearly trusted Kibe Quera, and both Ima-Gun Di and Ga-Olo-Namen were highly-regarded Jedi Masters. "What is it?"

Yoda was silent for a second. Then: "Knows about what lies beneath the Temple, young Shorereach does."

Drallig visibly paled. "What? How?! Who told her?"

"Told her, no-one has. What it is, knows she not." Yoda sighed. "When meditated together we did, asked I of her other dreams and visions. Most, typical for a Youngling were. But one, reoccurring... saw she a great dragon curled beneath the Temple, trying to escape. But too heavy, the Temple was. Push it off, the dragon could not. In its anger, black smoke poured from its nose. Into young Shorereach's room it poured, until nothing could she see, and coughing and choking she was." Yoda glanced seriously at Cin Drallig. "Reluctant she was, it to mention. Silly it was, said she. Then told me, in a small voice, that there were no dragons... were there. Only sometimes, sensed it she did."

"Light of the Force." The Head of Security shook his head. "I hope she passes Skellig's test, then. I think it might be best for everyone to get her out of the Temple as soon as possible and off on a world far, far away."

"Perhaps. Perhaps not." Yoda stood and hobbled towards the door, cane tapping along the floor. "Loudly speaking to the Youngling, the Force is. Listening intently, young Shorereach is. But what - is - it - saying, mmm? And what - is - she - hearing? Descended, the shroud of the Dark Side has. Within it, nothing is certain." The old Jedi Master paused in the door. "Patience we must have. For now."

As he left, Cin Drallig could almost see one small worry land atop a vast pile that the small green figure was carrying, becoming lost in the heap. As the war had gone on, the Grand Master had served as the rock the Order braced itself against, drawing comfort and strength from his serenity and wisdom. But even rocks have their limits, and the Head of Security had watched Yoda become steadily sadder, less inclined to laugh, more uncertain of things. In normal times he would have assumed the elderly master was simply growing old. But the times

they lived in brought a far more disturbing suspicion to Cin Drallig's mind... that the path the Jedi Order was trying to navigate was so treacherous, not even the wisdom of Yoda was sure of the way.

Celanon City, like Celanon itself, was a place of contrasts and contradictions. It was a somewhat dense urban area that nevertheless stayed mostly at ground level; no world-spanning arcology blocks here. It was built along both sides of a great ridgeline; the land sloping upwards ever more sharply before being sundered in half by a deep lake known as the Swanmere, then sloping back down on the other side. The lake was fed both by underground springs and the constant rains that this part of the planet experienced, and so a system of canals was employed to drain excess water down the slopes and out of the city, mostly to be used in agriculture.

The spaceport and the districts around it, on the western side of the ridge, were thoroughly modern and of a sort that could have been found in nearly any well-traveled galactic port. They served the traders, those who serviced the traders, and much of the city's heavy industry.

East past the ridge things changed; metal and duraplast grew rarer, and the favored construction materials were stone and even wood in the ancient styles of the planet. On the very shores of the lake, atop the ridgeline, loomed the soaring bulk of the Moatoan cathedrals, grey testament to the Nalroni origin of the city. This half was where the 'locals' lived and shopped, although inevitably anyone who lived in Celanon City would find themselves on both sides of the ridge regularly.

In the center of the lake on a small island sat what had been the Royal Palace, now simply the Governor's Residence. There had been a lot of renaming done after the Outer Rim Sieges had ended. A lot of other changes as well.

On a fine spring evening, two humans made their way downhill along the banks of what had been the Royal Canal. It had a new name now, but everyone still called it that, even the Imperials. It had rained earlier in the day, and the air smelled of earth and wet brick and wet wood.

"You know, that was not actually as good as I thought it was going to be," Min Camlann was saying. She brushed a stray bit of hair from her green eyes as she walked. "It smelled wonderful. It looked wonderful."

"I know, right? But it didn't actually have that much of a taste to it," Jirik Sloan replied, nodding. "I mean, it wasn't BAD."

"Oh, for sure, it wasn't BAD," Min agreed. "Just, you looked at it, and then you smelled it, and you were sure it was going to taste soooooo good, and then..."

"...just sort of meh," Sloan finished. "I've heard that's a problem with a lot of Nalroni food and humans, but I hadn't actually run into it before."

"Geritte says most of the Nalroni joints in town don't actually do Nalroni food," Min said sagely. "They just take the basic idea and then adapt it to human tastes. That place was the real deal."

"Yeah, makes sense. Ms. Kren'd know, for sure." He glanced at her. "You talked to her lately?"

"Not for a few weeks. Why?"

"Just curious what she thinks of the upcoming visit."

Min grimaced. "She's not going to be happy about seeing a Star Destroyer blocking out the sky, I can tell you that. I don't know what she thinks about SecGov D'Asta. She's probably happier to see him than his boss."

"Yeah, no shit. I don't think anyone wants to see Tarkin come here." Sloan turned and spat into the rushing canal. "The extra attention is bad enough. Lot of people are nervous."

"I don't think it's gonna be so bad," Min said, shrugging. "Not unless they leave a larger garrison or something. Personally I don't think D'Asta wants to raise much of a fuss. He just wants Turgid to crack down on the people funding the remaining holdouts. That's my guess, anyway."

"I dunno, Sparky. I've heard D'Asta is pretty firmly pro-Imperial. Certainly he's cooperated with them with more than customary enthusiasm for the Rim."

"That's true, yeah," Min agreed. "But the D'Astan family has a cadet branch here on Celanon, the Astarte. You may recall they were a key player in the old regime during the war. They seem to have crawled back into the Empire's good graces somehow, but I'm pretty sure Tarkin and the ISB remember. So I'm guessing D'Asta isn't going to be too eager to look into our sordid Separatist past." Her voice dripped sarcasm. "He just wants the flow of money turned off before Tarkin calls him on the carpet for it. That's my guess, anyway."

"Well, you're the authority on ex-Seppie politics," Sloan said, amused. "I'll take your word for it."

"I'm not really." Min shrugged, a sudden breeze sending her hair streaming to one side. She pulled her coat more tightly around herself as she glanced across the raging canal to the rows of brick apartments. "I mean, I don't really know anyone from those days except Geritte, and I'm not political nowadays, except so far as it relates to business and staying alive and out of a cell. The galaxy can go to hell in its own special way as long as it leaves me out of it."

"Yup, pretty much how I feel." Sloan chuckled. "Far as my people have always been concerned, the Republic, the Seppies, the Empire... here comes the new boss..."

"...same as the old boss," Min finished. They laughed.

"You don't seem to feel that way, though," Sloan commented after a while.

Min kicked a loose stone into the water. "The Republic was a corrupt mess that basically exploited the Rim to enrich the Core and a noble class of Senators. It had devolved into something like a collection of warlords without the actual war by the outbreak of the Clone Wars. The Empire takes all the worst qualities of the Republic and centralizes them, making them more efficient. The Separatists... were badly flawed and riddled with corporate influence and utter scumbags, but at least they saw what the Republic had become and were proposing a democratic alternative. If they'd won, maybe the General Grievouses would have turned it into another Empire, but then again maybe the people who believed in its stated ideals would have been able to clean house, and the Rim would have had a government run by and for the people of the Rim, not Coruscanti aristocracy seeking to suck us dry."

"And maybe you're actually the long-lost princess of Alderaan," Sloan said dryly. "And I'm the King of Corellia."

"Haaaa. Yeah, I know. That's one reason I'm not political in a serious way. Too realistic. Mostly it just gives me and Geritte something to bitch about."

"Yeah, that's fine. Lot of people here on Celanon who feel the same way." Sloan frowned. "Governor Turgid hopefully gets the message and starts reining in the people who AREN'T just bitching."

"Yeah. War's over. Everybody lost." A shadow passed over Min's face for a second, then she brightened. "I think Lemma may be sleeping with Janeel," she confided.

"She's not," Sloan replied with assurance. "I've seen her do this before. It's a classic Lemma Kiden cocktease."

"Oh? Hmm." Min frowned, disappointed. Then something occurred to her, and her frown deepened. "Has she tried it on you?"

"I know Lemma too well. She wouldn't bother trying." Sloan's voice was smug. "She's not my type anyway."

"Hey, what's wrong with Lemma?" Min chided. "She's sophisticated. And funny. And..."

"Hey, just because YOU have a crush on her doesn't mean I have to."

"I do NOT have a crush on-"

A loud crash and the sound of breaking glass caused their heads to turn in unison, their hands automatically reaching into their coats for concealed blasters. Across the canal, in one of the brick apartment blocks, a window shattered into fragments of glass and wooden frame as a body hurled through it. As it plummeted down into the rushing waters of the canal, a high-pitched scream trailed after it.

"Holy shit!" Min gasped. "Is that-"

"Kh'veek, that's a fucking kid!" Sloan cursed in Trandoshan and tore off his coat and gun belt, thrusting them at Min. "Here!"

"Jirik, wait a sec-" Min found herself with a bundle of fabric and weapons in her hands as Sloan dashed away and made a flying leap into the churning Royal Canal. "Kh'veek DAMN it, Jirik!"

Ignoring her, Sloan half-swam, half-floundered towards the flailing child. Both of them were being swept downhill, and Min cursed viciously, dropped the coat, and dashed down the bank after them, the blaster belt gripped loosely in one hand.

Sloan managed to reach the kid just as they went under, pulling their head back above the surface and gripping them. A second later the sizzling hiss of a blaster bolt struck the water near them as an arm snaked out of the broken window and fired.

On the shore, Min screeched to a halt. "For FUCK'S sake!" she snarled, then pulled Sloan's blaster from its holster and proceeded to fire several shots at the window. The arm gave a final blast at the canal, hitting nothing but churning liquid, and then vanished back inside. Min gave it a few shots more for purposes of discouragement, then resumed her mad dash downhill.

In the swirling water, Sloan was fighting to stay afloat. The rain-fed canal was moving far too quickly for him to do much more than control the rough angle at which he was being swept downhill, and the banks were sheer and made of mossy, slippery stone. With the need to support the child's head above water, there was little he could do except hold on and try not to drown himself.

"Jirik! There's a waste remover in half a mile! Get out!" Min shouted.

"I know, damn it! Easier said-" His head was swept under the churning water, and he surfaced with a gasp.

"Kh'veek DAMN it!" Min looked around frantically as she ran, stumbling a little. The embankment was deserted at this time of day; it wasn't the most optimal route to get anywhere and they'd

only taken it for the pleasure of the walk in the evening air. The archaic streetlamps cast a ruddy glow in circular pools of light, and she saw a janitor droid, a refurbished Separatist infantry model burdened down with brooms and ladders and buckets, emerge from an alley.

Changing course, Min dashed up to it. "Emergency! I need that rope!"

The droid clanked to a halt and glanced uncertainly at the coil of polyfiber hanging from its harness. "That's the property of Astarte Housing Services Ltd and I'm afraid I can't surrender it without an authorization signed by a supervisor and the relevant equipment manag-"

Min shoved the barrel of Sloan's blaster in the droid's face. "Give me the rope right NOW or you're gonna see me do a real good ARC Trooper imitation!"

"Here! Here!" It thrust the rope at her. Min snatched it and ran, putting on speed to make up lost ground.

"Nobody has any respect for veterans," the droid lamented. "Especially the young."

Min flew down the embankment, periodically glancing to keep track of Sloan's head in the rushing water. Behind her, the iron Nalroni-forged bells of the Moatoan cathedrals began to toll the hour in their high steeples, sending the familiar hollow sound echoing through the evening air.

Up ahead a bridge loomed, spanning the Royal Canal in a semicircle. Some ways beyond that, the waters disappeared briefly into a clanging, humming structure spanning the canal... the waste remover, which filtered out and chopped up trash and performed rudimentary water purification. It was ancient, like much of this part of the city's infrastructure, but still in working order. The intake valves were more than large enough to suck in a human.

Her lungs burning in the cool damp air, Min pushed herself and put on a burst of speed, dashing ahead of the pair in the river. She made a tight turn at the bridge and dashed onto it, stopping at the middle, then hurriedly unwound the rope. "Jirik! Grab hold!"

"No shit, Sparky, I'm not a fucking idiot!" Sloan was rapidly approaching the bridge. Min hurriedly stepped a few paces to the side.

"Yes you fucking are! Don't miss!" She braced herself.

Sloan and the child flew under the bridge, and he grabbed for the rope with one hand. His first flailing swipe missed it and Min's heart leapt into her mouth; his second one, however, caught hold. She started to give a sigh of relief that turned into a squawk as she was nearly pulled off her feet by the jerk of the rope. Arms straining, she braced herself against the railing as Sloan held on with one arm for dear life, the other clutching the kid in a death grip.

"Can you manage? You gonna be able to hold that?" Sloan called up, clearly nervous.

"Yeah, I got it. I'm gonna haul you up. Don't drop the rugrat." There were times when being built like a fire hydrant made her feel self-conscious about her body, and then there were times like this where being compact and muscular really, really came in handy. Planting her feet, she took a deep breath and began to haul on the rope.

A blaster bolt sizzled past her head and melted a chunk out of the railing, causing her to almost drop the rope. Swearing vilely in seven different languages, she stopped hauling, wound the rope around the railing to help reduce the weight, then gritted her teeth and called upon an asset she had done her best to avoid using for the last several years. Releasing the rope with one hand, she sidestepped as another bolt went through the space her head had occupied a second ago, pulled Sloan's blaster free, and continued to haul them up one-handed. The other hand aimed the gun at the mouth of an alley down the street and pulled the trigger.

A third bolt flew from the alley's shadows. "Damn it, Min, get the fuck down!" Sloan shouted. She ignored him, firing over and over into the blackness. No further bolts came, and then with a final supreme effort she pulled them up between the rails.

The child lay on the bridge choking and vomiting up water; a young boy, younger than Min had been when she found herself alone on Celanon's streets. Jirik lay for a few seconds spitting water and getting his breath, then scooped the boy up and dashed off the bridge. "Cover, now!"

Giving the alley a final burst of suppressive fire, Min followed at a trot, breathing ragged. They ducked down a series of winding sidestreets before coming to a halt in an almost invisible stone courtyard past a dark arch between buildings, lined with silent alabaster statues of Moatoa saints facing a central bubbling fountain. Weeds grew from between the pavestones.

Both of the two enforcers caught their breath, hands on their knees as they bent in a resting crouch. The boy huddled at their feet, quietly whimpering. The pale statues turned a dull red for a second as an aerial billboard, tethered in high orbit to a derelict CIS orbital defense platform, flickered on and blared a crimson message across the heavens. Then it turned off, and the paleness returned.

"Kh'veek, Sparky, I'm impressed," Sloan wheezed. "I would have bet good money you couldn't handle both of us one-handed. I would have bet good money DUHA-WIK couldn't handle both of us one-handed. You're a fucking monster."

"Yeah, well, amazing what sheer screaming terror will do for you." Her arm felt like it had been run over by a landcrawler. "Maybe consider losing weight."

"Very funny." Sloan looked down at the boy, and his face darkened. "Kh'veek's Wounds, a damn kid. What the fuck. What kind of crazy-"

"Jirik! Language!" Min snapped. She knelt down beside the boy. "Hey. Hey, you okay? What happened?"

The boy looked up at her, sniffing, then whispered, "She killed my Daddy."

"She? She who?" If this was a domestic dispute, Min thought angrily, she was going to go back to that apartment and express her displeasure to the bitch.

"The babysitter."

Jirik frowned. "Babysitter? What, he wouldn't pay her or something?" He looked dubious. "Seems a little... brutal for a babysitter."

"She killed my Daddy," the boy repeated. His lip started to tremble.

Min sighed. Dimly in the distance she could hear the siren of a CCPD landspeeder, back in the direction they'd come from. Probably someone had called the cops over the blaster fire. "We gotta go to the Don with him, Jirik. Maybe this was just some sort of lover's shitshow, but whoever that was seemed awfully persistent about making sure this little guy was dead once they realized someone was trying to save him. We could have just fucked up another organization's hit."

"Yeah. I was just thinking the same thing." Sloan sighed, and knelt down by the boy. "Hey, kid. What's your name?"

"Maato." He looked at Sloan with worried, miserable eyes.

"Hi, Maato. I'm Jirik, and this is Min. We're going to take you somewhere safe were the bad woman can't find you. Okay?"

"Okay." There was no enthusiasm in the boy's voice, but no reluctance either. His world had been broken and he was simply floating down the path of least resistance. Min knew all about that, more than she wanted to.

Sloan scooped the boy up; the child was shivering in the cool evening air. "Let's go. We can dry him off at our place and then take a speeder to headquarters. Where's my coat?"

"Lying on the embankment a mile back," Min said unapologetically. "What, I look like a coatcheck girl?"

"I liked that coat," Sloan said plaintively. He took his gun harness back from her. "It looked good on me."

"It did. It did."

They left the courtyard as another billboard sprang briefly to life in the sky, painting the statues and fountain and stones blue.

Inmedua Shoreach looked up from where she sat at the end of her bunk, short legs swinging. As Kibe Quera approached, the Youngling smiled at her and nodded. "You wanted to talk with me?"

"Actually, no, Inmedua. There's a special evaluation scheduled for you. I'm to escort you to the Jedi who will be overseeing it."

Inmedua's eyes widened very slightly. The smile on her face grew. "Yes, Kibe. I'm ready to go. Should I bring my training saber, or will they want me to use one they provide?"

"Your saber?" Kibe blinked. "You can bring it if you wish, I suppose, although I think you'll have to leave all your belongings here at the Temple. I doubt you'll be called upon to use a lightsaber, Inmedua. I certainly hope not."

A stab of uncertainty and disappointment ran through Inmedua, and the smile on her face slipped. "Isn't this for the Form V class?" she asked.

"No." Kibe Quera's voice was firm. "This has nothing to do with that. It is, however, important. I suggest you pull your head away from dreams of swordplay and focus on the moment. Master Yoda himself arranged this test, and it is most irregular, particularly at your age."

"Oh." Disappointment warred with curiosity and a growing excitement. Then Inmedua remembered herself and ruthlessly crushed the former and the latter, leaving only curiosity. "Well, if it's important, we shouldn't be late." She hopped down. "I'm ready when you are."

"Good! Follow me." They made their way out of Dormitory Five, and down into the halls of the Temple.

As they went, Inmedua glanced up at the Overseer. "Can you tell me anything about this evaluation?"

"No. I'm afraid I don't know all the specifics myself, and I don't wish to tell you anything you aren't supposed to know beforehand. It will be administered by a Jedi Knight named Skellig, who is quite highly regarded. You should obviously do your best."

"I see." Inmedua frowned, at a loss what to make of this. She had never heard of a Jedi by that name. Granted, there were an awful lot of Jedi, but she had at least heard of most of the ones frequently around the Temple.

Ahead of her down the long pillared gallery a pile of papers and datapads fell to the floor with a clatter, and with a noise of dismay an older human man bent awkwardly to gather them in bony hands. Inmedua moved quickly ahead of her escort and scooped several of them deftly up, handing them to him. "Here you go, Master Sevala."

"Oh... oh, thank you, ah... Shorereach, isn't it?" She nodded, and Mar-Alen Sevala gave her an absent smile. "Yes, thank you."

Kibe caught up with her, and they went onwards. "We'll be taking the elevator past the next column," the Overseer said.

Inmedua blinked. "That goes directly to the sublevels," she said uncertainly.

"Yes." Turning, Kibe pressed a panel; before too long, the lift doors opened and she motioned the Youngling in. Inmedua complied, and soon the two were descending rapidly.

As the elevator hummed into the depths, Inmedua ran through calming exercises in her mind. The strange, unknown nature of this examination was exciting enough, but their destination only made her more anxious. She didn't like the sublevels carved into the mountain peak; she knew it was childish and couldn't articulate clearly in her mind why she felt that way, but she always had a much harder time keeping calm and mindful when she was down there. Thankfully she didn't have to go there very often; they were mostly used for storage and similar purposes. Today apparently she did, though, and that troubled her. If the examination contained a test of her ability to maintain a tranquil spirit appropriate for a Jedi... and most of the Order's trials did, to some extent... she would be operating under a handicap.

Should she say something? No, Inmedua decided, mentioning that she still had infantile, nameless terrors at her age was definitely not the way to start off what Kibe had said was an important test. She would bring it up with Master Di the next time they spoke, since it was a clear flaw in her development as a Jedi and Inmedua was utterly committed to molding herself into a person as close to the Jedi ideal as humanly possible. But challenges existed to be overcome, and she felt that overcoming her own unease of the deep places would be a good personal trial of her self-control and internal meditation skills.

The lift stopped, and Kibe led Inmedua down strange ways, ways she had never had call to take, ways of which she was uncertain. Carefully she memorized the route in her head, noted with trepidation that their path took them ever downwards.

Finally, they emerged into a small airspeeder garage, big enough for just three or four vehicles. Only one was there at present; an unremarkable economy model without Jedi or Republic markings. The bay was otherwise empty except for a single human male, waiting.

Inmedua studied him as they approached. He was older, balding, with close-cropped blond hair. He wasn't dressed like any Jedi she'd ever seen; his clothing was of Coruscanti cut, muted, modern and unexceptional. He had a small blaster pistol buckled to a garden-variety equipment belt; there was no lightsaber in evidence anywhere.

Kibe stopped and gave a polite bow. "Inmedua, this is Skellig, a Jedi Knight. He will be conducting your examination."

Baffled but determined to make a good impression, the girl stepped forwards. "Hello, Master Skellig. I'm Initiate Inmedua Shoreach, Clan Heliost," she said with a polite dip of her head. "I look forward to your teachings."

The Jedi stared at her impassively for a few seconds, unsmiling. The silence lasted just long enough to make her uncomfortable. Then he reached into the back of the airspeeder, took out a bundle, and tossed it to her. "Call me Skellig. No 'master'. There's a changing room through that door." He jerked his hand towards a small portal in the wall. "Get dressed in what I gave you and leave your Jedi togs in the locker."

"Yes, Skellig." She walked off to change.

As she crossed the garage she could hear Kibe speak, dimly. "Is this going to be okay? She's very young."

"I know my business." Skellig's voice was unruffled, assured. "She'll probably fail. Most do. But I'll bring her back with most of her limbs."

Kibe's next words were lost as Inmedua closed the changing room door, but the Youngling thought the Overseer sounded displeased.

The clothing in the bundle turned out to be a dark blue jumpsuit with dull black boots and a weather hood that hung down on the back when not in use. It bore no symbols or identifying marks, but she could tell upon inspecting it that the fabric was well-made. There was a cloth belt of a somewhat thicker fabric with a darker hue, and she was startled to see that the soles of the boots had lightweight magnetic clamps that could be activated at need. She dressed quickly, placing her Initiate's uniform in a metal storage bin, and then emerged.

Kibe Quera had left; Skellig was waiting for her with the airspeeder door open. He made a motion, and she climbed into the back seat, more and more confused. "We're going outside the Temple, then?"

"Yes." Skellig locked the doors, checked that she was buckled, and then started the repulsors. "Were you told anything about this?"

"No. Just that it was an examination, that Master Yoda had arranged it, and that it was both important and irregular."

"Ha. Yes, accurate enough." He opened the garage doors with a signal and drove the airspeeder forward, down a long rocky tunnel. "Do you know where I'm taking you?"

Inmedua started to answer that she did not, then paused and thought. Silence filled the cabin for a few seconds as the tunnel sped by. Finally, she said, "Into the city. To many different places."

In the rearview mirror, Skellig lifted his brows slightly. "Oh? Explain why you think that."

"Yes, Skellig." She paused to assemble her thoughts. "We're not going to a remote part of the campus because we aren't dressed as Jedi. That implies that we're going somewhere in public and we don't want to draw attention to what we are."

"Fair enough. And the many places part?"

"The clothing you gave me was obviously tailored for me and with a specific purpose, as it is well made and includes nonstandard features like concealed mag boots and hidden pockets, and fits me perfectly. Yet it is outwardly very nonspecific; it would not attract attention in most places I can think of. Your own clothing is the same way. Since you could have given me clothing that would do a far better job of letting me play at a specific role, we are probably going to be going to more than one place, inhabited by different sorts of people."

"You talk pretty fancy for an Initiate," Skellig said dryly. Then he grunted. "You're correct. Have you been out of the Temple before?"

"Into Coruscant? A few times. Mostly on trips to the government complex."

"Mmm. This will be different, then." Abruptly the tunnel ceased and they emerged into a darkened metal transit tube. Skellig turned the speeder deftly, and they went driving along the unlit metal span.

The tube ended in a holo-barrier on a quiet air corridor in the upper levels of the city. Skellig casually drove through it... as they left, Inmedua glanced back and saw that it informed passing

drivers that the tube was closed indefinitely due to a severe and pervasive infestation of Morgunglian Death Mold... and out into the bright lights of the world-city. He angled the speeder down, and the Youngling watched with a steadily growing interest as they descended into the neon underworld of Coruscant.

The Family had many holdings scattered across the city, to lesser degree the planet, and to even lesser degree the sector. The main headquarters, however, was located in the Old Quarter, on a quiet street that mostly housed low-tech manufacturaries of artisans making craft goods in bulk. The building had a stone facade but modern durasteel construction.

As they walked into the ground lobby/lounge from the garage, Min glanced around at the various enforcers and couriers loafing about. Her face brightened as she saw a lanky blonde woman sprawled on a sofa, feet up and watching holovid. "Hey! Hey Lemma!"

Lemma Kiden jumped up, dashed over, and the two women hugged. "Hey, Min. Hi, Jirik." The tall woman grabbed Min by the shoulder and started to grind her knuckles into the other woman's scalp, then stopped and blinked at Maato. "Is that a kid?"

"No shit, genius," Min said.

"Language!" Jirik coughed, then nodded. "Yeah, Lemma."

Lemma blinked again, then grinned. "Well, I knew it was only a matter of time, but you two moved FAST. I didn't even notice you were pregnant, Min."

"Very funny," Min told her, rolling her eyes. "Hilarious."

"It would be soooooo cute though. Little Min waddling around with a great big belly all radiant and glowing." Lemma gave a happy little sigh. "Jirik, if you don't make this happen, I will."

"Lemma, your ability to be completely fucking mynock-shit inappropriate in public never ceases to amaze me," Sloan said dryly.

"Jirik! Language!" Min said, strangling a laugh.

"What's a mynock?" Maato asked timidly.

All three of them looked at him, and then Lemma lifted one eyebrow. "So what IS with the kid?"

Sloan's face darkened. "Collateral damage," he said shortly.

"We need to see the Don," Min added. "Alone. I don't suppose you can watch him for us while we're in there?"

Lemma sobered instantly. "Yeah. No problem. He's in his office." She looked at them, the friendliness and humor gone. "Don Margrann doesn't like collateral damage. I hope you guys didn't fuck up."

"Yeah, well. I hope so too." Sloan shrugged. "Guess we'll find out." He bent down and spoke to Maato. "This lady's named Lemma. She's going to watch you for a few minutes while we talk to someone who can help. Before we go, though I need you to tell me your father's name. Can you do that, Maato?"

"Uh-huh. His name is Garven Tolle." Maato looked up at Lemma nervously. "Are you going to come back?"

"Yeah, we'll be back. We just need to talk to someone." Sloan stood, then glanced back to Lemma. "This a good time, do you think?"

Lemma shrugged, face still neutral. "He's not too busy now, I don't think. The longer you wait to tell him about whatever this was the less happy he's gonna be."

"We'll go right up, then." Sloan shrugged again. "I don't think we're in trouble, Lemma. We didn't botch an assignment or anything."

"Mmm. Good." Lemma's expression relaxed a bit, but she still remained serious. "The Don favors you both, but there are rules, and consequences for breaking them. And he REALLY doesn't like this sort of thing."

"Yes, thank you, I'm aware," Sloan replied, irritated. "Come on, Min."

"Yeah." Min followed him away, then turned and gave Lemma the finger and a truly contorted face. The tall woman's cold, impassive mask shattered and she grinned, then made a gesture so obscene that it made Min flush a little and hurry after Sloan.

They walked up two flights of stairs to the third floor, past security systems that beeped recognition at them and guards who gave them friendly nods. Coming to a thick door, Sloan glanced at Min. They paused for a second, straightening their clothing, brushing the odd speck of lint or dirt from each other's collars. Then Sloan knocked.

"Come in!" They entered, shutting the door carefully behind them.

Inside was a wide, book-lined study, the air smelling of leather and paper and brass polish and rich tabac. A wide wooden desk stood in the center of the room, three chairs in a row before in,

a big bantha-leather swivel chair behind it. In the swivel chair, holding a large datapad, was a big, richly-dressed Togrutan, his tails ornamented with gemmed bands. He rose as they entered and spread his arms in greeting. "Jirik, my boy. And little Min. Such a pleasant surprise! Here I was having a dull, grey evening, and here come two of my favorite people to visit me before I retire for the night. Come here, both of you!"

They approached, and the Don clasped Sloan by the shoulders and slapped him approvingly on the back, then turned and bent forwards to give Min a warm hug and a light kiss on the cheek. Then he coughed. "Where are my manners. You want caf? I've got a good pot of spirian on."

"Yes, please," Min replied. Margrann beamed, and made a show of pouring and serving her it, then did the same for Sloan.

The two enforcers sampled their caf, made approving noises to the Don's satisfaction, and then declined his offers of alcoholic enhancement of the brew, also to his approval. Finally, Margrann sat back down in his swivel chair.

"So," he said, eyes glinting slightly, "it would be nice if you had come here to brighten an old man's day, but, you know, I try to be self-aware, and I gotta admit to myself, Margrann, you're old, you ramble on, you got caf breath, young people don't want to hang out with you. Especially not nice promising young folks like Jirik and Min. So I think probably you have something to tell me? Maybe something relating to business?"

"Well, I'm not sure, Don Margrann," Sloan said, shifting uncomfortably in his seat. "We were coming home from dinner and something... happened."

"Something happened. Huh." The Don glanced genially at Min. "Min, my dear, why don't you tell me about this something happened, hm?"

"Sure, Don Margrann." A little nervously, Min related the story of what had happened.

As she spoke, the big Togrutan's face grew steadily darker. By the end of her story he was visibly angry. "Juscuuto! This is a bad business, a fucking bad business." He glanced at them, then calmed himself and favored them with a warm smile. "You both did exactly right, of course. A child? Of course you had to do something. We are beings of honor, of respect. Who could respect someone who let a little one come to harm, eh?"

Sloan seemed to visibly relax. "Yeah."

Min relaxed slightly as well, although she hadn't actually been that worried. She had worked for the Margrann Family long enough to know how things were done, and she was aware that one of the cardinal rules was that civilians were not to be harmed except under exceptional circumstances, and children never. For a crime lord, Don Margrann was extremely civilized as

long as you were a law-abiding citizen with no interest in any of his goods or services. Once you started playing the game, though, he could be as ruthless as the worst of the Hutts. "Thank you, boss."

"So. Garven Tolle." Don Margrann steepled his fingers. "Either of you familiar with him?"

They shook their heads. The Don grunted. "Well, I am. He was an engineer. Worked for the office of the Governor, before that for the Royal Ministerium. We did business with him quite a few times, regular even."

Min frowned. "Just business? He wasn't family?"

The Don shook his head. "Independent contractor. We weren't the only ones he did business with."

"Was he buying or selling?" Sloan asked.

"Selling. He had access to all sorts of maps, schedules, that sort of thing. Also needed a lot of money, because he had a taste for whores. Lots of whores." Margrann shook his head. "A bad example to set for his kid, eh? That's one of the things I like about you two. You don't do anything to excess. Except Min's maybe a little too fond of good caf, gonna stunt her growth." He laughed genially. "But I gotta blame myself for that, right?"

"There's not much growth there to stunt," Sloan commented.

"Now, Jirik, be nice." The Don beamed proudly at them both, then abruptly frowned. "So the kid said a babysitter did it?"

"Yup," Min replied. "A female, coz he said 'she'."

"Seems to me babysitter might be a name Garven might have given to young women what would visit him from time to time," the Togrutan crime lord mused. "Might be a place to start, anyway."

"So we're looking into this?" Sloan asked.

"Of course we are," Margrann replied, waving one hand irritably. "Mr. Tolle did work for us and he lived in our territory. And I'm not gonna put up with groups doing hits in my city unless they reach an understanding with us first. On top of that, two of my people got involved and he works for the fucking governor." He gave Sloan a flat stare. "You needed to ask?"

Sloan held up both palms. "Just making sure."

Margrann grunted. "Pardon me please for one second. I have to make a call." He picked up the comm on his desk and thumbed a sequence. "Hi, Yara? How are you dear, it's Margrann. Can you put me through to the Chief?" There was a pause. "I know it's late, it's important." Another pause. "Thanks, dear."

Min sipped her caf and listened. Her boss waited impatiently, then smiled and spoke into the comm. "Chief Galyarn? It's Don Margrann. I need to talk to you about a shooting and murder that took place near the Royal Canal a few hours ago... oh, no, no, wasn't any of my people, c'mon. But two of my people were nearby, pure coincidence, and fished someone out of the drink. Alive, yeah. Someone took a few shots at them while they were doing so... no, they didn't see who. The kid they fished out said it was a woman. Yeah... yeah, I'll send you the details. Listen, this shit's not good for either of us, you know? My people are going to be looking into it, and we're gonna be talking to your people. Can you let them know to expect us? That's great, Edwardou. How's Rimi and the kids? That's good, that's good. Eh? Oh, still aches. Getting old I expect, just like you." A laugh. "I'll send it along in a bit. Yeah. Good night."

The Don hung up, then glanced up at them. "CCPD has a unit at the apartment, doing forensics. They'll be expecting you. Cooperate within limits." Both of them knew what those limits were. "On your way out pick up Maradelle. Her expertise may be of use here. If you need other resources, within reason, you can commandeer them under my authority." There was a warning tone in his voice that told them both they had better be able to justify it afterwards.

"Okay. Thanks, boss. Maradelle's professional." Sloan stretched in his chair. "You have any theories who might have wanted Tolle offed? I mean, assuming this was a hit, which is what it sounds like?"

"Kh'veek. I doubt this was revenge or a grudge." The big Togrutan shrugged broad shoulders. "Garven had appetites he should have kept controlled and poured far too much money into them, but he was methodical and professional about it. Like an engineer, which he was, you know? All the times we worked with him he delivered on his end of the bargain, never tried to hold us up for more cash or jerk us around, when he couldn't get something he apologized and wouldn't take any compensation for his time. Real gentleman in that respect, someone you could do business with. Not like some of these punks. From what I hear he was like that with all his clients. Guy like that, he doesn't really have enemies."

"Competition maybe?" Min asked. "Someone wanting to take over his racket?"

"Maybe, yeah, but I haven't heard of anyone like that offering a rival service. Of course, maybe they're just waiting til the heat dies down before they start advertising, yeah? Or until after SecGov D'Asta visits." The Don grimaced. "This fucking visit. You two got no idea how many shipments I've had to reroute this week to not go through our Celanon hub. The fucking Empire is all over the system spit-shining it for that aristocratic shithead. Some of em we can bribe.

Then you got Sector Rangers and the ISB." He rubbed his head crest. "It goes without saying that you're to keep the Imperials out of this shit at all costs."

"Yeah, that's the plan," Min replied fervently. "Shouldn't be too hard. The Empire isn't going to care about a dead local bureaucrat."

"See that it stays that way," Don Margrann said, not unkindly. "Now you kids run along. Keep me informed if anything important turns up. And try to get this wrapped up before the city's crawling with guys in shiny white armor babysitting Ragez D'Asta."

"We'll do our best," Sloan said, rising. He and Min both gave the Don a respectful nod of their heads, earning them another beaming smile. Then the two of them quietly filed out of the office and shut the door.

"Well, that could have gone worse," Min commented as they walked down the hallway.

"Yeah. He's mad, but he's not mad at US. About what I was expecting," Sloan replied.

Glancing at him, Min smirked. "You seem awful relieved for a man who was expecting it."

"Well, there's expecting, and then there's KNOWING, Sparky. You know what the Don's like when he's mad at you."

She flinched, remembering the incident with the uncharged blaster. "Yeah. The old bastard can be pretty hard when you screw up bad enough."

"He got his start with Gremta the Hutt. He says the kajidics taught him a lot about what to do if you wanted to be respected, and what NOT to do if you wanted to be able to respect yourself."

Min shook her head. "I don't think I could ever work for a Hutt."

"Yeah, me either. The Family's way of doing things is about right for me." Sloan shook his head. "You ever worked with Maradelle?"

"Once or twice. Not on anything major. We've talked a few times, I see her around the office, I once had lunch out with her and Lemma and Jurok." Min shrugged. "She seems okay."

"She knows her stuff. Not much like your average Devaronian; I get the feeling they consider her a mental deviant. Fits right in with our crew." He glanced at her. "You know her background and why it's relevant here?"

"Yeah, pretty much." The Family didn't traffic much in the lower end of the vice trade on Celanon; it was distasteful, attracted a low element, and the profit margins weren't great. They

had a protection racket running for the cheap pimps and cribs, but otherwise stayed clear. High-end vice was another story altogether. The profit you could make from an expensive, high-priced call girl with accessories was substantial; more important, perhaps, was the ability to use the services of such men and women as bribes and blackmail. There were a surprisingly large number of customs agents and bureaucrats who absolutely would not even consider taking any reasonable sum of money to look the other way, but would do so in a flash if it meant they could get into the pants of a stunning Mirialan beauty wearing a designer gown that showed off everything.

Maradelle had been one of those girls; an exquisite Devaronian woman with skills in dancing, music, massage, and more intimate activities. She had made the organization a good deal of money, and she was sharp enough to be used for more sensitive jobs. Eventually that had included assassination. And at some point, by some alchemy, she had ceased to be a call girl who did sensitive jobs and instead become an enforcer and eliminator who could double as a fully-functional top end call girl if the need arose.

Min was well aware of all of this, even though she wasn't anywhere near as familiar with the woman as she was with her closer circle of friends and co-workers. Her job and Maradelle's simply didn't intersect all that often. She'd been friendly enough the times they'd talked, though, and both of them liked the same kind of tabac and watching volley-darts on the holovid. "I'd assume she's very well acquainted with prostitution in the city. Doesn't she still work with our escort barns?"

"Yeah. Keeps an eye on things, keeps her hand in."

Min grunted, then glanced at him uncomfortably as they went down the stairs. "She's not too sensitive about that, is she? I never brought it up any of the times we talked."

"Maradelle? Kh'veek no. Just part of her resume." Sloan shrugged. "She's pretty comfortable in her own skin."

Unlike some people, Min thought she could hear unspoken. That irritated her, but it was a fair point.

Downstairs, Lemma was giggling with Maato on one of the sofas, playing some sort of card game with him. She glanced up as they approached. "How'd it go?"

"We're good," Min said. "He was pretty mad, but not at us. He wants us to look into it."

"Well good. It'd just be awkward if I had to drive you two out to a field somewhere." Lemma grinned. "So you taking the kid off my hands now?"

"Actually, no," Sloan said. "We have instructions that don't exactly mesh with dragging a kid around. You're on bab-" He caught himself in time. "...on caretaker detail until you can find someone else around here to handle it."

Lemma gave him a sour look. "I'm going to get you for this some day, Jirik Sloan."

He clasped one hand to his chest in mock dismay. "This is all on me? Min gets no blame?"

"I'm gonna get Min too, some day." Lemma giggled. "When she least expects it."

"Lemmmaaaaaaaa!" Min whined, trying not to laugh. "Not in front of the boys!"

"You know the only good thing about this routine you two pull? You don't often do it in public anywhere someone might think I was with you." Sloan sighed. "You seen Maradelle, Lemma? She's going to be working with us."

"Maradelle? Yeah, like five minutes ago. She just headed into the female sauna baths."

"She gonna be long?" Sloan asked.

Lemma rolled her eyes. "What, you think Maradelle lets me know how long she plans to soak just in case someone comes looking for her? The fuck should I know."

"Yeah, okay." He sighed again. "Min, go in and fetch her, okay?"

"Why me?"

They looked at her oddly, and she realized just how stupid a question that had been. "Well, I mean, Lemma could have gone," she said defensively.

"Lemma's already got a job watching your kid," Lemma said cheerfully. "Lemma's also not assigned to this shit and you are."

"Would it help if I said 'please', Sparky?" Sloan asked with forced patience.

"Yeah, sorry, I'm going. Be right back." Turning, Min hastily departed.

The building actually had three different sauna baths; one for males, one for females, and one unisex one that featured water temperatures higher than most species considered safe or comfortable. It was an amenity that went a long way towards keeping morale up among the enforcers, and after stripping off in the attached locker room, Min entered the chamber.

A blast of warm steam greeted her the second she stepped in. The room was filled with tiled pools of hot liquid, walkways between them, with benches along the walls and a bank of showers in the rear. Maradelle was using one of them, and as Min approached she turned, her figure becoming clear through the steam.

Like most Devaronians of her gender, Maradelle had red-orange skin with black facial markings in a pattern. Two circular black bumps on her forehead denoted proto-horns; the hair on her head was purple-black and styled short. She was tall and classically proportioned, putting grace into simply the act of turning. All of this was no surprise to Min, given how often she'd met the woman.

What did surprise her was the coat of snowy white fur covering Maradelle's body from the tops of her thighs to just under her breasts.

"Hello, Camlann." Maradelle noticed her fascinated stare, and the Devaronian's face slid into an amused expression. "You like what you see?"

Min's face reddened. "Uh... no. I mean, yes, I'm sure you're... I mean, better than me..." She trailed off, trying to think of something to say that wouldn't make things worse.

"Oh, I think you look fine," Maradelle said lazily, examining her with a calculating grin that made Min flinch. She hurriedly covered her groin with one hand and her breasts with the other arm, earning an expression of mock disappointment from the Devaronian.

"I'm sorry, I was just... I didn't know your species had body fur. It surprised me. I didn't mean to stare."

"Oh, I see." Maradelle's interest seemed to shift, becoming something more relaxed than it had been. "Yes, males get horns, females get hair. It's full body, actually, except for the face. Off Devaron though we shave it all except for the head, to conform with galactic culture." By which she meant the culture of the human Core. "I do a mostly full shave when I'm entertaining clients, but the rest of the time I like to leave the bits that are under clothing untouched. More comfortable. Also we get cold more easily than you humans do."

"I hadn't known that. I've only known one Devaronian well, and he was male." Min shifted uncomfortably, hands still held awkwardly shielding her modesty. "I'm actually here looking for you, on business. The Don's assigned you to help out Jirik Sloan and I on an assignment."

"Hm. Okay. Do we have a few minutes, or is this an every second counts thing?"

Min shook her head. "We got a few minutes. It's urgent, but not THAT urgent."

"Good, because I need a hot plunge after getting the sweat off." Maradelle walked over to one of the larger hot pools and stepped inside. She glanced up at Min. "Oh, stop clutching yourself like a Mirialan nun at a Hutt orgy, Camlann. It's making me uncomfortable."

"Sorry." Min lowered her arms with a little reluctance, then stepped into the far end of the pool, across from Maradelle. The two women sat, and for a second simply let their muscles relax in the warm water.

Finally Maradelle raised her head questioningly. "So what's the job?"

"Someone did a hit on a guy who did work for us. Garven Tolle. His kid was nearly killed, but survived; we brought him back here. According to the kid, it was a 'babysitter' that canceled Tolle. The boss said given Tolle's habits..."

"...'babysitter' could mean a working girl," Maradelle finished. "Okay, I see where I fit in. Are we putting on a counter-hit when we figure out who made the contract?"

Min shrugged. "We haven't gotten that far. I think Don Margrann wants an idea of who this is before he decides on a remedy. If it's a small group or single person, or if it's one of the big galactic players, a kajidic or something."

"Makes sense." Maradelle folded her arms behind her head. "I knew Tolle, actually. He was a client of mine some time back, before I got into this side of things."

"Ahh... really?" Min asked, blushing very slightly. "Do you know much about him?"

"He was intoxicated by women. By a certain kind of woman, in a certain sort of setting, that usually required a great deal of money to change hands. He didn't talk much about himself, and our encounters took place twice in my studio and once in a stateroom on a liner to Ryloth, so I never saw his lodgings. Not a sadist, but liked to feel in control of his women. He was in surprisingly good physical shape; very flexible, lots of stamina, impeccable physical hygiene." Maradelle saw her expression and raised one sculpted eyebrow. "You are a SHY little thing, aren't you, Camlann? I'm rather surprised, given the way you hang about with Lemma Kiden."

Min bristled a little. "Lemma and I are friends; she likes to tease but we both know she's just fooling around. It's not a big deal."

"You keep telling yourself that," Maradelle replied agreeably. "Kiden and I go way back. She's not shy at all." The enforcer gave a knowing little smirk, then sobered. "Not to give you a hard time, but this isn't going to be a problem, is it?"

"No. Look, I don't have a problem with your, uh, track record and skill set, honest. I really don't. It's going to probably come in really handy with this job. I'm just personally not used to that sort of thing myself and that's my problem, for when I'm off work."

Maradelle nodded sympathetically. "Aren't you and Jirik Sloan an item? I know you share a townhouse."

"We are, yeah, and I'd be lying if I said it wasn't a problem with us." Min stared at the water. "He's been pretty patient with me."

"That's good. Don't let anyone rush you unless you want to be rushed. That never ends well." Maradelle stretched. "Anyway, Tolle. He struck me as very precise, very systemic. He set rules for himself and he was very good about staying within those rules. But inside of them he could be reckless, extravagant, impulsive. That was pleasant for me; I like to work with a client who's passionate and unpredictable as long as they aren't violent, which he wasn't. But I remember thinking that if it weren't for his self-discipline he would have come to a bad end a long time ago."

"So you think that caught up with him?" Min asked.

"I don't know. It seems possible though that he got involved in good faith in a business that a wiser person would have stayed far away from." The Devaronian shrugged. "Hopefully we'll find out." She rose to her feet in the pool, upper body dripping, the downy fur of her midsection beaded with droplets. Water-resistant, Min surmised. "I'm done. Let's get on with it."

"All right." Min stood. "So does your hair color vary dependent on where on your body it is?"

"Hmm? No. It's all white. Nearly all of my kind have white or light tan fur. I just dye my scalp hair. Goes better with my skin. Again, pretty common with those of us who leave the homeworld." The two women stepped out of the pool and made their way into the locker area, where they dressed in silence. Maradelle put on a pair of shiny boots, tight pants, and a bustier of dark materiel; she then buckled on a weapons harness, and over everything draped a light green loose kimonolike garment with long, wide sleeves that left most of her shoulders bare.

Lemma and Maato were gone by the time they made their way back out into the lobby. Sloan was waiting impatiently; he walked over to them and nodded. "Maradelle. Min fill you in?"

"Hello, Sloan. Yes, she did. Where are we going to start?"

"CCPD has people at Tolle's apartment. We're going to talk to them, see what we can get. They know to expect us." He glanced at Maradelle. "Our speeder or yours?"

"Mine. Yours is a piece of bantha shit." Maradelle walked off towards the garage. "I'm driving, of course."

Sloan glanced at Min, who caught his eyes and gave a slight shrug. They both gave each other a faint smile, then followed.

Coruscant is often called a world-city, but it is more accurate to call it an ocean without water, only metal and polymer and duraglass and neon. The sunlight sparkled upon the glittering surface, and then in the layers immediately below you had the first bands of creatures, each living at their own depth, each adapted to a certain degree of pressure and blackness.

Inmedua watched with growing fascination as the airspeeder swam through the abyssal chasms of the metropolis, weaving in and out of traffic, moving ever downwards. Sometimes they shunted out of the wide transit chasms and into high-speed tunnels for a lateral move across great distances; other times they dove, spending upwards of ten minutes doing nothing but descending at high speeds.

She had never been this deep; had seldom been into the actual subsurface at all. Her trips to the Senate and several museums had all been on the surface, and nothing like this. It was thrilling and almost more than she could digest; there were so many questions she wished to ask.

At the wheel, Skellig seemed to sense her excitement. "This is new to you? Never been down here?"

"It's very new. It's so busy. And chao.. cha... wild. With all the lights and colors."

"Chaotic," Skellig said with a grunt. "So you didn't eat the whole dictionary after all."

She laughed. "I like to read."

"Read rather than do, eh?"

"They don't let you do much when you're a Youngling." She gazed out the window at the passing lights. "I think that's probably wise, but perhaps sometimes they take it too far." She turned and flashed him a warm smile. "But I'm not a neutral judge."

"Hm. Well. You'll get to 'do' a fair bit tonight. Assuming you don't botch things right away, which isn't unlikely." Skellig glanced at her, not returning her smile. "Understand, Shorereach, that most of the tests you've taken were designed for you to succeed at. Oh, you could fail them... many Younglings fail them... but they're designed so that if you're fit to be a Jedi, and you listen

to the Masters and apply yourself, you'll pass. That's the POINT of them. This one isn't like that. This one is designed for most Jedi to fail. Even perfectly good Jedi, like your Master Di."

She thought about this, her smile slipping a bit. She had confidence in her abilities, but he was heavily implying that they very likely wouldn't be enough, that he expected her to fail. That Master Di would have failed, maybe HAD failed years ago. Inmedua didn't think that she was anywhere near as promising as Ima-Gun Di had been decades ago, although she supposed she might simply be a slow bloomer. She had started to suspect that she would become a Jedi Knight fairly swiftly and then remain one all her life, never reaching the rank of Master. Then again, she could think of several Masters who privately amazed her at having been granted their rank, so perhaps not.

For a few seconds more she turned the matter over and over in her mind, and then smiled at him again. "It's not important," she said cheerfully.

"You don't think the test is important?" Skellig didn't sound pleased with that answer.

"Oh, of course it is. But if it's as you say, all I can do is my best. If I pass it, then I pass it. If I don't, then I don't. I was planning on doing my best anyway, so what you said doesn't change anything. Fear of failure will just hurt my performance."

"Hm." The older Jedi was silent for a while, then shifted the speeder into a lower gear. "We're almost to our first stop. We're going to leave the car for a while. You are to follow me. You aren't to speak or attract notice, or to try and hide either. People will see you, but they won't notice you... or they shouldn't. Observe your surroundings, but don't lose sight of me."

"Yes, Skellig," she answered obediently, fighting down her excitement.

They parked in a small lot, and walked around a corner into a district.

In her young life, Inmedua had never seen anything like this. Neon shopfronts glowed, holographic billboards with sound roared, and clashing music in a dozen styles, all loud and fast, blared from speakers and clubs. Members of what seemed like every race in the galaxy slouched past, dressed in garish clothing, leathers from alien beasts, chromed spikes, and frilled feathers. It was disorienting, frightening, amazing, exciting.

They walked down the street, past a puddle of vomit and a Ithorian glistening with jewelry. The noise was everywhere, almost an entity of its own, capering in the flashing lights. Inmedua kept Skellig's back in her sights, forcing back the fear of losing him and being lost in this place. The crowds were thick around them, almost all of the passerbyes far bigger than her, and she had to sidestep frequently. They seemed to perceive her presence enough to make cursory efforts to avoid colliding with her, but she could tell none of them were truly registering any details, as if her features and existence weren't quite making it to the part of their brains that handled

conscious thought. That was Skellig's doing, she knew; she could sense him cloaking them with the Force, although she wasn't completely sure how he was doing it. That sort of thing was well beyond what they taught most Younglings.

They walked on, and she paid careful attention to all around her, the people and the shopfronts, the music and the lights. The rich odor of cooking food drifted from a crowded takeaway and mingled with the sour smell of fermented gll juice from a Trandoshan bar that seemed to have a mostly Rodian clientele. Inmedua's head snapped round and she stared in shock as they walked past a skimpily-clad young Togrutan woman giving oral sex to a human male against a wall plastered with concert and trade meet posters. Her face flushed a deep crimson and she slowed for a second, eyes wide, and then hurried on.

They passed two more scenes of public lewdness before finally Skellig stopped in front of a weapons store selling knives, slugthrowers, and blasters with custom grips and ornamentation. "You've been paying attention?"

She nodded, still a little wide-eyed. "Yes, Skellig. It's... I've never seen anything like this. I had no idea."

"This is one of the most dangerous, crime-ridden areas of Coruscant, inhabited by the worst and most violent of the planet's criminals and those who serve them. What do you think of that?"

Inmedua thought for a time. She frowned. Her mouth opened, then she hesitated and thought some more. Finally her mouth hardened into a resolute line. "I don't believe you," she said.

Skellig looked at her without amusement. "You think you know better than me?"

"I don't think you're being truthful to me, Skellig." Inmedua's voice was nervous, but she held her ground.

"Explain."

"All the people here are happy. They look frightening but I sense very little anger or hatred. They've come here to have a good time, and the people who live here are making a lot of money off of them and are happy to be doing good business. They're loud and rowdy but in the manner of people enjoying themselves. Every thirty businesses we've passed there's been a unit of the Coruscant Police. They've been calm, relaxed, with their pistols secured in their holsters. Most of them had the holsters in a part of their overcoat where they couldn't easily reach it, giving priority to the stun baton. None of them were worried; I sensed boredom and a wish to go home." Inmedua looked at him and smiled, her confidence seeming to grow as she vocalized her conclusions. "This is a place that LOOKS like what you said if you've never been to the lower levels before and only go by surface appearances."

Skellig looked at her, then gave a short nod. "You are correct."

She gave a pleased chuckle, feeling like she had a better grasp of what was expected of her. "What now, Skellig?"

"We're going to walk a little further. You walk beside me. Most of what we'll pass is the same sort of thing you've seen so far. One thing won't be. I want you to stop and tell me when we pass it, and tell me why you think so." He glanced at her. "Go at your own pace."

She nodded. "May I ask questions as we go?"

"No. Save them for the speeder. Let's begin."

Nodding again, she pressed on along the street. The raucous noise and music and shouting seemed to become more familiar to her, the lights and holograms less disorienting. Once or twice her nose twitched at the smell of street food from kiosks, and her stomach rumbled; other times she had to step carefully to avoid puddles of suspicious substances. She passed a few more amorous couples and one house that advertised its activities with a live window show that made her walk a little faster. If nothing else, she told herself, she was getting quite an education on a part of life she was unlikely to ever experience personally, given the Jedi teachings.

She wasn't seeing anything out of the pattern, though, and that concerned her. She didn't want to fail the first leg of this.

Forcing herself to stay as tranquil as possible, Inmedua pressed on.

She would have passed it by had she simply been operating by sight. It didn't look much different than many of the other storefronts they'd passed; a club of some sort, with music and erotic dancers. This street was littered with them.

Inmedua slowly ground to a stop, and turned to look at the dim entrance. Inside, in pools of purple light, comely males and females gyrated on platforms. She shivered, feeling suddenly cold. "Skellig?"

"What is it?" Skellig's voice was quiet, almost gentle.

"I don't know. I don't know what it is. There's something about this place." She trembled slightly. "I don't like it."

"What do your feelings tell you?"

Steeling herself, she stretched out her senses, then gave a startled gasp. "Misery. Fear. Cruelty. Something... I don't know a name. The opposite of compassion." She stared up at Skellig, wide eyed. "Is this... is this the Dark Side?"

"Yes. Not a Sith or a Force adept, but the Dark Side nonetheless. This place is a front for a slaving operation working out of Coruscant, in the heart of the Core itself, not that far from the Senate. They traffic in the misery of sentient beings."

"Why... why hasn't the Order stopped them? If you know, why haven't you told the police? Slavery is illegal!" She stared at him, appalled.

"Do you know much about gardening, Shorereach?"

"What? I... uh, a bit. Master Unduli likes to garden. Sometimes Master Yoda would take our class out onto the terrace and he would talk to her while she worked, and they would both teach us." She struggled to see what this had to do with her question.

"Did Unduli ever tell you what happens if you just take your shears and cut off the top of a weed at the soil line?"

"The weed just grows back." She thought for a second, and slowly nodded. "To get rid of the weed, you need to pull it up by the roots. And you and the police haven't found all the roots yet, have you."

"Correct. We will, though. In a matter of days." He grunted. "You pass this part. Let's head back to the car."

She gave him a subdued smile, and they turned to go.

"Shorereach."

"Yes, Skellig?"

"Remember the feeling from that place. It won't be the last time you feel it. Sometimes it'll be a lot stronger."

The thought troubled her mind all the way to the speeder.

Maradelle's speeder was a canary yellow convertible with a styled hood and expensive leather seats. Min and Sloan sat in the back and basked in the smart contour molding and in-seat heating as Maradelle drove based on their instructions.

"We need a ride like this," Min said enviously as they whipped through the darkened streets.

"You gonna pay for it, Sparky?" Sloan replied, amused. "Don Margrann's generous, but not THAT generous."

"We save up for a bit, we probably could find one at a good price." Min patted the seat covetously. "Think how nice this would be to go about town in, especially when it's cold."

"Why do you call her that?" Maradelle asked abruptly.

Sloan blinked. "Hmm?"

"Why do you call her Sparky? Nobody else calls her that."

He coughed. "Oh. It's a human thing. We give certain people we're close to a name, sometimes."

Maradelle's face quirked. "I have noticed something like that with humans. But why Sparky? She doesn't have red hair. She doesn't use a flame projector. She doesn't have a reputation for getting angry a lot."

Min gave an embarrassed laugh. Sloan grinned. "Oh, that's easy. I used to stop by Ms. Kren's bakery when I was new for pastry and sandwiches and coffee... lot of us did, still do. Safe, good food. Anyway, there was this pretty girl who worked the counter, tiny perky little thing with this angelic smile and an innocent face. She was a bit spacey and off in her own world a lot of the time, but she was always happy to see you and you felt a little better after ordering and chatting with her. Made you want to stand up straight and maybe not be such an awful, horrible person."

Min just shook her head, eyes rolling. Grin widening, Sloan continued. "And then the bread oven's timer would ding, and she'd go and yank it open. Ms. Kren used a real old-school bakeoven for her loaves, big earthen thing, runs on fucking coal or something. And the bread smell would come wafting out, from the loaves in these huge heavy metal trays in the oven. And she'd haul them out with these deep grunting noises... HNNNNNGH! HNNNARGH! And the trays would get hauled out, shooting sparks from the coals and the metal runners as they were dragged out, all over her. Singe her clothes, her hands." Sloan was openly laughing now. "And she would swear like a Nar Shaddaa pit boss. Oh Kh'veek, you would not BELIEVE the words that came out of that 'angelic' mouth! We would all blush and shuffle and try and remember some of it for use if we REALLY needed something vile to curse with."

"He's exaggerating," Min said, a little embarrassed.

"I'm not," Sloan confided. "I'm really not. So that's why I call her that."

Chuckling, Maradelle shook her head. "I'm not very good at swearing myself. I just don't have the knack."

"That's probably a good thing," Min mumbled. "I've been trying to show more self-control."

They saw the flashing lights of several police cruisers as they pulled up to the apartment. There was a small crowd gathered around; very small, given that it was after dark. Getting out, they walked up to the line the police had taped off, where a CCPD officer moved out to intercept them. "Crime scene. No entry. If you're residents, the city's putting you up at the Droidical Tech College dormitories for the night; go there and show your ID."

"We're expected," Min replied. "Tell whoever's in charge Margrann's people are here."

The officer's face tightened. Reluctantly, he got out a comlink and spoke into it. After a while he turned back to them. "Apartment 314. Go straight up. Don't touch anything."

"Thanks a lot." They ducked under the line and strolled inside.

"Not too happy to see us, was he?" Maradelle murmured.

"Yeah, see, the CCPD doesn't exactly love us. At least not all of em," Sloan replied.

"Funny, I seldom get that reaction," Maradelle said lazily.

"I can't imagine why." Sloan shook his head.

The apartment's door was wide open, with officers hurrying in and out; they got some odd looks as they entered, but nobody tried to stop them. Inside, they found a front room furnished in tasteful and quality furniture and artwork. Several pieces of furniture were overturned; one small table lay in fragments against a wall.

"Nice place," Sloan commented, looking around. "He certainly wasn't hurting for money."

"That or he was writing checks his ass couldn't cash," Maradelle replied.

A brisk human woman in CCPD uniform came hurrying up to them. "Sloan," she said with distaste. "Margrann sent you?"

"Lieutenant Chrobbtuit," Sloan answered, giving a polite nod. "Nice to see you again. You in charge here?"

"Joint charge." She glanced at the other two. "Did you have to bring your molls?"

Maradelle laughed. Min did not; she eyed the other woman coldly and pursed her lips into a thin, hard line. "Maybe we should ask to speak with the other, more competent officer? Since they don't seem to trust you to run this by yourself?"

The lieutenant gave her a venomous stare. "You'll deal with me. I was told you had information that would help us. Spit it out and get the fuck out of my crime scene."

"Now, lieutenant, you know that's not how it works," Sloan said genially. "You help us, we help you."

"We don't NEED the help of criminals," Chrobbtuit hissed.

"Yeah, well, centuries of police stoolies disagree with you," Min said. "Think of us as informants who don't want cash as payment."

Clearly unhappy, the lieutenant seemed to waver. Sloan gave her a charming smile. "Besides, Lieutenant, this is what Chief Galyarn wants. You want to solve this case, right? Good for the career. Haven't the past times we've worked together turned out well for you?"

She flushed angrily, then looked down. "Fine. Give me what you know, and I'll fill you in on what we have."

"There we go." Sloan gave her a quick description of the firefight by the canal, with Chrobbtuit jotting down the information in her notepad. When they were done, she frowned. "All right. What did you need?"

"Let's start with Tolle. Is his body here?" Sloan asked.

"Yeah. This way." Lieutenant Chrobbtuit led them into the bedroom.

They stopped dead upon entering; it had been a lovely room once, but now was a charnel house. "Kh'veek on Deathsticks," Sloan muttered. "What a shitshow."

Min just stared. Garven Tolle appeared to have been literally pulled apart; ripped limb from limb. "Holy shit. It looks like a couple of Wookiees had a tug-of-war with him, and he lost."

Maradelle just frowned slightly. "Was he alive when this happened?"

"Coroner droid says yes," Lieutenant Chrobbtuit answered. "They also look to have taken a light stun charge shortly before death; enough to slow them down and disorient, but not enough to disable completely."

"Tortured to get him to talk, maybe?" Min guessed.

"Maybe. Or they just wanted his death to be as horrible as possible."

Sloan grunted. "Any working theories who could have done it? Doesn't look much like the 'babysitter' the kid mentioned."

"Yes, actually. We think it was Nalroni dissidents. There's a group of them who are connected with a Barabel combat dojo down by the spaceport. Likely they targeted Tolle because he worked for the planetary government. It's also possible he had information they wanted, possibly about the upcoming visit."

Sloan grunted. "So you think one of the Barabels ripped him apart?"

"Yes. It's the sort of thing their kind would do. Motive, weapon... we just need opportunity, which will be the next step." Lieutenant Chrobbtuit brushed her hair from her eyes and glanced irritably at them. "You have what you wanted. Take a hike."

"Now hold on, we just got here," Sloan objected. "Showing us the stiff doesn't go nearly far enough..."

"It's as far as you're going to get this time, Sloan," Chrobbtuit said, her voice rising. "Now why don't you take your entourage of hookers and-"

"Hey, whoa, whoa," another CCPD officer said, hurrying towards them. A human male with lieutenant's bars, he gave everyone a conciliatory smile and then turned to Chrobbtuit. "Gracia, why don't you go supervise the search of the other apartments. I'll take over here."

"There's no need. I was just telling them to lea-"

"I've got seniority here, Gracia." The other lieutenant's voice was still friendly, but his eyes less so. "I'll handle this."

With a final, venomous glare, Chrobbtuit turned silently on her heel and stalked off without a word.

"Hey, sorry about that," the other lieutenant said cheerfully. "She's a bit of a bitch sometimes. Not very flexible." He shook his head, and then reached out and patted Min on the cheek. "Little Min! I missed you! The new courier just isn't the same. We should get drinks some night, have some fun."

"Lieutenant Greff," Min replied without enthusiasm. She knew the officer fairly well and disliked him; he had little in the way of morals and a habit of inappropriate touching.

"And Maradelle." Greff's expression moved to an open leer. "We should DEFINITELY have some fun again some night."

"You know my rates," Maradelle replied.

He looked disappointed, then turned to Sloan. "Not sure we've met."

"Mr. Sloan," the enforcer said neutrally.

"Good to meet you. Anyhow. How can I help the Don?"

"Comm records would be a good start," Sloan replied. "So would a listing of anything interesting you found that Gracia didn't tell us."

"No sweat." Greff took out a datapad and passed it to Sloan, who passed it to Maradelle. "Got a few things that seemed odd. Not sure if they mean anything or not."

"Let's see em," Min said.

"First one is this thing." Greff led them over to the fragments of some sort of shattered handheld mechanical device. "We're not sure what the fuck this is. Gracia thinks it might be some sort of Nalroni stun weapon. No idea, myself."

They looked at the shards and wires, mystified. Then Sloan shrugged. "Okay. What else?"

"Found this on the floor." Greff fished a metallic pin, the clasp broken, out of his pocket. It was in a clear evidence bag, but easily viewable. "We're hoping this belonged to the killer, but it's more likely it was Tolle's and he lost it while being ripped apart or sometime before all this shit went down. Not sure what it is, though. Doesn't look like jewelry."

Min forced herself to keep her face even as she looked at it, recognizing it for what it was instantly. She just shrugged, though, along with the others.

"Anything else?" Sloan asked.

"Yeah. Dead guy had this in one hand." Greff fished out another evidence bag, this one holding a hunk of bloody fur in it.

"Fur?" Sloan raised an eyebrow. "Shit, maybe it WAS a Wookiee."

"What's Lt. Bitchface's explanation for this one?" Min asked, sneering slightly.

"Well, she does have a good one here. Those Barabels at the combat dojo, they go around wearing furs, all of them. Big old pelt vests and kilts. So this is actually evidence in favor of her theory." Lieutenant Greff shrugged. "Gracia's got an inflated sense of her own righteousness but she's not stupid and she's got a copper's instincts. She's probably right. We just don't have proof yet."

"I'd noticed that about her," Sloan said dryly. He glanced at Maradelle. "You done with the comm records?"

"Yes," the Devaronian replied. "We're good."

"All right. Unless there's anything else you can tell us, we're going to take our inquiries elsewhere." Sloan glanced around. "Min, Maradelle, anything else?"

They shook their heads, and he grunted. "Nice to meet you, Lieutenant Greff. We'll be in touch."

"Min and Maradelle have my comm info," Greff said, grinning. "See you around." He attempted to pat Min's ass as she turned to go; deftly she sidestepped and walked faster.

"Fucking slime," she muttered when they had passed the police line. "Best part of no longer being a courier is not having to deal with that shit."

"He give you a hard time, Sparky?" Sloan's voice was easy but she knew him well enough to sense the undercurrent of violence there.

"Nothing important. Just a creep with roaming hands. I'd have broken his nose by now if he weren't so useful to the family in addition to being a cop." Min shrugged. "I took him his monthly payments from the Don. Kept trying to wheedle his way into my pants."

"I WAS a payment from the Don once," Maradelle said, amused. "You didn't miss anything."

Min just shook her head. "You're... a lot more laid back about that than I would be."

"You seem to give it a level of meaning that I don't," Maradelle replied. "All it means to me is that he's that much easier to lead around by his anatomy. He's a corrupt asshole but he's a useful one to us." She chuckled. "So did anyone see anything of use in there? I can tell you two things."

"I saw one," Min said. "Didn't want to mention it in front of Greff."

"Didn't see a damn thing except what he showed us," Sloan said.

"Well, to start with, Tolle commed one of our escort services the day he died," Maradelle said. "Presumably to get himself a woman."

"Good!" Min said, grinning. "That's a solid lead. We can go there and see who they sent, find out if they're missing, if they did the deed and came back, what they saw, all that."

Maradelle nodded. "Exactly, Camlann. The other thing is that smashed device on the floor? That was a sex toy intended for use on females. And select males."

Sloan laughed. Min just blinked, and for a brief second tried to figure out exactly what sort of toy it had been. Then she shook her head irritably. "So probably not too relevant."

"Mmm. The fact that it was out to get smashed suggests that either Tolle had a whore there, or he was expecting one to arrive shortly," Sloan mused. "You said you noticed something, Sparky?"

"Yeah. That pin. I recognize it." Min went quiet.

"Go on?" Sloan said curiously.

She took a long breath. "That's the insignia of the Skunks. They were Separatist commandos specializing in industrial sabotage and assassination during the war."

"Well." Sloan was silent for a second. "Tolle wasn't a Seppie, was he?"

"Only in an official capacity," Maradelle replied. "He was an engineer in the Royal Ministerium during the Clone Wars, and the old regime was Separatist. I never got the impression he had strong political leanings myself, though he could have just hid them well. He wasn't purged when the new Imperial puppet government took over, anyway."

"If he was an engineer, maybe he had contacts with this unit, if they did industrial sabotage?" Sloan glanced at Min. "Somebody settling an old score from the war, maybe? Or maybe he tried to blackmail them and wasn't careful enough."

"That would make sense," Min said slowly. "Could be I can find out more."

Sloan gave her a knowing look. "Go ask some other True Believers in the Lost Cause?"

"Something like that."

They reached Maradelle's speeder and got in. "So what now?" the Devaronian asked.

"It's pretty late and we've got a lot of leads," Min said. "Why don't we get some rest, and in the morning go and run some of them down?"

Sloan nodded. "Min can go chat with her Seppie friends, and I'll go down to the droid tech college dorms, have a chat with the displaced residents, see if they saw anything."

"Sounds good," Maradelle replied. "I'll pay a visit to our escort service and see what they know. When we're done, we'll meet at Montessor's and compare notes. Or if we find out anything that might be relevant to the others, comm."

"Sounds like a plan," Min said, nodding. "You know where we live?"

"Yes. Correct me if I make a wrong turn." Maradelle started up the speeder, and the bright yellow craft vanished into the gloom of the city.

The neon and fuzzy glow was gone from the black now. The great chasms were fewer and fewer. So were the panes of glass on the side of towers and arcology blocks. Down here, the spaces were narrower, the arteries of traffic more cramped and less busy. The further down you delved into the body of Coruscant, the less vital she became.

Inmedua watched as they descended down tubes and shafts, her face pressed against the cold glass of the rear window. She was fascinated and a little disturbed, feeling like a sailor who had spent their life at peace on the surface of a placid, friendly sea, and who now was getting a look at the stygian depths that had always been directly under them, gazing up.

Skellig steered with a placid expression, hands loose on the wheel. She wondered about him. Clearly he was a Jedi, but he seemed quite different than all the many others she had met. He was a human, so clearly it wasn't due to his race. He seemed rather less... supportive than most of her other teachers, although she didn't get any sense of dislike or hostility from him. It was unnerving in a way, but in another sense it made her more comfortable, because she didn't feel any particular desire to gain his good opinion beyond what was needed to pass the test. That let her focus on doing her part in this.

The airspeeder entered a series of low tunnels, and after a time emerged into a set of low housing blocks at the bottom of a broad shaft. It wasn't a very deep one; she could see the roof about seven stories up, with an artificial 'sun' hovering near it. It was dark now, indicating that it was night... down as deep as they were, lighting was the only way to tell beyond looking at a chronometer.

Slowing the speeder, Skellig drove through the blocks for a while, then pulled to a stop and opened the door. "We get out here for a while."

Nodding, Inmedua stepped out. The air had a strange tang to it, and she looked around, curious. Mostly she saw one-story housing units with the occasional two-decker, one home built atop another.

"What I'm going to tell you now is the truth; no test. You can rely on it," Skellig said. "This is a housing neighborhood for the area. It's largely families, although there's a couple singles. There's not much crime here; everyone of working age is employed and they're not well-off enough to be tempting targets for outsiders. Like I said, they're not well-off, but they earn enough to keep fed and clothed in what most would consider an adequate fashion." He glanced at her. "Do you understand?"

"Yes, Skellig."

"All right. Let's walk a short distance. Then tell me your observations."

They strolled along. It was quiet, dead quiet. From time to time Inmedua would see a lighted window, even more rarely would see a shape pass by in outline behind one. The streetlights cast a steady, dim, sterile glow on the ferroconcrete as they walked along silently.

They went two blocks, with Inmedua's foreboding growing with each step. Finally they stopped, and Skellig turned to her. "Well?"

"This is a very strange place," Inmedua said quietly. "I'm not sure I know what to make of it."

"Explain."

"Most of it fits with what you told me. There are no gang tags on surfaces or signs of vandalism, the houses fit what you describe. But there are courtyards in front of each residence with low fences, and boxes to accomodate plants and flowers that thrive without real light. Just from our driving I can tell how much of a difference those make down here and how much people love them. Yet none of these houses are using their boxes; all are empty. The courtyards are clean and lack litter, but if these are the residences of families with jobs, where are the toys and playthings in the front yard? Even if money is tight, children will still fashion a discarded pole and some crate pieces into a play 'speeder' to romp about with. We even do such things in Heliost Clan, and we're Jedi! There's nothing like that here. There's nothing at ALL." She shivered. "I tried doing what I did back in front of that club. Stretching out my feelings."

Skellig nodded. "And?"

"There is deep misery here. Suffering. Hopelessness. But not like at the club. That was concentrated, malicious, palpable. This is more diffuse. Broader. I think... I think it's the Dark Side, but I'm not sure. It's different than what I felt before, but similar in some ways. I don't fully

understand." She looked up at him, puzzled and distressed. "Surely families with children and steady work shouldn't feel this way?"

"Indeed they should not," Skellig said, nodding. "What does that tell you, Shorereach?"

She frowned. "What you told me was true?" He nodded, and she thought, face adopting a mulish look. For several seconds she considered the matter, then she glanced up at Skellig. "Do these people work in a specific industry?"

"Yes. They're all employees of Tar Nuba Industrial Compounds."

"Do they all work in the same plant, in roughly the same area?" she asked, suspicion rising.

"Yes."

Inmedua looked around at the blocks and then closed her eyes and held out her hands, feeling the flow of the Force through the area and beings around her. The sensations she got back started to make a lot more sense. Sighing, she lowered her arms and opened her eyes. "They're dying, aren't they?" she said sadly, looking up at Skellig. "They're sick and poisoned and they're dying."

Skellig nodded.

"It's the plant, isn't it," she said. "The work they're doing."

"Yes." Skellig's face was impassive. "The fumes they absorb, despite the so-called safety equipment, do this to them. Some of it causes genetic damage, so the children don't escape either if they were born after their parents started work."

"Don't they know? Hasn't anyone told them?"

"They know. They're poor. This is more money than they've ever made in their lives." Skellig shook his head. "It's a bad trade. By the time they realize it, it's too late."

"This is horrible." Inmedua stared at him, appalled. "When are we going to go to the police with this? Are you still gathering evidence?"

"No. The police can't do anything. This is completely legal." Skellig shrugged.

"Well... well, then the Senate! The Order's going to present this to the Senate, tell them what's happening here, and-"

"The Senate knows. The Senate doesn't care. At least, not enough of the Senate." Skellig gave a callous chuckle. "Politicians never like to 'kill jobs'. Even jobs like this. Also, the industrial trade has a big lobby with a fat wallet." He shook his head. "There is nothing that can be done within the law."

A cold knot formed in Inmedua's stomach as she stared at him. "These people need help. We have to help them!"

"Oh? And how are you going to do that?" Skellig looked at her.

She stared back at him helplessly. Nothing in her training had prepared her for this. "But we're Jedi! That... that means something!"

"That's right. We are Jedi. With compassion towards all." Skellig's voice was gentle but unsympathetic. "Think a little bit and tell me your conclusions."

For a long time she was silent. Confusion, frustration, and anger warred within her, leaving her at a loss. Then she recognized that fact, and forced herself to push those feelings away, view the matter at a distance, impassively.

Finally she spoke. "There's nothing I can do right now. This is unjust, but I'm just an Initiate, here on a training exercise. I don't know enough, and even if I did I don't have the power to do anything." She sighed. "This isn't unique, is it. There are more of these neighborhoods, variations of them, all over Coruscant."

"All over the galaxy." Skellig nodded. "Some worse, some better, but the same basic thing."

"Bariss Offee... she's one of the padawans, do you know her? She taught us a class on battlefield healing one day." Inmedua's voice was sad. "She told me something I didn't like. It was a concept called 'triage'."

"That's right. You save the ones you can save. You don't waste time on the ones you can't if that takes away from saving the ones who might make it." Skellig put a hand on her shoulder. "We ARE Jedi. Not gods. And we can't save everyone."

"But we can watch, can't we? And remember."

"Yes. Yes, we can. And if we get the chance, use that to correct such obscenities and see justice done." Skellig removed his hand, and started walking back to the speeder. "You pass this stage. Let's go."

They returned quietly to the speeder and got back in. As they left the neighborhood, Inmedua stared out the window pensively, watching the hopeless little housing units go past. Usually

opening herself to the Force was uplifting. Here, it made her skin crawl a little, as if the Force itself were diseased.

They were almost to the neighborhood's border when she stiffened suddenly, her senses expanding and then focusing. She stared fixedly out the window into the dark. "Skellig? Skellig, stop the speeder, please."

With a look of irritation, the Jedi pulled over. "What is it?" he asked with unconcealed impatience.

Inmedua opened the door. "Out there. Just past that power junction." She began to walk rapidly forwards.

Frowning, Skellig slid from the speeder and followed.

She rounded the corner of the junction box and knelt. A man was lying on the ground, breathing shallowly and raggedly, his eyes rolled up in his head. "Skellig, over here."

The Jedi quickly bent and checked his pulse, then took out a small scanning device and ran it over him. With a grunt, Skellig glanced at Min. "Late stage poisoning. He's in a bad way."

"Yes." She gazed down at him. "Let's put him in the back seat and get him to a med facility. I can ride up front with you if there's no room."

Skellig looked at her neutrally. "How does that square with your conclusions back there? Are you giving them up so quickly?"

Inmedua looked back at him, unblinking. "I can't save everyone, but this man is right in front of my face and I CAN help him. We aren't doing anything more important than giving me a test. A man's life is worth more than a test. If you have something vital to do afterwards and can't let it take longer than scheduled, then let's get him to a med center, say I failed, and call it a day."

Skellig gazed at her with a cold, impassive stare for several seconds. Then his face broke into an honest smile. "This wasn't a test," he said. "But you pass again. Help me get him to the speeder."

Morning dawned grey-white and chill, a steady rain falling. Min woke early, nudged Sloan awake, and they moved about their small upper-floor house in companionable silence. The wooden walls smelled of damp timber, the exterior adding the odor of crumbling, ancient stone.

"I'll comm you if I find anything," Min said on her way out the door.

"Yeah. Likewise. Good luck."

Half an hour later, her route that morning took her into a part of the old town she didn't frequent much anymore. It was on the border of one of the less savory parts of the old city, where it gradually turned into a respectable district of shops and cafes that were patronized by the working class.

It was still drizzling as she walked through the maze of streets and alleys, a small woman in a long grey coat and a black brimmed cap to keep the rain off. She'd bound her long hair into a loose tail and tucked it inside the breast of her coat to keep it dry, but the mist rendered everything damp. All around her the business of the city continued despite the weather; this was normal for Celanon, and men and women in coveralls and thick coats trotted along with toolboxes, or stopped at a newsagent to buy a file for their pad, or queued up around a shop awning to buy a steaming cup of caf and a hot roll. It was quieter than usual though, the weather and the early hour subduing all, and they vanished in and out of the morning mist like ghosts.

Min made one stop, pausing at a flower girl's cart to pick out a bouquet of the bright blue semi-roses native to the southern part of the planet. The girl wrapped the stems in cream-colored paper, and Min smiled at her and gave her a few credits. Then she walked on.

The streets and alleys grew steadily more familiar. Nothing had changed over the years except her. She trudged on, watching a child glance warily at her then run across the street into an alley.

She had lived here. Not in a house near here, but here, in the streets. She had eaten from garbage cans. She had huddled under a pile of rotting boards in that very corner to take shelter from the constant rain. She had begged, stole, kept a jagged knife under her clothing at all times, used it once or twice. She had-

With effort, Min forced the memories away. Her hands shook, causing a single blue flower to tumble out into a puddle. This place hadn't bothered her after she'd left the streets and started living here under a roof, but now that she seldom came... it had been a bad time, an awful time, a time that had seen the person she used to be die sobbing and alone in a stinking alley. She wanted to simply forget about it.

The cast-iron bells of the cathedrals tolled through the rainy air, drifting down from up on the hill. How often had she looked up at them from here, inescapable? The one known as the Woessmith's House was the closest, its facade grey-black against the sky, the carved gargoyles and black windows the same as they had been years ago to her miserable child's eyes.

Min gathered her coat about her and walked on, bouquet gripped loosely in one hand. Things had changed, she told herself. They had changed before she'd even left this neighborhood. The past was the past, and she needed to focus on the future.

She turned a corner, and the nightmares seemed to fade away. She remembered this street best of all, and the memories were good ones.

Walking a bit faster, she passed a bookseller and a soap merchant and came to a halt in front of a scarred wooden facade between stone supporting walls. The central door was flanked by wide glass bay windows, holding baskets of bread and pastry. A signboard above the entrance read, simply, Providence Bakery.

Smiling, Min pushed the door open and entered the warm, brightly-lit interior. The familiar aroma of baking bread enveloped her like an old friend, and for a second it was as if she had never left.

"Bread's still in the oven, but we got caf and hot p-" An aging woman, hair imprisoned by an oversized beret, limped out of the back and stopped dead when she saw Min. A delighted grin spread over her face and she gave a little yelp of happiness and rushed forwards. "There's my girl! Look at you!"

"Hey, Geritte." Smiling warmly, Min hugged the older woman tightly. "Still late with the baking, I see."

"A tradition you started, miss!" They both laughed, and as they broke the hug Geritte beamed at her and clapped her on the shoulder. "It's been a while, Min. Was starting to think you'd forgotten sour old Ms. Kren."

Looking abashed, Min shrugged guiltily. "I'm sorry, Geritte. You know I haven't. It's just there's work, and... now that I don't live here, when I come back to this part of the city it brings back... memories. Of before you saved me."

"Oh, don't worry about it, I'm just giving you grief. You're a young person and young people ought to be busy living life, not waiting on the old." Geritte patted her shoulder. "And I just gave you a job. Hardly 'saved'."

"We both know that's not true." Min offered her the bouquet with a flourish. "For you."

"Oh, they're lovely!" Ms. Kren exclaimed. "Let me put them in water." Turning, she bustled to the sink and filled a glass with liquid, then put the roses in them and turned to come back.

"Is that a new leg?" Min asked as her old mentor limped back.

Ms. Kren beamed. "It is! The bakery's been doing well, and an old friend is good at finding bargains and got me a line on one of the new SoroSuub Delta-Pro lower limb units. The old Merr-Sonn LowerStar 4 was adequate, I suppose, but the servos were getting a bit worn and the Delta-Pro has far better actuator response and is much more comfortable to wear for long periods of time. I can actually run in this thing, would you believe that? Never thought I'd be sprinting again." She chuckled. "Still limp when I move slowly, though. It's less noticeable the faster you go. You'd think it would be the other way around, right?"

"That's great, Geritte." Min grinned, happiness briefly pushing away her purpose there. "Business is doing okay then?"

"Oh yes. The regular customers will be around in an hour and a half to pick up their bread; I have a delivery speeder as well that comes by around the same time to take it to them as can't come get it themselves. We do a good lunch business as well still. About the same as when you were here, except maybe not so many boys coming in to make eyes at the pretty counter girl." Geritte laughed. "You broken your fast? Have a seat, take a meal with me."

"I haven't eaten; was planning on getting something here." Min took a seat at a table and removed her cap, and Geritte got a basket of rolls, pastry, and a bottle of wine that had been heating by the fire. Picking up two glasses, she sat down across from Min and poured them each a steaming flute.

"Eat a roll before you drink, now," Ms. Kren urged.

"I remember, Geritte," Min said tolerantly. The old woman had taught her how to drink the hot spiced chole-grape wine years ago, and they'd spent many cold evenings imbibing and talking and arguing. She bit into a roll with gusto.

For a time there was just eating and a comfortable, happy silence. Then Geritte raised her wine glass. "To crazy baker women of all ages."

"To crazy bakery women!" Min raised her glass, then took a long gulp. She mastered the burning the way she had been taught, gave one short cough, and then set the glass on the table and grinned at Ms. Kren.

Geritte laughed. "That's my own girl," she said proudly. Then she looked at Min calculatingly. "Things going all right at work?"

"Hm? Well, as well as they ever do. You know how it goes on that end. Never a dull moment."

"I do know, yes." Geritte's expression sobered. "The only thing I regret about taking you in, my girl, is that it got you mixed up in the Family. I worry about you."

"Yeah. Well, it's less dangerous than the streets, Geritte. I wasn't exactly loaded with career opportunities. Exciting openings in unskilled labor, maybe, or the rewarding field of being a cheap spaceport whore." Min took another drink, a sip this time. "In a couple years maybe I can retire, get some education or something."

"You could have stayed here." Geritte's voice was wistful and a little reproving. "I won't live forever. You know I'd have left you the bakery."

"Lies." Min laughed. "You'll still be here when Celanon's sun burns out, bitching about the dark."

"Hah! Perhaps." Geritte smiled and bit a hunk off a roll, chewed it, then swallowed and looked at the younger woman. "I know you're glad to see me, my girl, and I'm glad to see you. But you're here for something, aren't you?"

Min sighed. "You see right through me, Geritte. Yeah. I am. I'd have been by in a few weeks otherwise though."

"Pah, don't worry about that. What is it? Nothing good, I'm guessing."

"Yeah." Min took another drink of the hot spiced wine, then glanced up at her. "One of your old comrades is mixed up in some bad shit."

Geritte frowned. "When you say old comrades, what exactly do you mean, Min?"

"A Skunk. Someone offed a government employee, guy named Garven Tolle. Took a few shots at me and Jirik on the way out, tried to murder a kid as well. When we went up to the apartment, we found a unit insignia on the floor, torn off in the fight. It was exactly the same as yours."

"Shit." Ms. Kren steepled her fingers. "How much does that old fart Margrann know?"

"He knows about the hit. Jirik and a Devaronian named Maradelle know about the Skunk connection. Far as I know, nobody except me knows you were one." Min sighed. "I was hoping you could give me a hand here, but I know you may have some divided loyalties."

"Not if they took a shot at you I don't," Geritte said grimly. "Look, the Skunks... we were damn good at our job but we had the same issues that the rest of the Separatist military did. You had idealists who honestly believed we were always the good guy, Bonteri's acolytes. You had mad dogs like Grievous and Loathsom. And you had people like me, who knew the mad dogs were what they were, but calculated that we needed them and could purge their asses after we won the war." She sighed. "Most of the first group didn't survive the war. Or the peace. The second group, well, they died, went freelance, or work for the Empire now. And I... I bake bread and dream about what might have been." She glanced up. "What I'm getting at is some of my old 'comrades' were not very nice people."

"Yeah, well, I'm guessing this person is one of them," Min said. "They literally ripped Tolle apart."

Geritte made a face. "Wookiee?"

"See, I'm not sure. There was some fur left behind. But the kid who survived said it was a 'babysitter' that done Tolle. The cops think it was some Nalroni group connected with a Barabel dojo down by the spaceport."

Ms. Kren snorted. "Fucking pigs. I know those guys. They're nonviolent."

"Nonviolent Barabels?" Min sounded skeptical. "Nonviolent Barabels with a FIGHTING SCHOOL?"

"Yeah, they're followers of some long-dead Jedi's teachings," Geritte replied. "The combat style they practice is completely defensive; throws and joint locks. The Nalroni they're allied with are a passive resistance movement. Trust me, they wouldn't even consider assassination."

"Huh." Min took another bite of pastry. "Is there anyone in town who you'd tend to suspect, given what I told you?"

"Hmmm." Geritte thought for a while, then shook her head. "There's a Wookiee who runs a head shop down in the red light district off the spaceport. Hallucinogenic inhalers, drinks, herbs, and powders, and a couple of Twi'lek girls who put out if you pay extra. But he's been out of the game since the war. Bitter that the other furball shitheads didn't listen to him until it was too late." Geritte gave a weary laugh. "He was never a bad guy, except for having a weakness for 'vision trips' and a lekku fetish that made the rest of his kind consider him a bit of a pervert. I can't see him doing this."

"Doesn't sound too promising. Not unless Tolle ordered one of his girls and the Wook got angry and tore him up. That could explain it."

"I seem to recall the girls were in-shop only." Geritte shrugged. "Best I can do, though. We were a pretty homicidal bunch in the line of duty, but ripping people apart with our hands wasn't exactly our forte, you know?"

"Yeah." Min sighed. "Well, if that's what you've got, that's what you've got. At least it got me back here for a chat and some wine."

"There you go." Geritte smiled and took another roll. "I added some Chandrila items to the menu, since you came last."

"Oh? How are those working out?"

"I was dubious at first. Some of them require grains that are a bit expensive out here on the Rim. The customers really have taken a shine to them, though. They're profitable. Have to admit they're tasty, too."

Min grinned. "I'm surprised you and some of your customers would touch anything from a Core World."

"Mmm." Geritte gave her a meaningful glance. "I don't know how much you're following politics lately, but some of the most obvious sounds of resistance these days are coming from Chandrila. Some of the useful idiots finally have woken up, now that it's too late." The older woman sneered. "Gives their products a certain cachet. Although, like I said, it is good bread."

"What are the types you make like?"

"My favorite is a thick loaf with drell honey and berries..."

For several dozen minutes the two ate, drank, and enthusiastically talked shop. Finally, Min tilted back in her chair and gave a long sigh. "I really miss just making bread," she said wistfully. "You'll never know how much that helped me."

"I have an idea," Geritte replied. "It's why I opened the place, after the war." She was silent for a while. "I wish you'd stayed. But I suppose you were too social for that to be realistic, too active to be stuck behind a counter all day once you'd gotten your bearings back."

"Yeah. I suppose so." Min looked at the crumbs on the table.

"How's your young man, Mr. Sloan? You getting along?"

"Hmm? Oh, yeah, we're great. I told you we moved in a while back, yeah?"

"Yup, you did." Geritte didn't look entirely happy. "I suppose that's to be expected."

Min grinned. "You never liked him, did you?"

"What?" Ms. Kren shook her head. "I like the young man just fine. He's polite and smart and doesn't think too much of himself. Also isn't addicted to violence. Most of Margrann's people aren't."

"Huh. Because I always got the feeling you didn't like-"

"I like Mr. Sloan fine, I just don't completely like him with you, my girl." Geritte shrugged. "Remember the three types of Skunk I mentioned? Sloan's like the first sort. The most dangerous."

Min blinked, then laughed. "Jirik? An idealist? Are we talking about the same Jirik Sloan? Geritte, I love you, but you really have to be joking."

The old Separatist didn't return her amusement. "Not politically. But he takes the Family seriously, Min."

"Of course he does. Anyone with any sort of brain takes Don Margrann and the organization seri-"

"No. I don't mean the way you or I do." Geritte looked at her, eyes moody. "I don't think this is something I can explain to you, my girl. You're going to have to find it out yourself." She shrugged. "Or maybe I just don't think anyone's good enough for my Min. That's possible too."

"That seems more likely." Min reached out and patted her hand. "Maybe you can show me how to prepare that loaf you were talking about, once the oven's free."

"Well, we'll see. Those ingredients are expens-" Geritte broke off as Min's comlink began to buzz.

With an apologetic shrug, Min answered it. "Camlann."

She could hear sobbing somewhere in the background. "It's Maradelle, Min," the Devaronian's voice said over the call. "I got something for us."

"Go on?"

"The supervisor at our escort business was bribed. She was given two names, and when either of those people ordered a girl, she was to comm the fucker instead of sending an employee. One of those names was Garven Tolle."

Min thumped the table lightly. "Nice work. The supervisor know who paid her?"

"Not by name, but I got a description. Squirrely sort of woman, a near-human species, light green skin, funny eyes of some sort. She said they were wearing an eyepiece of some sort so it was hard to tell."

Min frowned. "A Mirialan?"

"No. I asked the same question, and she was quite sure it wasn't; said she'd never seen the species before." Maradelle sounded lazily pleased. "I've questioned her at length. Bitch is in a lot of trouble and she knows it. She did tell me that the other name on the list hasn't called yet. Might be some use in that."

"Yeah. Yeah, I can see that. Lemme run your description past my contact. You told Jirik yet?"

"Just about to. Unless he's found a reason not to, why don't you come down here when you're done. I don't want to let Miss Money-On-The-Side here out of my sight until I'm finished with her." Maradelle's voice was cold.

"Right. See you in a while. Camlann out." Min closed the comlink and turned back to Geritte. "Okay. We got a description now. Not the most complete, but sort of weird and distinctive. Squirrely chick, unknown near-human species, light green skin, funny eyes. Ring any bells?"

The old Separatist's eyes narrowed. "Yes. Ardrame."

"Ard... is that a species, or a name?"

"A bit of both." Geritte sighed. "It's a short, nasty little story. Kamino's known for its cloning, of course, but before the war they were into other genetic engineering projects on the side. Not directly linked to them; semi-shadow stuff located off world via the usual rabbit hole of corporate ownership. One of them was a lab aimed at improving humans by borrowing aspects of other races. Like, if you wanted a kid with Mirialan flexibility, or a Trandoshan's knack for tracking, but who looked just like your average human to the naked eye."

"Can see how that would be profitable," Min commented. "They get it to work?"

"Sort of. They were having trouble getting it to work properly without regular treatments over the person's life. Anyway, the Clone Wars began, and all of a sudden Kamino was practically a Republic military institution. At about the same time you had a sudden rise in Human Supremacist representation in the Senate, due to most of the Rim pulling out. I don't know the details, but I guess Kamino quietly got the message that maybe they shouldn't be meddling with pure human genes, so they shut the project down." Geritte shook her head. "Ardrame was one of the test subjects."

"I'm seeing where this is going," Min said sourly. "They tried to off her, eliminate the evidence sort of thing?"

"Oh, no." Geritte gave a short bark of laughter. "That would probably have been better for everyone concerned. They just dumped Ardrame on the street like a sack of garbage."

"Doesn't sound so bad. I mean, I've been there, it's not fun, but-"

"Like I said, they needed regular treatments. Suddenly there weren't any." Geritte shook her head. "She was a human with Rodian gene elements. She was strange when she first signed up with us early in the war, but not so bad. By the end of things she was batshit psychotic and her outward form had changed to the point where she couldn't pass as human in any sort of light. She's seriously bad news, my girl."

"Huh." Min frowned. "She got some sort of grudge against the administration here on Celanon? Or with Tolle himself?"

"Not that I know of. I actually don't think she has any connection with Celanon at all. I didn't know she was on the planet until you gave me the description." Geritte drummed her scarred fingers on the table. "She was a dead-end. Never cared much about the Cause, but she hated the Republic and I doubt she feels any friendlier towards the Empire. Wanted to burn down the galaxy for abandoning her and dance on the ashes."

"Lovely. And here she is, murdering crooked engineering bureaucrats on Celanon." Min swirled the dregs of her wine. "What sort of skillset are we looking at here?"

"Acute senses. Some degree of infrared vision, the ability to pick up subsonic vibrations and interpret them as a sense on the same level as hearing or sight. Fast, agile. Hunter's instincts. Extremely good with machines, particularly droids. During her time with the Skunks we used her as a proxy assassin; we'd insert her into a semi-secure area and she'd subdue and modify a legit droid to kill the target. She had a real knack for that. Though sometimes she was a little too... creative. And indiscriminate." Geritte made a face. "We wanted nice clean kills, not... drawn out and gory."

"Like Tolle's death was," Min replied, nodding grimly. "She wasn't strong enough to rip a man apart, was she? And she didn't have fur?"

"She wasn't feeble but she certainly couldn't tear people apart. Definitely no fur either." Geritte frowned. "Maybe she has an accomplice."

"That's what it sounds like." Min mulled this over. "You think this woman can be reasoned with? Gently let her know that she's irritating people she really don't want to irritate?"

"No," the old Separatist stated immediately. "Ardrane doesn't give a fuck. You're dealing with the worst kind of crazy person... one capable of coherent, logical thought but not capable of applying that to consequences or ethics. She's a highly intelligent rabid wolf and you need to treat her as such."

"Harsh." Min winced, feeling less than thrilled with the picture she was forming. "Do you think she's doing this on her own accord?"

"Maybe. Probably not. Based on what I know of her activities after the war, she's probably being paid by one of the radical holdout groups the Empire hasn't managed to subdue. They get a lot of money from backers here on Celanon, so it's not entirely surprising they'd have an interest in things here." Geritte gave a low grunt. "I'll do some quiet asking about."

"Just be careful. Don't put yourself in any danger," Min cautioned.

Geritte laughed. "That's my line, miss. Don't fret. I've been kicking hornets' nests since before you were born, and I've only lost the one limb." She cackled at her own joke, then abruptly sobered. "Don't treat this bitch lightly, my girl. Ardrame has a really charming, convincing routine when she wants to use it. 'Oh, I'm just an awkward lovable nerd who lives to tinker and has a hard time in social settings!'" The older woman shook her head. "That might even have been true once, before they stopped her treatments. By the end of the war it was just a mask hiding something diseased and lacking any meaningful sanity. Be careful."

"I'm always careful, Geritte. That's why I still have both my legs." They laughed; it was an old joke between the two of them. Min stood. "I'd better go. We need to move on what you've told me as fast as possible. The city's going to be crawling with stormtroopers tomorrow."

"Fucking tyrants," Geritte snarled. "Why can't they just leave us in peace?"

Min shrugged. "It's the holdouts. The money, some of it, comes from here. You know that as well as I."

"Yes." Ms. Kren seemed to deflate, slumping back in her chair. "I didn't hesitate to fight for our freedom, little Min. Against the corruption of the Senate, the oppression of the Core bleeding us dry, the increasing autocracy of the government. I didn't lose faith despite the moral compromises we made, despite the Jedi betraying us and leading slave armies to crush us, despite how we devoured our own dream in order to survive. I lost people I loved. I gave my own leg. Even after we lost, I told myself 'Well Geritte, you did what was right and you didn't go quietly.'" She shook her head. "But what we feared happened anyway. We just caused a lot of destruction first. And now our legacy is crazy fanatics murdering people for nothing." She looked older, tired. "Sometimes I almost regret what we did."

Min shuffled awkwardly, surprised by the admission. "Do you?"

"No." Geritte looked up, the fire back in her eyes. "We did what was right... for liberty, for democracy. Our leaders led us into war and betrayed us, just like the Republic's did. What happened is on their heads. And someday, my girl, a new generation will pick up our banner and burn the Coruscanti regime to the ground." She shook her head. "But not today. Likely not in my lifetime."

"Hopefully in mine." A wistful tone entered Min's voice. "Oh, hopefully in mine."

"If it does, I expect you'll want a part of it. Just remember to put no faith in voices of authority, yours or theirs." Geritte rose, and walked over to embrace her. The two women hugged warmly for almost a minute, and then the older woman broke it, wiping at her eyes. "Now get you gone; can't be a slackard in the Family and I've bread to get out of the oven. Be careful."

"I will, Geritte. I promise I'll visit sooner this time, and not on business." Min walked to the door.

A snort behind her. "A likely story."

Smiling, Min walked out into the rain and mist, placing her cap back on her head as she did.

It was cold outside after the warmth of the bakery, although the wine and bread in her belly helped a bit. She walked for a while to dispel the feeling of safety and comfort she'd built up over the last hour; pleasant, but dangerous while she was working.

The escort service was down by the spaceport, so she turned and walked to the nearest monorail station. Ages ago she had begged and busked here. Her eyes glanced to a worn panel in one corner. It still bore faint, almost invisible chips from where an irate commuter, hopped up on drugs or drink or transit rage, had attempted to kick her to death one morning. Two other commuters had roused themselves sufficiently to drag the Weequay off her, but not enough to bother to get her medical attention. She had lain in a broken heap in the corner, half-conscious, for three hours in a pool of blood from her nose.

Forcing that away, she went to find the Lucky Seat. Once she'd found a disposable container lying there unattended that still had three whole donuts and a half-warm cup of caf in it. Oh, how she'd feasted! Another time someone had lost some credit chips from their pockets, and not just small change either. A third time there had been an abandoned pornographic holomag that she'd traded to a bigger urchin for protection.

It was gone. Min stopped dead, feeling a real, irrational sense of dismay and anxiety. The small bank of seating where the Lucky Seat had been had been removed and replaced by a billboard.

Closing her eyes, she ran through the ancient calming exercises she had been taught as a child. This was fucking ridiculous. She wasn't ten years old any more. She was an enforcer for the most respected crime syndicate on the planet.

When the monorail came she boarded it quickly and didn't look back.

After several minutes travel the monorail passed through a tunnel in the ridge, and the character of the city changed. Where there had been buildings of stone and wood, there was now

durasteel and glass. Neon shone and holoprojectors sent up ads and signs. Over everything was the noise of craft coming in to land at the docking bays of the port itself.

Min got off the monorail at the edge of the business district, and walked through the damp a few blocks. Energy shields mounted on the sides of the buildings covered the sidewalks, protecting them from the direct rain; instead there was just a hiss and sizzle of drops above, and the occasional wet gust as wind blew drops sideways under the force awnings.

The building she eventually reached was a modern, well-maintained office structure with no signage, just an address number. She went into the lobby, a dark affair with black coffee tables and crimson red sofas, and went up to the Mirialan receptionist. "Mr. Sloan arrive yet?"

"No, ma'am." The woman looked more subdued than she had been on Min's other visits. "Would you like to wait? I can get you some caf."

"Thanks, but I just had something. I'll wait, though." Min went and took a seat on one of the sofas.

Several dull minutes passed. There was a booklet on the coffee table listing some of the flagship girls, and she picked it up and began leafing through it out of sheer boredom. Everyone in it was exquisite, and it made her a little envious. Not that she wanted to look like a cheap whore, but these women definitely weren't cheap, and she was painfully aware that physically she wasn't qualified to work here even if she did have the required skills in makeup, fashion, poise, and conversation. Once that would have meant nothing to her, but she was determined to bury the past.

A few escorts entered or left the building as she waited, giving her curious glances as they did. One of them, a human in elaborate if revealing robes, was just entering when Sloan came in behind her, looking faintly disgruntled.

Min grinned and stood up. "You looking for a good time, mister? Twenty credits and you can have me tonight, ten extra for oral."

The escort whipped her head around. "No freelancers!" she snarled. "Get your skank ass off the property before security shoves a stun baton up your moneymaker!"

"..." Min took a step back, crimson-faced and at a loss. Sloan just laughed.

"Jlelle! No!!! They're with the Family! They're with Maradelle!" the receptionist hissed fearfully.

The woman's face went pale, and without another word she fled through a side door marked 'Employees Only'. The receptionist turned back to Min. "I am so, so sorry. She didn't mean it, I'm sure. Please-"

"Ah... it's fine, it's fine," Min mumbled. "It was a stupid joke. My fault. Completely my fault." She shuffled her feet in embarrassment. "Can we see Maradelle now?"

"Of course, ma'am. Right this way."

"Smooth as always, Sparky," Sloan whispered as they followed.

"Oh, fuck off."

They found Maradelle sitting at a chair in a back office, examining a computer terminal. "Good, you're here. Sloan, you find anything from the other apartment residents?"

"Not a whole damn lot," Sloan said unhappily. "There were a couple young women who Tolle used as babysitters. Actual babysitters, not people in this line of work. The usual pair was two Rodian sisters. I talked to them and if they have anything to do with this, they're the best actors I've ever seen. Everyone knew about Tolle and women, but nobody saw anything last night except one guy, who claims he saw a hugely fat guy in a hooded cloak or something enter the building." He grimaced. "I didn't have as much time as I wanted to talk to people, though. Campus security was ridiculously tight because of some big break-in a week or so back; thieves made off with a shit-ton of parts and equipment. Took me over an hour to talk my way past the gate."

"Mmm. Min, did you learn anything since I last commed you?" Maradelle asked.

"Matter of fact, yes," Min said with satisfaction. "I got a name and a background for that description you gave me."

The Devaronian woman blinked. "Excellent! Good job. Who are they?"

"Ex-Separatist assassin and saboteur named Ardrame. Some sort of freakish Human-Rodian genetic experiment gone wrong. She's got a grudge against the Empire for cutting her loose, and apparently she's psycho."

Sloan frowned. "Hmm. Affiliated with anyone?"

"I'm told she does contract jobs for the various Seppie holdout groups, but it didn't sound like she was an actual member of any current group. She used to be part of a CIS special forces unit, but that's history, obviously." Min shrugged. "I was warned she's a nasty customer, and that this was probably a contract hit rather than her own idea."

"Well, that poses a certain problem," Maradelle mused. "If we just rub her out, maybe her employer doesn't get the message."

"Yeah," Sloan agreed. "I think the boss would like a chat with this lady. Which leads to the question of how we arrange that chat."

"I do have an idea on that score," Maradelle said. "The greedy little shit here was given two names. When either of them called in for a girl, the manager was supposed to call a certain number instead and repeat the name, then hang up and not send the girl out. They did that with Tolle, right before he was offed. But this other name... he hasn't called in yet."

"I get you," Min said, nodding. "We put a team outside this other guy's address, call the number, leave the name, and wait for Ardrane or whoever to show and do the hit."

"Exactly," Maradelle said with satisfaction. "We jump the fucker as they make the approach and take them in for a gentle word."

"I'm not quite clear on why calling for a whore is the signal they have to die," Sloan commented.

Maradelle shrugged. "Maybe it's just an easy way to be certain they're at home? I don't know. We can ask when we have them."

Min nodded. "Sounds good." She looked around. "Long as the sellout keeps their fucking mouth shut and doesn't squeal to their new buddy. I'd actually like to ask them a few questions on how Ardrane approached them, get a feel for the style."

"Afraid she's not going to be available for comment. Ever." Maradelle smiled, and Min felt a slight chill in the back of her spine. "Sorry if that's a problem."

"Don't worry about it." She glanced at Sloan. "How you want to play this, Jirik?"

He thought for a few seconds. "I think we keep Maradelle here to handle the call. You and I outside the guy's house. Get a couple of other soldiers to stand by a few blocks away in a speeder to give us reinforcements or evac if we need it in a hurry."

Min nodded. "Works for me."

"Fair enough." Maradelle stretched. "It'll take me a bit to get everything arranged with headquarters. Either of you two want a girl while you wait?"

Sloan laughed. "No comment."

"Uh, thanks, but no thanks," Min said, twitching.

Maradelle grinned. "I can see why Kiden finds you so fun. Okay, beat it. I'm sending the address to your comms. Find a good spot to wait and let me know when to pull the trigger."

"Right, right." Sloan walked off, Min trailing behind.

It was pouring rain when they got outside. "Where the fuck is this place?" Min asked.

"Other side of the ridge, up the hill."

"Of course it is," she muttered disgustedly. "Of course it is. Tell me you came in a speeder, Jirik."

"I did, as a matter of fact," he replied. "No heated seats, but it does have a roof."

"You're a lifesaver," she said gratefully. "I almost feel bad about making you turn down Maradelle's offer back there."

"It was a bit of a waste, yeah. What did you say your prices were again?"

"Eternal worship and fidelity, most of your soul, that sort of thing."

"Got a payment plan?"

The world-city-ocean was old, had been old before the Republic, predated some of the species who lived upon and in it developing spaceflight. It had grown upwards until a halt had been put to things, partly by the realities of construction, partly by legislation, mostly at the insistence of the Jedi. The bands of life within it were thickest a mile under the surface, then thinned as you went up or down, occasionally surging in a crowded slum or densely populated arcology tower.

They were very deep indeed now, and there was little life at all.

Inmedua watched out the windows. A sense of fear lurked in the dark corners of her mind, kept at bay by the light of her Jedi emotional control training. Outside passed a residential block, the towers silent, dark, and archaic. Droids of a sort whose maker had gone out of business centuries ago lurched from doorway to doorway, rotting cleaning apparati clutched in rusting claws. From time to time another speeder would pass, giving them a wide berth.

Several of the dead walls were covered with posters and handbills, and Inmedua tried to read them as she passed. One of them was a recruiting poster, seeking recruits to fight...

"The Sith EMPIRE?" she said aloud, amazed. "How old is this place?"

"Old. But there's older still," Skellig replied tersely.

They had earlier dropped their rescued toxin victim off at a medical center, and Skellig had quietly instructed the administrator to bill the Jedi Temple. They'd departed as quickly as they could.

"With a full cleanse, he can probably recover a fair amount of his health," Skellig had said. "Hopefully he has sense to take what money he earned and get out. If not..." He had shrugged.

They been traveling downwards ever since until the sudden cut through this graveyard township, and Inmedua was starting to wonder about their destination.

"Do you have any instruction for our next stop?" she asked, hoping to pry something out of the taciturn Jedi Knight.

"Yes. It's not a safe place. Act accordingly. Don't draw attention to yourself unless instructed. Don't take any great risks. Don't act stupidly or horse around."

"I see." She watched the empty apartment blocks pass with increasing foreboding.

After a time she began to see more traffic. Most of the buildings were still uninhabited, but more speeders were in evidence... and even a few wheeled vehicles of unimaginably ancient design. They began to leave the deathly silence of the towers behind, and entered into a business corridor... some of which were still in operation, lights shining through windows in the black.

Skellig glanced down at an indicator on the dash. "Air's good here," he said conversationally. "Most of this level it's foul. The scrubbers in this section have been refurbished by a private concern."

"What level are we on, Skellig?" she asked curiously.

"93."

Inmedua's eyes widened in shock. She knew that the highest level of Coruscant, the one the Jedi Temple occupied, was Level 5127. She seemed to recall hearing somewhere that the lowest theoretically habitable level was Level 5. They were deeper than she had realized.

Droids passed, several of them modern types. She saw a gang of beings in breathing masks going from one lit building towards another, sacks over their backs.

Finally they pulled into a small parking center guarded by armed security droids, and Skellig popped the doors. Getting out, they walked quickly through the mostly empty lots and down a covered ramp to stand in front of another, even larger building.

Inmedua gazed up at it with something like awe. It was a soaring structure, covered with sculpturelike fluting in a style she didn't recognize. She knew very little about art or architecture, but it gave her the impression that it had been built in a time with more primitive materials and fewer eons of galactic civilization. It had a very great, melancholy grandeur for all that.

Pausing for only a second, Skellig pushed open the great doors and they went in.

She gasped audibly as they entered. The interior was like that of a brokendown palace, all red plush and carpeting and marble floors and glittering chandeliers. Tarnished brass fixtures protruded from jarringly ugly walls that had once had fine wooden paneling; panels that had rotted to dust centuries ago. Droids of an almost comically primitive kind, their surfaces coated in gilding and ornamentation, stood behind stands or counters. A great mosaic between two grand staircases showed a male and female human in clothing of a sort she was unfamiliar with, dancing.

"What is this place?" she whispered, eyes wide.

"The lobby of the old Coruscant Opera House," Skellig replied softly. "Not Coruscant the planet. It had a different name then. Coruscant the City." He strode across the lobby. "Come."

Inmedua followed, over rich carpets worn and frayed despite being made of artificial fibers meant to last lifetimes of constant use. The antique droids watched her hopefully, yearningly, clearly eager to be of service, to do something. One of them engaged a vocorder, producing a burst of static followed by a shower of sparks.

Walking reluctantly past, she followed Skellig through a side door and into a room decidedly undeserted. Booths lined it, upholstered in crumbling leather. The wood paneling had been replaced by a somewhat more modern artificial type, badly installed but better looking than barren wall. A marble bar occupied a far wall with glasses, bottles, a human bartender, a modern mixing droid, an ancient stockdroid. Chandeliers cast a dim light over the mixed crowd of beings inhabiting the room. A low hum of hushed conversation flowed throughout.

"The Opera Bar. In service since before the formation of the Old Republic, with a few intermissions," Skellig murmured sardonically. "Not the lowest of Coruscant's drinking establishments... there's one on Level 5... but the lowest of any quality. Serves a very different clientele than it was intended for originally." He glanced at her. "Are you prepared for your next test?"

She nodded wordlessly. He grunted, then gestured to a booth towards the rear of the bar. "Do you see that man there, sitting alone?"

"Yes." He was a bearded, middle-aged fellow nursing a drink.

"Find out as much as you can about him and his purpose here. You are not to reveal your connection with the Jedi. You are not to give your real name. You are not to mention me in any context. You are not to cause any sort of stir or disturbance. And you are not to speak to anyone besides him. He should still be sitting at the table when you are done. Do you understand these terms?"

Inmedua reviewed them in her head, and then nodded. "Yes."

"Good. Get to it." Skellig leaned back in the doorway and watched.

Turning, she considered her approach. Clearly she had to concoct a cover reason to approach the man, but she knew so little of this place that it would be difficult to construct a believable story. For a second she hesitated, then quietly went to circulate through the bar and listen.

She spent at least five minutes doing this, occasionally glancing at Skellig for signs of impatience. She saw none; well, he hadn't given her a time limit in his instructions, so she assumed she could take as long as she needed. What she heard was instructive, and she listened carefully, making sure she understood terms and contexts. When she was confident she did, she approached the man and cleared her throat.

The man glanced down at her in surprise and mild irritation. "What, kid?"

"Apologies, sir. Have you seen a Aqualish, small one, goes by Hylli?"

"No." Then man started to lose interest.

"Have you been here long? He would have been by-"

"I only been here an hour, kid, and I better not be here another hour." He glanced down at a full satchel on the seat next to him. "I ain't seen your Aqui."

"Kren'duci whore's get," Inmedua whined. "That fucker's never on time." She darted and skipped to one side, then glanced up at the man calculatingly. "You want to buy the location of a trove, mister? Undecayed heirloom, prime stuff."

"Not from a foulmouthed little depth urchin," the man returned contemptuously, shifting position on the bench so that he could keep her in vision. Then he glanced at her curiously. "Primary, or latter day cache?"

"Primary heirlooms," she replied, intentionally sounding less than convincing.

"And the cache date?"

"Republic era," she said reluctantly. "But early Republic."

The man sneered. "Fuck off."

She scuttled off, retreating back to Skellig's position. He nodded to her, and they stepped just outside the bar. The thin-haired Jedi glanced down questioningly.

"He's not a very nice person," Inmedua said. "He's a criminal who relies on fear to get what he wants. He knows enough about the trade and doings of this area to do intelligent business and avoid being taken for a ride, but not enough to suggest that doing so is his main occupation. He's come here to make a quiet exchange, something he has in return for either cash or information or favors. He doesn't want it widely known, especially to the law, but he isn't overly worried anyone will find out. He is expecting the exchange to take place any minute now."

Skellig eyed her. "Explain your conclusions."

"He was unkind to a small child, so he's not a nice man. Not only that, he was carrying a disruptor pistol under his jacket; I moved in a way that would cause his coat to open slightly if he turned to track me so I could get a look at what the bulge was. Only criminals carry those and they do so for the intimidation value. He understood what I was offering him and saw through the con I was supposedly running quickly, so he knows how this place works, but he bothered to ask for details in the first place, and I don't think anyone truly plugged into this area would have even gotten that far. His glances and body language said that whatever was in that bag was why he was waiting for someone, and his words indicated that he didn't expect to wait much longer. He's making the exchange here, in the belly of the world, which says that he wants it out of sight of society, and probably the law since he's a criminal. But he's having the meeting in a public bar and he didn't seem nervous about me talking to him, so he clearly isn't too paranoid about being discovered." Inmedua looked up at him and smiled. "Is that enough?"

"That's the first part. Now the second. Follow. Do not speak. Nobody should notice you. Watch and listen." Skellig walked back into the bar, heading for the man's booth. She followed quietly.

The bearded drinker glanced up as Skellig slid in across from him. "Gar-Tallo. You're late."

"Ran into some trouble in the middle levels. Had to take a different route. I'm in plenty of time." Skellig glanced at him. "You weren't followed? Nobody's been spying on you?"

"We're good. There was some snotnosed depth urchin came around a few minutes ago, trying to sell a bullshit cache. Didn't seem like a spy to me, just gutter trash, but if they were I didn't let anything slip. Just a guy in a bar having a drink." The man leaned back. "You got my money?"

"You got my items?" Skellig shot back.

The man lifted the satchel onto the tabletop and opened it. Skellig glanced in, then grunted. Taking a credit stick out of one pocket, he passed it across the bar. "What's the use-by?"

"These are both good any time within the next four days. After that you got exactly seven more days of potential usefulness. On the twelfth day I guarantee you they'll be useless, at best. Honestly if I were you I'd make damn sure they were nowhere near you by then."

"That's cutting things close," Skellig said, scowling. "I paid a lot of fucking money for these."

The man shrugged. "You pushed the pickup back a day. You could have had five days guaranteed. I warned you. Also, these are Midnight Nine-Seven Golds. You think those can just walk off and nobody's gonna notice? The fact that you're even getting as much time as you are is why you're coming to me and not someone else."

"True." Skellig picked up the satchel. "All quiet down here?"

"Yeah. Usual bullshit. There's a swoop gang pushing up from level 80, gene-spoiled. The Gentry are getting ready to run em off." The man took a pull of his drink. "The usual."

"Right. Pleasure doing business with you." Skellig stood, sourly.

"Be seein' you, Gar-Tallo. Enjoy your merch. Remember, 4 days, 12 days."

Skellig walked out the door, and Inmedua followed. She could feel the Force masking her presence again, had felt it since Skellig had entered the bar. Catching up with him, she glanced up. "Are we done here?"

"Yes. You pass again." Skellig sounded very slightly surprised. "On to the next stop."

"Are we going back up again?" she asked, doing her best to hide her anxiety.

The Jedi Knight looked down at her with an expression of cynical amusement. "Oh, not at all," he said calmly. "We're going down."

Inmedua's face was troubled as she followed him to the speeder.

The rain was pouring down steadily, and now came the cold white fog, overflowing the kettle of the Swanmere high on the ridge and spilling down between the cathedrals like a breaking dam.

Min and Sloan stood in an archway across the street from a gate of black iron, the only way into the yard of the designated victim. His house was up the ridge in the old town, just below the Moatoan basilicas and Nalroni religious compounds. In fact, the houses in this residential neighborhood had probably been owned by Nalroni Moatoa clerics before the Empire; the architecture and the ironwork said as much. That was good, because Nalroni custom was that any dwelling place should only have one entrance.

It was damn cold. Not so much from the temperature, but the damp chill that seeped into your very bones with the mist. Comfort aside, the fog was both a blessing and a curse. It gave them a lot less visibility than they wanted, but that worked both ways; their quarry wouldn't be able to see them until they were right at the gate, and maybe not even then.

Despite herself, Min sort of wished she were with the backup team on this one. Maradelle, Duha-Wik, Tiggy, and Gormal were all sitting in Maradelle's speeder, comfortable in a climate-controlled cabin with heated seats, waiting a few blocks away to swoop in if needed.

"How long since Maradelle made the call?" she asked, wishing she could light a cigarillo to keep warm.

"Only about fifteen minutes," Sloan replied. "Keep your shirt on, Sparky."

"Any minute now, then. Good. Unless they aren't coming." She stared unhappily into the white haze, wishing it was over.

Seven seconds later a figure in a black hooded rain-cloak walked into view. Even through the mist Min could see long green hands. Her heartrate spiked, and she reached into her coat, muscles clenching to move forward. She could sense Sloan start to move as well, feel the eager tension coming off him.

The figure touched the gate, then suddenly raised one hand and shot them the finger. Then they took off running.

"Shit, they've made us!" Sloan snarled, breaking into a run. "After the fucker!"

"No shit!" Min dashed along on his heels.

They charged uphill, barely keeping on the heels of the cloaked figure. The black-clad quarry was fast, moving erratically and ducking suddenly into alleyways, forcing them several times to skid to a halt and reverse course.

For what seemed like an eternity they panted and stumbled their way through the mist and rain, splashing through puddles, the stone faces of Moatoan saints gazing impassively down from carved spouts and signs like wise foxes. In the looming black spires above, iron bells began to

toll, the sound rolling and loud from this close. And always the fleeing quarry just nearly out of sight as they ran, guns drawn and coats flowing behind them through the rain-washed cobble streets...

Min fumbled out her comlink. "Camlann. Target is on the move, we have been made, heading up the ridge!"

"Maradelle. Heading WHERE up the ridge?"

"Camlann. I don't fucking-" She swore and dropped and rolled as the person turned and fired a blaster, sending a bolt screeching past her to scar a crumbling wall. "Target is returning fire!"

Sloan had dropped to one knee and was shooting, blaster on stun. The cloaked figure fled again, and they surged after, breathing heavily and dripping rain and sweat.

"Maradelle. Repeat, where is the target going?"

"I don't know, they're moving, they ain't taking a direct route! Camlann," she added belatedly.

"Maradelle. Advise soonest when you know. We're shifting position."

Min didn't reply, her lungs burning with cold wet air as she struggled to keep up on her shorter legs.

They dashed up a narrow stone alley, with Sloan getting off a shot just as their quarry slipped round the corner. It missed; he swore and advanced. The alley opened onto a small plaza atop the ridge, the fog-wreathed Swanmere dimly in view beyond it, one of the Moatoan cathedrals directly ahead. Simply, through the swirling white mist and the pelting rain, she saw a black shape duck in through the wide doors.

"Cathedral!" she snapped to Sloan. He nodded, and they charged the doors, keeping careful eyes on the windows above.

They entered with guns drawn, advancing into the empty sanctuary. A Moatoa caretaker-priest, an old Nalroni, was lying dead on the tiles, his red-black blood matting his greying fur. Statues of the saints and devils stared down at them accusingly, the swirling kaleidoscope light of the Moa Tori upon the altar bathing them all in shifting colors. From above they heard the sound of running feet.

"The tower. Up the tower," Sloan snapped. He ran for the stairwell, gun drawn and leading.

Min followed, blaster in one hand, comlink in the other. "Camlann. We got em cornered in one of the cathedrals. I think it's the House of No Virgins, not sure. I can't see the spires in the damn fog. Get your ass up here."

"Maradelle. We're trying. The fucking streets up there weren't built for speeders; too narrow. Trying to find a way to you."

They advanced rapidly but carefully up the stone steps, trying to control the sound of their breathing, hearts pounding with exertion and tension. The footsteps had abruptly stopped; either they'd reached the top of the spire or they had paused and were waiting to open fire the second Min came round the corner.

No shots came, however, and eventually they ran out of stairwell, the spiral of stone steps and wooden banister curling around a long fall down through empty air and ending in a doorway. She and Sloan glanced at each other, nodded curtly in unison, and then dived through the doorway in opposite directions, going into a roll and coming up with blasters drawn and tracking.

"Don't shoot!" A scrawny young woman with mousy brown hair, tight-fitting black goggles, and green skin was standing behind a table with a backpack on it, her hands raised high in the air over her head. The sides of the room were piled with a mess of crates and boxes in stacks reaching to the ceiling. A central hole in the roof led up to a belfry with the cast-iron sacred bells; behind the woman, a wide window gaped open, giving a view of the lake down below the fog. "You got me! I give up!"

They trained their guns on her warily, keeping alert for anyone else who might be lurking about behind the piles of crates. "Ardrame, I presume," Min said, catching her breath.

"You know my name?!?" the woman squeaked, looking startled. "Oh wow. Are you Imperial Intelligence? ISB? You can't be... Sector Rangers, can you? Do you have a badge? Can I see it?"

Sloan gave Min a startled glance, then replied, "We represent a business interest in this area that doesn't like people murdering our contacts in our city. Gives the area a bad name, you know. The boss would like a polite word with you." He kept the gun trained on her. "You got the binders, Min?"

"Yeah. One second." She fumbled at her belt, keeping her gun aimed with the other hand.

Ardrame wiggled excitedly, hands still above her head. "Ohhhhhhh!" she sighed, sounding relieved. "You're the MOB. You know, I was expecting the local pigs, or the Imperials, or maybe even a private dick, but it never even OCCURED to me that organized crime would be looking for me! Of COURSE Tolle would be tied into them." She crinkled her nose and shook her head. "Oh, I am so STUPID sometimes!"

"Yeah, well, not arguing that," Sloan replied. "What you did certainly qualifies."

"Will you be my boyfriend?"

"Uh..." Sloan just blinked, somewhat at a loss for the turn the conversation had taken.

"I don't meet many people! If this is the end of the line, I want to know love! Did you know I'M A VIRGIN?" That was said in an earnest stage whisper. "You're handsome AND a button man AND have a gun pointed at me so I figure this is DESTINY!"

"I... don't date crazy women." He half-glanced at Min. "Maybe with a single exception."

"Very funny," Min said, finally getting the cuffs off her belt. "Hilarious." She walked forward. There was a crackle of energy and she stopped dead as she hit some sort of forcefield barrier. "The fuck?"

Ardrane lowered her hands and opened her coat. The jumpsuit she was wearing under it was covered in pockets; some of them held tools, one a blaster, but most of them contained open, half-eaten candy bars. She selected one and took a bite out of it, then replaced it in the pocket. "Oh yeah, I sort of erected a force barrier." She sounded apologetic. "Sorry. So you two are dating? I can do a threesome! I've never been with a woman but I can probably learn! There's fisting involved, right? Or is that just made-up stuff? I don't know these things because I've never known love!"

Min glanced around, mind racing. The projectors were... they must be sheltered between the stacks of boxes. Yeah, she could see the narrow opening between piles that the field was running through. "Jirik, the field projector's behind the crates."

"Too many to shoot through. Take a while to move. Must have taken a while to set this up..." He exchanged glances with Min, both of them suddenly coming to a full understanding that they had entered ground that had been painstakingly prepared.

"You can think it over. Although I really would like an answer now, because life is short and uncertain and you can't play with a girl's heart forever!" Ardrane took another candy bar from her jumpsuit and bit into it. A tiny green stalk, like a Rodian's, pushed through her brown hair and dangled awkwardly. "I'd make myself useful. I'm good with computers and droids and engines!" She bounced up and down on her heels. "You probably knew that if you know my name but I'm proud of it!"

"I'm going to try and pull the whole pile over," Min said, loping around to the stacked crates.

"Oh golly," Ardrane commented. "Was it the fisting comment? Was that rude?"

Min glanced up at her in irritation and suddenly realized, with a faint shock of insight, that Ardrame wasn't wearing goggles at all. Those black, featureless, shiny disks were her EYES, and she had drawn lines between them in marker to mimic straps.

Geritte's words came crashing down with cold certainty. This woman is completely mad, Min realized with a jolt of fear, mad in a complex, twisted, horrible way. She hauled frantically at the crates.

"Maybe I'd better come back later," Ardrame said awkwardly. She pulled a small jetpack from the knapsack on the table, buckled it on, bit into another candy bar. "I guess I was too sudden and I should have built up to this by telling your friends that I liked you, so they could let you know, so when I confessed it wasn't a surprise. I am so, so stupid." She sighed, and turned to the window. "I just want you to know that I'm determined to win your love, and that's why I just filled the cathedral with homicidal droids instead of rigging the tower to explode or something, so that's definitely something you should count in my favor if you survive." She ignited the pack. "And remember, I'M STILL A VIRGIN!"

As she soared out the window, Sloan and Min stared at each other.

Then the Laith-Bear exploded out of the pile of boxes to Min's right, maw gaping, massive paws slashing.

"FUCK!" With a yelp Min backpedaled and shot, her blaster loud in the stone chamber. Behind her, Sloan spun and opened fire himself, darting to the side to keep from hitting her. She scored two hits on its chest and then it bowled her over, pinning her to the ground beneath its shaggy-furred bulk.

A fucking Laith-Bear?! she thought frantically. Really? The big predators were native to the southern part of the planet and were dumb even for animals. You couldn't tame them. What the fuck?

"Even since you I separate, I has been hating you," the Laith-Bear told her earnestly. It raised one paw, talons glinting. "You are a sacrifice article that I cut up rough now."

It drove the paw down. Min yanked her head to one side, barely missing having her skull punctured and crushed. She fired her blaster into it over and over at point blank range as Sloan shot it in the head and body repeatedly.

"Smelly... boy..." The Laith-Bear suddenly convulsed, its hide now on fire and burning. It lurched off Min, sparks flying from its mouth, then made a ear-piercing screech of static and staggered through the open window.

"You okay, Sparky?" Sloan said, rushing over to her as she struggled to stand. "It get you?"

"I'm fine," she gasped. "A droid. It was a model 59 SoroSuub Moleminer droid with an IG-100 head grafted on and stuffed into a fucking piece of taxidermy. What the fuck."

"Come on, we-" Three Weequay burst in the door. They had clearly been dead for some time, sledgehammers gripped tightly in decaying hands. "Oh, Kh'veek!"

A protocol droid dressed in an ancient Separatist Navy uniform and sporting a fish tank built into its upper torso appeared behind the Weequay, an industrial vibrosaw in one hand and a disruptor pistol in the other. It gestured at them with the saw. "BATTER TO DEATH THEM!"

The Weequays charged.

Sloan dashed towards a pile of crates, putting it between him and the rotting attackers as he fired repeatedly. His shots burned through putrid flesh and into metal and circuitry. The first one went down. The second smashed the top of the pile to bits with his hammer.

On the other side of the room, Min toppled a stack of containers over on the third Weequay, then swore as the protocol droid barely missed her with a disruptor shot. She blasted the gun out of its hand with her pistol, then stumbled backwards as it swiped at her viciously with the vibrosaw. "BATTER TO DEATH THEM!"

Cursing, Sloan spun, catching his rotting Weequay with a high kick that sent it staggering back three steps. That gave him the room to level his blaster and fire again and again. The Weequay burst into flame, made a high pitched keening noise, and then fell to the ground, sparks shooting from a wire-filled hole in its stomach.

Small cleaning droids now began to spill into the room, shock prods and sharpened metal poles soldered to them. "BATTER TO DEATH THEM!" the protocol droid howled, driving Min backwards. The final Weequay burst out of the stack of crates she had knocked onto it, only to go down almost immediately under fire from Sloan.

Desperate, Min shot one of the cleaning droids as it tried to impale her, grabbed the metal pole it was attached to, and used it to parry a savage downward slash from the vibrosaw. The protocol unit's unblinking yellow eyes stared into her own wide ones. "I'm so, so sorry," the droid whispered. "Please kill me. PLEASE."

Then Sloan shot it in the head. It staggered back, and Min drove the metal spear through its body, then shot it over and over. Blazing, it stumbled around the room slashing at the air and occasionally at the cleaning bots.

Clanking noises came from the stairs outside. Glancing at each other, eyes a little wild, they lurched to the stairwell door.

A speaker hidden somewhere above snapped on. "Look, PLEASE don't be mad with me," Ardrame said pleadingly. "This one's my fault. I know... I know I SAID that I didn't rig the tower to explode, but I was bored and have no boyfriend, so..."

With crystal clarity Min suddenly had the sort of insight she had only received a few times in her life. It was as if she were sitting in a command ship a thousand miles up, able to see everything, with top-model strategy droids breaking down every single piece of data. She knew exactly what was going to happen in the next twenty seconds and exactly what she needed to do for every second of it.

Grabbing Sloan in a death grip, she jerked him bodily off his feet and flung herself forward, through and over the bannister, into the empty well of the stairs.

"Miiiiiaaaaaahhhh!" Sloan's shout of her name turned into a scream of horrified terror as they plummeted down towards the distant stone floor of the cathedral. She ignored it, shifted her grip, let the blaster fall from her other hand as she aligned her body.

Sloan's shriek was abruptly cut off as the tower above them erupted in a ball of fire and masonry. The blast wave pushed them downwards even faster. She had already engaged her particular resources, the ones she didn't use, the ones she usually COULDN'T use anymore. As they hurled downwards, she slowed herself, gauged the fall, then grabbed a passing bannister and SWUNG.

She nearly lost her grip on Sloan. Her arm burned with pain and she fought desperately to keep in the numb, passionless trance she had entered. As they flew down and across, she grabbed a second bannister, swung again. Her scream of pain was almost drowned by the cataclysm above. A third swing; they were nearly to the ground now.

With a supreme effort, Min grabbed herself with her mind, grabbed the floor, and pushed.

She landed on her feet, knees buckling, holding Sloan in both arms. She promptly howled in agony and toppled over.

Gasping, shaking, Sloan clawed to his feet, grabbed her, and dragged her at high speed for the door. A second later the cast-iron bell smashed the floor they had just occupied to bits of shattered tile. "KH'VEEK!" he screamed. "Fuck, fuck, FUCK!"

"AAAAANGH!" Min shrieked, eyes screwed shut.

They staggered out the doors, bits of burning stone falling all around them. Just as they exited, Maradelle's speeder sped into the plaza, pulling to a stop right in front of them. The doors opened, and Duha-Wik and Gormal pulled them inside. Maradelle floored the engine before the speeder doors were even closed.

"Are you all right, Min Camlann?" Duha-Wik said anxiously, pulling a medkit from beneath the seat. "Have you been shot?"

"I'll be fine," Min gasped. "I think I just fractured my leg. Few hours with a bone knitter and I'll be fine."

"Kh'veek on a Star Destroyer, Sparky." Sloan sounded stunned. "You're a monster. That was a nine story drop! You landed on your fucking feet!"

"Terror's a great motivator. I grabbed shit on the way down. You're welcome." She groaned. "Oh, that BITCH."

"Kh'veek, what the fuck HAPPENED?" Maradelle hissed, sounding agitated. "Margrann wanted this quiet! Kh'veek! Half the fucking CITY would have seen that if it weren't for this fog!"

"It was a trap," Sloan snarled. "And this bitch is crazy. I don't mean a hard-ass psycho, I mean clinical shit. She's not gonna cooperate with us taking her out nice and quiet. Kh'veek! You didn't see the inside of that shitshow! A fucking TALKING LAITH-BEAR tried to kill us!"

"Laith-Bears cannot talk, Jirik Sloan," Duha-Wik told him earnestly.

"They can when you scoop out their insides and fill it with droid," Min gritted, then gasped in pain. "Fucking amateur taxidermist psycho cuntcasket."

"Yeah, guess we know what tore Tolle apart," Sloan muttered bitterly. "Not something I would have guessed."

In the distance they could hear CCPD sirens converging on the ridge, somewhere through the fog.

Tiggie sighed and lit a cigarillo. Gormal shook his head, the Duros button man's stoic face bearing a woeful expression.

"Don Margrann," he said unhappily, "is gonna shit."

Where is the line between civilization and wasteland?

How does one make the binary separation between a place of life and a tomb?

The concept of the world city as an ocean was a compelling one, but even at the lowest fathoms, at depths that no light can reach and strange creatures dwell at pressures that would instantly pulp a human, life thrives.

There was life here, of a sort, but it was not thriving. Even the feeders upon decay were sick, ailing, genetic templates hopelessly corrupted. Nothing was viable. Everything was dying.

Now and then a droid still persisted, lost in electronic madness from centuries of silent existence without a memory wipe. They rattled between mansions where once a growing nation had turned its smiling face to the sun and the stars beyond. Once they had heard voices, laughter, music. Once they had known sunlight. Once, in a time even fable struggled to remember.

The airspeeder pulled to a stop. The occupants donned breathing helmets. A sign on the wall before them said, in script faded almost to invisibility, 'Levele 5'.

And so it was that Inmedua Shorereach stepped over the border of life and entered the world of the dead.

"YOU FUCKING IDIOTS!" Don Margrann screamed, his big face almost purple. They had gone to his office the first thing in the morning, and were now wishing they were anywhere else.

"Quiet, I said! No Imperial involvement, I said! So what do you do?" He glared at them, and then slammed his fist violently into the desk. "YOU BLOW THE KH'VEEK-DAMN TOP OFF THE SECOND-BIGGEST CATHEDRAL IN THE FUCKING CITY! You shitbrained useless FUCKING IDIOTS!"

Sloan, Min, and Maradelle flinched in unison, stayed silent, kept standing straight. Behind them, Duha-Wik, Tiggie, and Gormal exchanged glances.

The big Togrutan glared at them, breathing heavily. "What the FUCK happened?"

Maradelle took a half step forward. "Boss, we decided to-"

"SHUT THE FUCK UP!" Margrann shouted. "When I want a fucking BLOWJOB you can open your mouth!" His head jerked around. "Min. What. Happened?"

Sweating, Min swallowed and stepped forwards. "We found out who did Tolle, boss. We found a way to draw them out and put together a backup squad to assist. Jirik and I did the initial approach. It was a trap. She led us to the tower, droids hit us, and then she blew the place up."

"You have fucked up," the Don informed her curtly. "I should have left you baking shitty bread with that hag Kren. Or maybe it was Sloan who fucked up." He glanced up. "Well, Jirik? Whose fault is this?"

"The bitch who killed Tolle," Sloan replied. "We-"

"She doesn't FUCKING WORK FOR ME!" Margrann screamed. "Someone's ass is gonna be put through the meatgrinder for this and I want to know who! Is it you, Sloan? Was it you who failed? Or was it your girlfriend? Or was it the whore?" Sloan was silent. "Well? WHO?"

Slowly, Sloan's fists clenched. Then he gazed coldly at the Don. "Nobody fucked up," he said with calm anger. "We had no way of knowing the bitch would do something like this. We tried to take her with stun weapons, in heavy fog, on a deserted street. Short of not going after her at all, not much more we could do. This isn't our fault."

Margrann stared at him murderously, then slowly relaxed and gave a dismissive wave of his hand. "At least none of you were seriously hurt. Juscuuto! At least it happened yesterday and not today, with that fucking Star Destroyer hanging over the city and Stormtroopers in every gutter." He sagged down into his chair. "Chief Galyarn's already called twice looking for information. I told him I was still sorting through rumors." He shook his head. "Kh'veek's cock."

"Do you think the cops have tied any of us to it?" Min asked.

"Nah. CCPD arrested a bunch of Barabel thugs and a few Nalroni radicals this morning, charged em with the bombing and Tolle's murder." Margrann shook his head. "I assume they have the wrong guys?"

"Fucking pigs. Yes," Maradelle said nervously. "Lieutenant Greff and his partner seemed to be fixating on them. They have nothing to do with it."

"Figures." Margrann heaved a long sigh. "I ought to take you off this. At least until the Sector Governor gets his blue-blooded human ass off planet. But I get these hunches. And my hunches are telling me whatever this bitch wants, it's connected with the visit, which means if we wait it may be too late. So I dunno."

"I can't guarantee you shit won't go down like this again," Sloan said soberly. "She's fucking crazy and fond of fancy sorts of overkill. Also, apparently more careful than we thought."

"Yeah. I think..." Margrann trailed to a halt as Min's comlink buzzed. He gave her an irritated look. "If this isn't relevant, hang up," he said coldly.

Nervously, Min answered. "Camlann."

"Min? It's Geritte. I have some information on your quarry."

"Let's hear it."

"She's working for a holdout group like we thought, the Confederacy Popular Front of Liberation. They've paid her to assassinate Ragez D'Asta while he's on Celanon."

"Kh'veek," Min muttered, appalled. "The Empire would-"

"We'd be lucky if all they did was glass a few neighborhoods from orbit and leave a garrison," Geritte's worried voice said over the comm. "They paid her a lot of money and gave her a bit of material support. That's the good news."

"That she has a war chest is good news?"

"No, the material support. They covertly fixed up one of the defense platforms for her to use as a bolthole and staging ground. None of its weapons, nothing easily detectable, just life support and living quarters and a work area. That's where she's probably gone to ground when not out on business. I'm sending you the orbital data now."

"Perfect," Min breathed. "Thank you, Geritte. This is just what we needed."

"You need to do something, girl. If she bags D'Asta Celanon is fucked. Get Margrann to make this happen."

"I will. I have to go."

"Good luck, my girl." Geritte hung up.

Putting her comlink away, Min turned to the expectant faces. "Ardrane's planning to assassinate the SecGov during the visit."

Don Margrann's face went grey. "Juscuuto. Bleeding Kh'veek. The Empire will... did you learn anything else?"

"Yeah. Found her bolthole. She's got a little lair up the asshole of one of the derelict platforms in orbit, the old CIS ones. Good odds she's there now, unless she's already planetside angling to get a bead on D'Asta." She frowned. "Has he landed yet?"

"Not yet. Not til noon." Margrann thought. "Orbit. Good. It'll draw less attention. We just need to get you up there." He drummed his fingers on the desk, then grinned unpleasantly. "I know. Some fuckhead freighter captain hauling a load of spice for us ignored the reroute order. The

idiot jumped into the system under the guns of a Star Destroyer and half the sector's patrol craft. Thankfully despite being a moron he seems to know how to fly and how to get past customs, so he got his cargo safely to the ground. We're unloading it now." Margrann chuckled. "I was pretty upset at the time, you know? But seems it was a blessing in disguise. He's in Docking Bay 49 at the spaceport. I want the six of you to go there. By the time you arrive mister idiot freighter captain will be aware of his new commission to take you up to the station. If he argues, kill him and have Duha-Wik pilot you up in the ship. Clear?"

"Crystal, boss," Sloan said confidently. "If she's there, we'll get her. If she ain't... well, maybe she left something that'll be helpful, a timetable or a planning holo or something."

"We can hope," Margrann grumbled. "Okay, beat it. Be careful out there, kids. Don't get dead. And for Kh'veek's sake make less noise. I'm gonna bust a blood vessel roaring one of these days."

They all filed out of his office silently. As they proceeded along the hall and down the stairs, Min and Sloan and Maradelle exchanged neutral glances.

"Kh'veek, I've never seen the old man that pissed," Min finally muttered.

"I have," Maradelle said quietly.

"So have I," Sloan said, wiping his forehead. "All things considered we got off easy."

"I nearly fainted when you talked back to him," Min told him. "You grew balls, Jirik. Guess it had to happen sometime."

He grinned, then shrugged. "The Don's hard but he's pretty sharp. It ain't possible to grovel your way off his shit list. The only real hope was to convince him of the truth... that we couldn't have anticipated this. And that meant holding my ground." He shook his head. "Even though it took a force of will not to piss myself."

"Well, we're not off his shit list yet, and we're going to be firmly back ON it if this next part doesn't go the way we want," Maradelle said tightly. "We need to nail this bitch." She glanced back at the other three. "That goes for you guys as well. Don't think you didn't get splashed with some of yesterday's shit."

Gormal shrugged lanky shoulders, the Durosian's face unreadable as usual. "No need to be rude, Maradelle," he said in heavily accented Basic.

They filed into the garage, picked out a speeder van, loaded it with vacuum suits, and pulled out into the street. Unlike the day before, the morning was clear and bright, a bright sun shining down through scattered puffy clouds.

Yet much of the city was dark. And that was because a giant grey wedge floated in the sky, seemingly defying physics, casting a vast shadow down upon Celanon City. All around it glided small specks, swooping and whirling like carrion birds around a corpse, occasionally dipping low towards the city. Distantly they could hear the distinctive banshee wail of twin ion engines.

"It's like even the weather has to kowtow to the Empire," Maradelle muttered bitterly. "A nice sunny day for Governor Turgid to lick SecGov D'Asta's boots on the palace lawn."

Tiggie snorted something unintelligible in their language, took out a cigarillo, and lit up.

Behind the wheel, Duha-Wik steered them through the old town towards the main transit loop. As they drove they saw far fewer people on the streets than normal, and the reason for that was clear. There were white-armored figures everywhere, not in ones or twos but whole squads, moving through the city carrying blaster rifles. One square had an AT-ST in it, guarding a makeshift headquarters.

"Kh'veek, I don't think there were this many creamshells in Celiciti after the Outer Rim Sieges ended," Sloan muttered. "I don't think they trust us somehow."

"It's a show of force," Min said bleakly. "If there's one thing the Empire knows, it's a show of force." She glanced up at the ridgeline, where one of the cathedral tovertops was now covered by a blue tarpaulin. Maybe they'd think it was just undergoing restoration.

There was somewhat more traffic when they pulled into the streets surrounding the spaceport, but not much. There was a low undercurrent of anger in the crowds that everyone in the van picked up on immediately; the way people moved along the sidewalks, the looks they aimed at the sky, the knots of conversation in hushed voices. The enforcers glanced at each other uneasily.

"Hey," Min said finally. "Has anyone seen a single Nalroni?"

The air of unease in the van deepened. "No, Min Camlann," Duka-Wik said slowly. "I have not."

They pulled into the parking center for the east side of the spaceport complex, got out, and walked in a close, wary group through the kiosks and spacer traps. Almost immediately five stormtroopers made a beeline for them. "Papers," the lead trooper said curtly.

Sloan fished a datapad out of his pocket and presented it to the white-armored figure. "Here you go, commander. Got all of my employees on there."

The stormtrooper scrolled through it, then grunted. "Any Separatist talk is to be reported at once to Imperial authorities. You are to go directly to your required business here and then leave

immediately. Any disturbance will be dealt with instantly and without mercy. Do you understand?"

"Yes, commander," Sloan said, casting his eyes down.

"Good. Get your alien slime out of my sight." He tossed the pad back to Sloan and stalked off, his squad following.

"Winning hearts and minds," Sloan muttered when they were out of earshot. "Come on."

They stopped briefly at a souk, just long enough for Duha-Wik to buy the day's navigational chart and advisories for the system and for Maradelle to speak with a provocatively-dressed Rodian woman. When she returned, her face was troubled. "The Imperials raided the Kuliwani District a few hours ago." That was a section of the old town still mostly inhabited by the Nalroni. "They dragged every foxface they could find out of their shops, lined them up against a wall in Aonoatuo Plaza, and shot them. At least three hundred of them."

"Kh'veek," Sloan breathed, appalled. "Why? For fuck's sake, why?"

"Well, they don't seem too certain of that themselves," Maradelle said acidly. "Apparently they're 'sending a message to terrorists'."

"Those fucking arrests," Min said, feeling sick. "Kh'veek. Two shithead cops fuck up and a wholesale massacre results."

Grimly, the six enforcers proceeded to Docking Bay 49 in a bleak silence. Almost everyone they passed seemed to have an expression saying that they wished they hadn't decided to land here today.

The bay, as they entered, held a YT-model freighter with a human male about the same age as Min lounging around the bottom of the ramp. He looked up as they approached. "It's about time. Your people finished unloading half an hour ago. Sooner you get aboard, the sooner we can make this little pleasure excursion and I can get paid and get out of here." He eyed them, and frowned. "You seem pretty strapped for a day trip."

"We're big believers in self-defense," Min replied, distrusting him instantly. "You got a crew?"

"Just me and my first mate. Plenty of room for you all, if that's what you're asking," the man drawled. "You got your passage money?"

"That goes through the boss," Sloan said. "You know who we are. We're good for it."

"I don't know. See, this is sort of a funny situation we got here," the young smuggler said, faint sarcasm in his voice. "Could be that maybe things are about to get a bit more New Orderly around this system, and you're looking to liquidate the old firm ahead of that, in which case-

Maradelle reached into her flowing overgarment and placed her hand on her sporting blaster. "We're lifting off inside five minutes. One way or another. You'll be paid. One way or another." Her cold, clear voice dripped menace. "Understand?"

The man's eyes widened slightly and he held up his hands defensively. "Hey, let's not get all unpleasant here," he said, sounding almost hurt. "This is no way to treat an independent contractor who-

"-who jumped a full load of spice into the middle of an Imperial security operation's task force after being warned about it days in advance," Min interjected harshly. "Count yourself lucky the Don is giving you a chance to atone and make some money on the side at the same time. The Don doesn't LIKE fuckups."

Frowning, the man glanced from person to person, assessing exactly what sort of spot he was in. He didn't seem to like the answer. "Alright. Welcome aboard, then." Turning, he led the way up the ramp. "Chewie, prep her for launch."

A mournful yodeling growl came from inside the ship, and Duha-Wik let out a long hiss. Sloan blinked. "Your first mate's a Wookiee?"

"You got a problem with that?" The smuggler gave him a cagey look. "Because Wookiees get upset if they think someone doesn't like them. It hurts their feelings."

"I got no problem if he has no problem," Sloan replied. He glanced back. "Right, Duha-Wik?"

The big Trandoshan hissed again, then nodded. "It is as you say, Jirik Sloan," he said, nostrils flaring slightly. "It cannot be disputed."

"Glad to hear it." With a faint smirk, the pilot strolled through the freighter to the cockpit. "If you'd all like to strap in, we'll be on our way."

"Min and I will be up front with you and your first mate," Sloan told him pleasantly. "We can keep our balance."

"Whatever you say," the man replied, not bothering to fake sincerity.

The Wookiee was seated in the co-pilots chair, a bandolier across his broad furry chest; he had just finished the warm-up procedure for the engines and growled something as the three of

them approached. "Yeah, Chewie. Six of these gentlemen. Very well-equipped gentlemen," the smuggler told him. "Including one Trando."

The Wookiee snarled ominously. "They said there's not going to be any trouble," the man reassured him. "Let's just get this over with and be on our way, okay?"

A mournful yodel. The smuggler turned and gave Sloan an insincere 'what did I tell you' grin, then sat down and began flipping switches. "Celanon Control, this is freighter Millenium Falcon, port number YT-5547927, requesting departure clearance for intra-planet transport."

"YT-5547927, please hold." A minute passed, and then the comm crackled back to life. "YT-5547927, you are cleared for departure by Celanon Control along corridor 67. Be advised that you will be escorted by Imperial fighters who will fire on you without warning if you deviate from this corridor before reaching the ionosphere. Be advised that you will be fired upon without warning if you power up any of your vessel's weapons systems or target acquisition gear."

"Copy that, Celanon Control. Have a nice day." The pilot eased back on the controls, and with a low roar, the freighter rose into the air.

As they soared upwards, they saw two TIE Fighters peel away from the flock and move into escort positions immediately behind them. The pilot glanced at the Wookiee, who shifted uneasily and fiddled with the controls.

"They've got concussion missiles slung and hot," the pilot noted tightly. "A little jumpy, aren't they?"

"It's almost like there's a highly unpopular Sector Governor visiting a hotbed of Separatist sympathy and committing indiscriminate massacres before his shuttle even sets down," Sloan replied. "There's a reason you were told to reroute, Captain...?"

"Solo," the smuggler replied. "Look, I misplaced the transmission. It happens. I delivered the goods, didn't I? Your boss is taking this way too seriously. Like those guys out there."

The Wookiee growled mournfully.

"Looks like they're breaking off," Min said, peering over his shoulder at the navigational scope.

"Yeah. We're entering the ionosphere." Solo glanced at the instruments. "So we're going to some sort of station? Hadn't known there was one in this system."

"To one of the derelict CIS planetary defense fortresses. I'll give you the nav data when we break atmosphere." Sloan frowned. "This ship agile?"

"Well, she's not a snubfighter, but I know a few maneuvers." Solo glanced back in growing alarm. "Why?"

"The landing is hostile and I'm not one hundred percent sure all the station's guns are offline. They ought to be, but I've had enough surprises in the last few days. Just want to be sure we can take evasive action if need be."

"The landing is hosti...? Hey!" The smuggler turned in his seat, glaring back at them. "Nobody said anything about this! I was hired to take you up to a station and back, not.... assault a damn planetary defense platform! I'm not being paid anywhere near that kind of money!"

Min leaned forwards. "Perhaps you think you are being treated unfairly?" she asked, voice soft and dangerous.

Solo opened his mouth to angrily retort, then glanced at her expression and Sloan's, and the hands that were straying to their blasters. "No," he said grudgingly. "This is fine."

"That's good," Min replied. "I don't think that pilot chair would seat Duha-Wik too comfortably."

"Look, Captain Solo, intel says there's no live weapons on the thing," Sloan said soothingly. "I'm just bringing it up out of an abundance of caution. You dock, we take care of business, we leave, and you've made a nice bit of profit for under two hours' work and gotten yourself back into the Pykes' good graces. Is that really so bad?"

The smuggler considered this dubiously, then turned his attention back to the controls. "Chewie, punch up the forward deflectors," he muttered. "See if you can reroute power from the climate control in the passenger section to give us an extra 10%."

For several minutes they traversed the planet in high orbit, ignored by both the swarms of patrol craft in the outer parts of the system and the fighter swarms around the Star Destroyer down in the atmosphere. Eventually Sloan leaned forward. "There we are. That's the platform."

"Alright. Let's hope your intel was good, or this may be an even shorter trip than you planned." Solo gunned the throttle and accelerated to attack speed.

"We want to LAND on the platform, not ram it," Min snapped tensely.

Grinning, the smuggler increased velocity. "Relax, lady. In this business sometimes you need to dock in a hurry. I've never crashed yet." The Wookiee growled, and the pilot shot him an irritated glance. "That doesn't count, we were missing a rear stabilizer. Warm up the auxiliary thrusters for my mark."

Sloan and Min exchanged glances and gripped the back of the chairs a little harder.

They careened towards the ancient defense station, silent and dark and sporting a scarred CIS emblem. A large holoprojector array had been anchored to it at some point after the war, and periodically flashed advertising down from the heavens. For a heartstopping second Min thought they would crash into it at full speed, but at the last possible second the pilot swerved, the auxiliary thrusters fired to brake them, and the ship's airlock slid to a halt against the station's docking port like a pool ball entering a corner pocket.

"You're welcome," Solo said, every so faintly sarcastic. "I'll keep the engine running for you."

"Right," Min said. She and Sloan trotted back into the main passenger section. "Okay, listen up. Me, Jirik, Maradelle, Tiggle are the boarding team. Duha-Wik and Gormal hold the ship."

Duha-Wik made a noise of protest. "Min Camlann, is it wise to leave a third of our force aboard?"

"No, but it's wiser than leaving one person here with a Wookiee and an unenthusiastic pilot." Duha-Wik hissed and slowly nodded; he understood what she meant.

"Let's move." Sloan drew his pistol, climbed into his pressure suit, and sealed it. The others followed suit, and when they had Sloan opened the airlock and led the way through.

The inside was cramped, full of old and broken military equipment, but the hum of the air scrubbers made it clear the station had been lived in and maintained recently. Guns out, the four of them advanced.

The interior wasn't much to look at. There was a barracks room, containing one recently slept-in bed with a teddy wampa and strange stains on the sheets. Another room was a bathing and lavatory area. Someone had scrawled 'FILTH FILTH FILTH KNIFE' on the wall in what looked like feces.

The final room was a work bay. There were crates in pieces around the room, all bearing a logo, and a few workbenches. Cases and cases of different brands of candy bars littered every surface, torn open, shot open, and the floor was literally covered in discarded wrappers. A large tilted worktable was covered with dried blood; the upper torso of a horrified-looking Twi'lek woman lay chained to it, a motivator unit sticking out of her chest. The bottom half of a Naboo stream-horse lay in a gory heap below it, with five wires and a servo cord running from the bottom of the Twi'lek torso to the bloody upper part of the stream-horse. The woman's face and lekku had been painted in bright colors.

"Kh'veek," Maradelle whispered. "What the fuck."

"Yeah," Min said unhappily. "Let's you and I keep our eyes peeled. Jirik, check and see if you can find anything. Tiggie, slice the station's computer; I think there's a terminal over there."

The diminutive little Ugnaught snorted uneasily and moved to comply, holstering their trademark twin heavy blasters and getting out their slicing equipment. Min was well aware of their ability with computers as well as weapons; she considered Tiggie to be one of the more broadly useful of Margrann's soldiers, even if she had never figured out what gender they were and was too embarrassed to ask. They'd been held back in the Family by the fact that enforcers needed to be taken seriously when making threats, and Ugnaughts simply... weren't. She sometimes had that problem herself due to her height.

A period of tense waiting followed. Finally Tiggie snargled something flatly and at length, to the effect that there were no other life signs aboard the station and very little else of interest.

Sloan walked over. "I got two things. I'm guessing stuff Tolle had."

"What is it?" Min asked.

"Well, the one looks like a pad with the technical specs for the Governor's Palace on it," Sloan replied unhappily.

"Floor plans?" Maradelle asked.

"Yeah, but more than that. Stuff like the sort of fire alarms, the hardened factor of the building against missiles and the like, the power systems and their locations... stuff that anyone wanting to assault or sneak into the place would probably like to know."

"Does it have information on the security detail and their deployment?" Maradelle asked

"Nope. So that's something, especially given D'Asta will have brought his own people. I'm guessing she's going to try a frontal attack or something as a distraction using droids, and then infiltrate in the confusion. There's creamshells all over the city; it wouldn't be too hard for her to lure a squad into a trap, take their armor, and she's just one more stormtrooper running around trying to fight off a wave of droids." Sloan grimaced.

"Shit." Min glanced around the room. "What else did you find?"

"There's another pad. Same make as the first, same stamps on it, so it looks like a government datapad Tolle took. But it's been wiped."

"Shit." Min glanced over at the Ugnaught. "Hey Tiggie, see what you can do with this, eh?"

Snuffling, Tiggie came crankily over and plugged in. Several tense minutes passed and then the Ugnaught snorted out something Min couldn't quite follow.

"Tiggie says the pad's data is gone for good, but they didn't bother double-erasing the graphical portion of the main index, and that can be restored with a few seconds work," Maradelle said. She bent down and kissed the little enforcer on the cheek. "Good work, love."

Tiggie made a pleased sound and patted her on the ass in an obviously familiar fashion. Sloan and Min exchanged surprised glances, then turned back to watch.

Sure enough, after a few seconds a small holoprojection appeared on the surface of the pad. Maradelle blinked. "Okay. What am I looking at?"

"Is it a space station?" Sloan said uncertainly. "Maybe a dropship?"

"Or is it an engine? A generator?" Maradelle asked, frowning. "A bomb?"

"Maybe it's some sort of droid?" Min said hesitantly, an odd feeling in the back of her mind.

Tiggie snuffled something about landcrawlers and mobile mining rigs.

"Well fuck," Sloan said. "Bit of a mystery." He glanced round the room, then swore. "Ah, Kh'veek, these crate bits. The logo on them. That's the Celanon City Droidical Tech College emblem."

"Didn't you say they'd been robbed?" Maradelle said, sighing. "Of a ton of droid parts and-"

"Yes. Kh'veek only knows how many of these funbots she's built." He glanced at the Twi'lek corpse shackled to the table. "Looks like she wanted a centaur."

Min shuddered. "Let's get the fuck out of here." She moved for the door and nearly slipped on the candy wrappers. "Damnit!"

They followed, and as soon as they were back aboard the Falcon Captain Solo disengaged from the station and soared away at high speed. "It's a good thing you decided to end your trip," he drawled tensely as Min and Sloan walked up to the cockpit. "We just got a transmission from the surface. We've got fifteen minutes to get on the ground before they close the airspace over the city to all non-official traffic."

"They must be getting ready to land D'Asta's shuttle," Sloan said. "Can you make it in time?"

"It'll be close, but we can do it." His first mate gave a dubious moan, and Solo glared at him. "We can do it," he said with something less than confidence.

"Oh, joy," Min muttered.

As they powered into the ionosphere, the smuggler picked up the comm. "Celanon Control, this is freighter Millenium Falcon, port number YT-5547927, beginning initial approach, please advise."

"YT-5547927, this is Celanon Control, abort your approach. Airspace will close in five minutes."

"Negative Celanon Control, fuel situation critical, landing essential." Solo turned, winked, then accelerated.

"YT-5547927..." There was a pause, and then: "YT-5547927, this is Celanon Control, corridor 23 is open for you." A pause. "Be advised that you will be blown out of the sky by Imperial fighters if you do not land within 4 minutes or break off from your approach."

"Duly noted, Celanon Control." The smuggler grinned, then flipped a switch. "Chewie, override the atmospheric braking safeguards."

Nervously, the Wookiee fiddled with the controls. Gripping the controls tightly, Solo licked his lips and dove.

"YT-5547927, you are coming in too hot, reduce your speed! Reduce speed!" The voice on the comm sounded deeply alarmed.

"Celanon Control, didn't read that last, please repeat?" Solo accelerated.

"Kh'veek!" The voice on the other end of the comm grew fainter as they turned from the microphone. "Firefighting units stand by to converge on Bay 49! Evacuate the area!"

Sloan muttered something and grabbed Min's hand, squeezed. Min just swallowed and tried to run through the calming exercises she had been taught years ago.

The freighter came roaring down through the clouds. At what seemed like the last moment, Solo manually triggered auxiliary thrusters, hard-engaged atmospheric brakes, and jerked the ship's nose up. There was a slight creaking from the spaceframe that made everyone on board wince, and then, light as a feather, the ship slowly settled to earth on the dead center of Docking Bay 49.

There was complete silence for a second. Then, casually, Solo swiveled around in his seat. "You were right," he said casually. "That wasn't so bad. And we made it with 26 seconds to spare."

There was no light they did not bring.

Inmedua crept along behind Skellig, the breathing helmet she wore shielding her from what she was certain was a terrible stench, making sure to stay very, very close to the Jedi. Despite all of her training she felt a deep, irrational fear of this place. Or maybe it wasn't so irrational. She had never before been in a place so devoid of any sense of the Force.

They were in a narrow corridor, choked with garbage and the bones of long-dead rodent scavengers. The doorways to either side were in a style she had never seen, with decorative metal trimming around them now rusting away. She could see only via the lights on her helmet and Skellig's flashlight.

It had been an hour since they had come here. She had no idea where they were going or why. It made her wonder about the nature of this test. Very little of what they had done so far made a great deal of sense to her.

Swallowing back her dread, Inmedua pushed on after the Jedi Knight leading her into darkness.

They rounded a corner, and Skellig drew to a halt. Ahead, Inmedua saw the corridor end abruptly, jaggedly, vanishing into a dark expanse beyond. She couldn't make out what it contained.

Turning, Skellig took out a badge and data card of some sort in a clear holder, and looped it around her neck on a lanyard. "Keep that around your neck, on your chest, at all times. Do not let your clothing conceal it. Stay right behind me. This will be safe if you follow instructions but dangerous, potentially fatal if you do not. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Skellig," she said, keeping her voice steady.

"Good. Follow." He strode on.

As they approached the end of the corridor, Inmedua gasped. The city had been torn asunder here, the structure of the ancient arcology blocks ripped out and gutted. In the middle of the vast open space, a giant structure loomed, humming and alight with blinking indicators and spotlights, a giant piston-like obelisk slowly moving up and down on one end of it. Droids hovered about it... modern droids, sentry models, heavily armed.

"What is this?" she stammered.

There was a catwalk leading from the corridor to a walkway around the structure's upper levels, and Skellig walked briskly down it. Inmedua hurried to follow, giving the droids wary glances.

They were descending, half of them. The other half took up aerial positions that she recognized as a fire support formation.

Skellig stopped just short of a faded yellow line painted on the catwalk. A single droid descended, and a beam of red light from it played over their badges. Then it spoke in a harsh mechanical voice. "State your identity."

"Artorius Skellig, Jedi Knight of the Republic, and padawan. Special Authorization Watcher-5 Cenote."

The droid considered this. "Requested access and reasons?"

"Passage along outer structure to Level 0. Transit only. Jedi business."

Another pause. "Please hold for Integrity Command."

Three long minutes passed, with Inmedua's curiosity and worry growing with each second. Finally, the droid activated a holoprojector and the image of a human male in a strange uniform appeared. "This is Colonel Obyrn, Coruscant Integrity Command." There was a pause. "Back again, Skellig?"

The Jedi nodded, a faint smile on his face. "Sooner than I thought."

"You know, you can't just keep using the station as your private staircase." The Colonel's voice sounded amused.

"Might as well put it to some good use," Skellig returned. "Besides, it doesn't hurt for at least one Jedi to come down and have a look around now and then."

"True enough." The Colonel nodded. "All right, I'm approving your standard authorization. Both ways?"

"Both ways," Skellig confirmed. "Thanks, Colonel. Have a nice night."

"You too," Obyrn said. "Be careful down there."

The holoprojector shut off, and the droid hummed for a second, then beeped. "You and your padawan are cleared for exterior walkway access. Do not attempt to enter the station or you will be disintegrated without warning."

"Understood," Skellig replied calmly. "Come along, Shorereach." He resumed walking, down to the walkway around the structure, then began descending a winding ramp.

Trailing nervously after him, Inmedua watched the hovering droids cautiously. "What is 'Coruscant Integrity Command'? It sounds like a military ethics board."

Skellig chuckled. "No. They're the arm of the planetary government responsible for maintaining the structure and stability of the world-city's framework. Basically a bunch of structural engineers operating under military discipline. They make sure aging structures on the lower levels don't give way in a fashion that would cause the levels above to pancake, do periodic weight-bearing simulations and add bracing dependent on the results, and establish dead zone 'cushion' levels to mitigate the results of a major collapse should one ever happen. Important stuff, but when they do their job correctly nobody ever hears of them."

Inmedua nodded, then frowned. "Is that why you had to get permission from them? Because they don't want people on the lower levels, damaging things?"

"No. Technically there are no laws prohibiting going down. There don't need to be; there's nothing worth going down for, and it's not a nice place. The permission was to get as close as we are to this, and use these ramps." The Jedi gestured to the structure they were descending.

"What IS this, anyway?" Inmedua asked curiously. "A power plant?"

"Hm? No. It's a seismic station." He noticed her blank look, and smiled faintly. "Coruscant is tectonically active, like most planets. Not exceptionally so, but one bad quake hitting a planet sized metropolis could kill millions. So ages ago, before the city was much more than 100 levels, they built the seismic stations into the fault lines. They regulate the friction between plates somehow; I'm not an engineer and don't pretend to understand the science behind it. So we never have earthquakes above a magnitude 1.0 or 2.0."

"I see." Inmedua digested this. "And that's why they have all these guards?"

"Yes. Don't want the Seppies making a run at it or junkers trying to steal parts, and if something breaks down they want to know quickly. It's not actually a big deal. This fault line alone has literally hundreds of these stations, and even if one, two, three, ten, fifty of them were to break down or blow up or go berserk, the rest would keep the fault under control. But better safe than sorry."

"That certainly seems sensible," Inmedua replied. She stared down into the blackness. "How far down are we going?"

Skellig just smiled.

They proceeded down the ramp for nearly twenty minutes, until finally there was no further down to go, and they stepped off the grillwork walkway onto a flat, spongy surface. Skellig walked away, into the black, and Inmedua hurried after him anxiously. She stumbled as she

went, the floor feeling broken and strange under her mag boots, covered in a thick layer of muck.

They had traveled for five minutes when the nature of the substance beneath her feet suddenly struck her like a hammer. Her eyes widened. "Skellig? Is this... are we walking on soil?"

"Yes. Welcome to Level 0."

Inmedua swallowed, suddenly feeling a crushing sense of depth from the darkness around her. This was as low as one could go, a lightless, airless tomb upon which the most populated planet in the galaxy was built. So many people, and yet she felt so utterly alone down here. "Why... why have we come here?"

"That you may see something." Skellig's stride didn't slow. "Enough questions for now, Youngling."

"You told that Colonel I was a padawan," she said, voice holding a slightly ridiculous tone of accusation.

"People outside the Order think every Jedi who hasn't made Knight is a padawan," Skellig said with cynical amusement. "And most of them call every Jedi above padawan 'Master', just in case they are. You'll learn it's easier to just go along with this; trying to correct them merely disrupts harmony."

"Hmm," Inmedua replied thoughtfully, filing that away for future reference. "Is this thing I'm supposed to see far?"

"No, not far now. Not far at all." Skellig glanced at her unreadably. "You've done well so far. Don't let this discourage you."

He thinks I'm going to fail, she realized with an unpleasant shock. Even though I've passed all the tests he's given me, he's expecting me to fail. Somehow the idea that she might not succeed hadn't truly occurred to her, even when he'd spelled it out at the beginning of their trip. Now, here in the stygian black, it seemed much realer.

"We'll see," she said.

The lights of the station behind them dimmed, faded, and were lost in the distance.

The ride home from the spaceport was glum and quiet. Nobody was looking forward to telling Don Margrann that they'd once again failed to bag Ardrane. Even less appealing was the

prospect of confessing to him that they hadn't found any terribly valuable information, just indications that the assassin knew a lot about the palace. The whole trip had been disturbing, stressful, and largely a waste of time.

Sloan was moodily flipping a lighter back and forth between his hands, an unlit cigarillo between his lips. Maradelle by contrast was smoking hers, eyes cast down, depression oozing off her like heat from a stove. Duha-Wik's face was unhappy as he drove. Gormal was impassive, but his fingers twitched in his lap. Only Tiggie seemed unperturbed by how things had turned out.

Stormtroopers were everywhere as they drove. They noticed that one wall as they entered the old city bore fresh blaster marks.

"What do you think they'll do if the Governor's Palace is attacked?" Min finally said in a low voice. Something had been bothering her since the defense platform, something she couldn't quite put a name to.

"What stormtroopers always do. Shoot indiscriminately," Maradelle replied bleakly. "Probably bomb the old town too, if we're lucky. If we're not, they'll pull out the Imps and then use the turbolasers."

"The Imperials are fond of object lessons in obedience," Gormal said, voice raspy. "The bigger the better."

"Maybe D'Asta will rein them in," Sloan said. "His relatives have business interests here, from what Min told me."

"Yeah. Not sure I'd count on that to save us," she said moodily. "Shit like this might attract Tarkin's attention."

That name sent a wave of apprehension through the speedervan.

"Don Margrann will be very unhappy to hear the results of our trip, my friends," Duha-Wik said somberly. "I fear we have not served the Family so well as we would have wished."

A gloomy silence returned as they drove. Min scowled out the window and clenched and unclenched her hands, deeply unhappy. She knew there was something just beyond her awareness, something important, but it stubbornly refused to make itself known to her. It was maddening.

"Well, we did our best," she said. "Hopefully that'll count for something with the Don."

"Yeah," Sloan agreed. "We tried. I think we were just a bit out of our depth from the beginning."

"Yeah. Out of our... depth..." The skin on the back of her neck prickling, Min ground to a halt, the words causing a sudden memory to surface ominously in her mind like a sea monster from a dark tarn. "Tiggie. Give me the pad. The erased pad."

Snorting curiously, the Ugnought tossed it to her. She activated it and stared at the three-dimensional diagram. Yes, she was certain of what it was now; that was what had been bothering her. Then her brow furrowed in confusion over what it could possibly...

Min's face went chalk white.

Sloan heard her gasp in horror and his head snapped around; he reached for his blaster, a look of concern on his face. "Sparky? What's wrong?" Min almost never gave outward signs of fear; it was one of the things that had attracted the Family's interest in her.

"This. This thing. I know what it is. I've seen it before. Oh, Kh'veek." Min's eyes were wide, staring at the holo diagram rotating in front of her. "It's a seismic station. They put them into the planetary crust, along fault lines, to control tectonics."

"Huh? Yeah, I've heard of those. Think there's one out in the canyons to the east." Sloan frowned. "Why would she want that? Is D'Asta going to be inspecting one or-"

He broke off, eyes widening. Slowly, as if on a swivel, the heads of everyone in the vehicle turned to look up at the ridge.

"Oh, fuck," Maradelle whispered. "Oh fuck. That's a fault line, isn't it. The ridge. The Swanmere. The palace in the middle. It's a water-filled tectonic rift. Right through the center of the city."

"The palace," Min said, growing fear in her voice. "She'll want to make sure it's enough to do the job. Tiggie, what does the other pad list for the quake protection value they built into it?"

The Ugnought hurriedly flicked through the pad, then gave a squeal of dismay and held it up.

"Built to withstand ground tremors of up to 8.7," Min read aloud. "That means that to be sure, she'd want to trigger one... much... higher..."

"Kh'veek!" Sloan spat, appalled. "That'll level the entire fucking area! She's gonna kill everyone in the fucking CITY just to get D'Asta! This is INSANE!"

"Has she struck you as a model of sanity so far?" Min snapped. "Call the boss. Don Margrann needs to tell Chief Galyarn and have him land ten dropships of stormtroopers on that station right NOW!"

"Right." Sloan fumbled out his comlink, punched a code, and waited a second. "Boss? Sloan. Listen to me carefully. We think Ardrame's gonna use the seismic station out east of town to create an earthquake big enough to bring the palace down on D'Asta's head. One that strong would have to be over 9.0 at least; it'd level the entire fucking town." He paused. "We don't know when, boss, but D'Asta's shuttle just landed. We'd have called you earlier but it took a while for us to figure out what the hell we were looking at." Another pause. "Yeah, figured you would. We'll be right there." He hung up, then turned to the others. "Don Margrann's gonna call Galyarn and light a fire under his ass, get these fucking creamshells to do something useful for a change and secure the station. He wants us back at headquarters as fast as possible. We're probably going to have to evacuate as much of our assets from the city as we can, just in case."

There were nods all around, and the van drove on in stressed silence, the occupants flinching with every vibration or shudder that got past the speeder's shock absorbers.

There was a dead Nalroni lying on the side of the road near the entrance to their neighborhood, blood congealing from a blaster hole in his skull. Someone had placed a blue rose besides the corpse. On a wall nearby, someone else had spraypainted the word 'MURDERED'.

"Kh'veek, this escalated quickly," Sloan muttered. "The city was normal yesterday."

"Yeah," Min answered, voice subdued. "Maybe they'll pull troops out to help with the station once Margrann makes that call."

They proceeded down the familiar, empty streets, Duha-Wik driving noticeably faster than usual, and pulled into the parking bay of the headquarters. The Don was waiting for them there, his face reddish-grey and hard. Lemma was standing next to him, sniper rifle slung in its case over her shoulder, twin heavy blasters in holsters under her arms, a bandoleer of grenades across her white blouse top.

Duka-Wik popped the doors, and before they could get out the two hurried over. "Listen up, kids," Don Margrann said tightly. "I talked to the Chief. Edwardou can't tell the Imperials."

"What?" Min protested, disbelieving. "Why the fuck not? Boss," she hastily amended.

Magrann didn't seem to notice. "The stormtroopers are running apeshit. D'Asta doesn't have full control up there; Tarkin sent someone along to handle security, someone who reports directly to him, and they're just looking for excuses to punish Celanon, especially because they've got a suspicion D'Asta's going to go easy on us. If he tells them about this, the Chief and Governor Turgid are afraid they may declare the planet in rebellion and 'put us down' by force."

They stared at him, appalled. "What is he gonna do, then?" Sloan finally asked.

"Galyarn's sending two patrol assault transports of CCPD special weapons officers to secure the station. That's all he can dispatch with the city in the state it's in; people will notice otherwise. He's asked me for help backing him up, since we seem to have a better idea of what we're dealing with here." Margrann looked at them unhappily. "That's you kids and Lemma here. Get your asses down to our warehouses on Pico Street and meet Kren and your liaison officers, then help secure the station and bring me the head of this Seppie mental case."

"Ms. Kren?" Min said, startled. "Why Geritte?"

Magrann glanced at her. "Because my bakery woman has a past and keeps a Clone War assault landing gunship fueled and armed in storage, Min. You got any other questions? I'm gonna assume no. Get moving. I'm gonna oversee our evacuation. Meet back in Meraloa town if we lose Celanon City. Which, just to be clear, we had better fucking not." His face grew grim. "Listen, people, this is business, that's one thing, but several million people live here. We are beings of honor and respect, first and foremost. Not worthless thugs. Prove it. Don't let these people die. Got that?"

"We won't fail, boss." Min glanced at Sloan, startled by how fervent he sounded. "We won't fail the Family, and the Family won't fail Celanon."

"That's good, Jirik. I got faith in you." Don Margrann's voice was warm. Lemma scrambled into the van, and the crime boss turned and hurried back into the building. Duha-Wik pulled the van out of the bay, and hit the accelerator, sending them roaring through the streets.

"Slow down when you get near a patrol," Maradelle cautioned. "Last thing we want is Imperial attention."

"Understood," Duha-Wik replied.

Gormal took out a slim black case and began quietly assembling a repeating carbine.

"That a SoroSuub, Traveler?" Lemma asked him neutrally. The woman's face was a cold mask.

"Grentel Arms," Gormal replied. "Made a few modifications. Don't usually use it. Attracts attention, tends to be overkill."

Min nervously checked the charge on her blaster, exchanged glances with Sloan, and watched the streets slide by.

After what seemed far too long, they screeched to a halt in the yard of a warehouse complex and spilled out of the speedervan. Geritte Kren was waiting outside, dressed in camos with a heavily modified sniper rifle over her shoulder and an ancient CIS beret on her head; next to her stood CCPD Lieutenants Gracia Chrobbtuit and Karr Greff. Nodding briefly to them, Ms. Kren

limped rapidly over to one of the warehouses and opened the front rolldown, revealing a small hangar with a powder-blue Republic LAAT gunship in it, fully armed. "All aboard who's going aboard! Duha-Wik! Can you fly one of these things?"

"Yes, Geritte Kren," the Trandoshan replied. "I have flown them before. You do not wish to?"

"I can in a pinch, but I'm not the pilot Margrann says you are." Awkwardly, Geritte clambered into the troop bay and then helped the rest in. "Welcome aboard the Jolly Turncoat! Always knew she'd come in handy one day. Luckily that old fart Margrann agreed."

"I'm disappointed in you, Geritte," Min said, forcing a smile. "A Republic ship?"

"Well, the Republic and I, we had our differences," Ms. Kren drawled. "But if there's one thing my experiences taught me, my girl, it's that they had a VERY GOOD assault lander gunship in the LAAT, much better than anything we had."

"Greff will take the co-pilot's position, next to the Trando," Lt. Chrobttuit said. Her eyes were red and puffy, as if she'd been weeping earlier, but her voice was clear and cold. "If we're not transmitting a police code when we leave the ground those TIE Fighters will blow us out of the sky. Get us out from over the city as fast as possible."

Everyone nodded or grunted in agreement, and Duha-Wik ran through the pre-flight checklist and warmed up the engines. Gormal and Tiggie each manned a waist gun, and at Greff's nod the LAAT rose up on repulsors, eased out of the hangar, and then soared up into the air with a sickening lurch.

Almost immediately they were flanked by two TIEs directly to their rear. "CCPD craft, identify yourself," the radio crackled.

"This is CCPD Flight 23, operational sign Conformist One, departing Celanon City for rural operations," Greff replied pleasantly. "Flight has been filed by CCPD with your vessel's air control center."

There was a long pause, and then the comm came on again. "Roger that, Conformist One, proceed on your current course. Do not turn back towards the interior of the city or you will be fired upon."

"Understood. Glory to the New Order." Greff turned the comm off and glanced back at them. "Kh'veek. They'd shoot us out of the sky for a course change. The fucking POLICE."

"Yeah, well, you're local police," Min said neutrally. "So you're probably Seppies and barely trustworthy."

"They don't give a damn about the law." That was Lieutenant Chrobbtuit, a deep and raw bitterness in her voice. "Used to think they did."

Nobody seemed to know what to say to that. "You okay, Gracia?" Sloan finally asked.

"No." She didn't seem inclined to talk about it, though.

Five miles out of Celanon two patrol gunships fell into formation with them, the old Republic-vintage police transports with their three solar collectors and TIE-like bodies. Greff spoke with them briefly, then turned back to the others. "We're following them in for a landing to secure the station. They'll do the initial ground assault, we're to stay airborne and provide fire support and rapid deployment where needed."

"Are they sure we have the right station?" Min asked anxiously. "I seem to recall the planet I remember these from having a lot of them along each fault."

"It was probably somewhere a lot more technologically advanced, wealthy, populated, and seismically active than Celanon, then," Greff replied. "The Huromarroa Fault just has the one station on it, ancient fucking thing predating the Republic. Nobody cares if there's a quake out in the sticks, they just don't want one in the main spaceport and capital. So there's just the one. Apparently barely guarded, too. A handful of ancient security droids with stun weapons."

"Stun weapons?" Lemma asked disbelievingly.

"Apparently they're mostly to keep horga-bulls from trying to attack the outer machinery," Greff said, shrugging. "Farmers get upset if you kill their horga-bulls."

"Kh'veek," Lemma muttered. She glanced at Min. "I knew leaving you alone with Maradelle was a bad idea."

"We weren't alone," Maradelle said primly. "Jirik was our chaperone." She smirked at Lemma. "You didn't expect it to lead to the world rocking, the ground opening up, and massive, uncontrollable convulsions?"

Lemma's cold expression cracked and she smirked back. "No poaching."

"Do you two mind?" Min said, struggling to keep a straight face.

"Ten minutes to target," Lt. Chrobbtuit interjected harshly, unamused. The brief moment of levity vanished.

Geritte pressed a button, and straps deployed from the troop bay roof. "Everybody grab on," the old Separatist instructed. "If the LZ is hot when we get there, we might be making some sharp sudden turns, and these things can spill you out easy if you aren't prepared."

Expression again an emotionless mask, Lemma took her sniper rifle off her shoulder and began snapping the pieces of it into the ready position for use. The others gripped their straps and stared out the open doors, faces bleak. Min felt a sour ball of stress form in the pit of her stomach.

Something began beeping up in the cockpit, and Duha-Wik hissed. "We have two radar signatures ascending from ground le-"

The beeping suddenly changed to a screeching alarm and Greff cursed. "Missiles in the air! Evasive! Evas-"

One of the two patrol transports ahead of them exploded in a fireball and fell out of the sky. The other veered sharply left, guns on it spitting blaster fire at a seeking missile trail. It hit the incoming projectile at the last minute, causing the police vessel to rock but doing little real damage.

"Two HMPs, bearing 9-5-5!" shouted Ms. Kren. "Light them up!"

With a reptilian growl, Duha-Wik veered hard to the right, banking the craft to bring it into firing position while keeping it out of the main guns of the two hostile gunships. They were mean, ovoid, beetle-looking ships; old Baktoid Fleet Ordinance droid Heavy Missile Platform assault ships used to land small platoons of droids and provide both anti-air and anti-ground fire support. They hadn't made very good dropships, but as fire platforms they were formidable and required no crew, just the notoriously misanthropic droid pilot brain.

"Mayday! Mayday! They have target lock! They-" The radio went dead as a second missile salvo slammed into the rear of the remaining police gunship, sending it careening earthwards trailing smoke. The two HMP vessels twisted, taking minor damage from the Jolly Turncoat's fire, then roared towards it in formation.

"Duha-Wik, listen!" Geritte barked. "Gun the afterburners and take us directly between them! Directly!"

"We will never survive that, Ger-" Duha-Wik started to protest.

"Do it! NOW!" Geritte screamed.

Duha-Wik's knuckles clenched. He let out a Trandoshan howl of challenge, then hit the afterburners up to maximum and roared towards the gap between the two.

The missile pods started to light up, then went dark; target too close. Instead the laser cannons elevated, took careful aim.

The LAAT passed directly between them. At that range there was no way either HMP could miss.

They didn't fire.

"What the fuck?" Lemma said, face pale, as they banked around.

"Duha-Wik, you got 30 seconds before their weapons systems come back online," Geritte Kren said calmly. "Kill them. Kill them now."

With a bloodthirsty hiss, no longer having to worry about evasion, Duha-Wik took them in, weapons systems roaring. Gormal and Tiggie held down their gun triggers and kept shooting.

24 seconds later both droid gunships were spiraling groundward, ripped by explosions.

"What the fuck?" Lemma repeated.

"See, we had to develop a counter to these damn LAATs in a hurry," Geritte explained calmly. "Baktoid did a pretty good job under the circumstances, all told. Clones used to shit themselves when they saw an HMP breathing fire down on em. Only trouble was, so did our guys, because the droid brain of the HMP is really aggressive and has a hard-on for shooting stuff up, and sometimes it didn't really care if that involved a bit of friendly fire. They tried fixing it, but it was a problem with the core neural design and they were really pressed for time. So they did a quick and dirty fix." Geritte shook her head. "They had the weapons systems automatically power down if they tried to fire with another friendly unit in the line of fire. Takes about 35 seconds to restart them. The design liaison from the ground forces at the time tried to tell them this was a bad idea, but nobody listened to me." She shrugged, looking smug.

"Greff, can you get anyone from the two transports on comms?" Lt. Chrobttuit asked, face pale.

He turned back to face her, face uncharacteristically somber and upset. "Nothing, Gracia."

There was a queasy silence for a long time. Then Duha-Wik spoke. "Arrival in 3 minutes."

"All right, here's the plan," Ms Kren said crisply, "Duha-Wik will circle the station in close orbit. Put down fire on anything on the ground that moves until nothing is, then we land. Duha-Wik and Lemma will stay airborne and mobile and cover the outside, the rest of us breach and clear. We'll get more specific when we get closer, although if this is as much of a shitshow as I expect

people are probably going to have to use their own initiative. Don't bunch up, get clear of the LAAT as soon as we land. Got that?"

There were worried nods. Chrobbtuit turned and glared at her. "Why are you giving orders?"

"Because I used to be Major Geritte Kren, CIS Special Forces, and I've commanded airborne insertions against a hostile objective before," the old baker woman replied evenly. "Have you?"

The police officer's hands clenched, then she gave a curt nod and turned away to look at the structure rapidly coming into view.

The seismic station was half-buried in a low valley, and as they dove into it blaster fire started to arc up from the ground. The LAAT's guns began to blaze, while Lemma and Geritte knelt on the cabin floor, aimed, and began sniping. Below, Min could make out a horde of...

"Are those pantomime banthas?" she asked disbelievingly.

"Seems to be," Lemma replied, firing steadily. "With blasters." She squeezed off several more shots. "Looks like there's old-model clankers under the costumes."

"Steady orbit, Duha-Wik, just out of easy small arms range," Ms. Kren said calmly.

"Yes, Geritte Kren. I have done this before." Duha-Wik sounded faintly wounded.

By the third pass, most of the droids were down. Several, garbed as brightly painted clowns, had tried to lug up surface-to-air missile launchers with multicolored balloons tied to the tubes. The two snipers picked them off the second they exposed themselves to try and shoot.

"Min, where's the entrance to the control room?" Ms. Kren asked.

"I have no idea," she replied unhappily. "I've never been in one of these things, I don't know how they work, I don't know the layout. Just what they look like outside."

"We want the door on the south face," Lt. Chrobbtuit said. "That leads into a set of corridors that can take us to the control room. There's also a stairwell down to the deep core pistons; we need to secure those and make sure they haven't been sabotaged."

The old Separatist nodded thoughtfully. "So two objectives to secure. Well, could be worse." She leaned forwards. "Duha-Wik, let us down in that open patch over there, across from the door. As soon as we're down everyone but you and Lemma will hop out; once we're clear take off again and keep circling and laying down fire. Make sure nothing comes up and hits us from behind through our entry. Got that?"

"Understood," the Trandoshan replied, easing the LAAT down.

"Myself, Maradelle, and Lt. Chrobbtuit will clear out the pistons," Geritte continued. "The rest of you take the control room. We'll join you as soon as we've verified the machinery is fine."

Min gave a tight nod. "Be careful, Geritte."

"Oh I will. I haven't the money to buy another leg." The baker woman cackled. "All right. Sloan, Gormal, you're breaching. We'll be a step behind you."

The LAAT landed with a sickening jolt. Stomach leaden, clutching her blaster tightly, Min vaulted out of the troop bay and ran for the station doors.

There was nothing but darkness here.

Level Zero was a purgatory. Dim shapes passed by, piles of ancient garbage and collapsed structures. Vast durasteel alloy pillars, a quarter mile across, would rise dimly into view of their helmet light, stay a while, and then fall behind.

Nothing lived here except a creeping fungus, and a small, pale, scuttling sort of insect that dined on it. Neither was present in great abundance. The land was too poisoned even for such forms of life.

Inmedua trudged on behind Skellig, desperately wanting it to end. Sometimes she found it hard to believe this wasn't some sort of nightmare she was having. It certainly seemed dreamlike, a fitful hallucination on the brink of sleep brought on by too much care and stress. She knew it wasn't, though.

Finally Skellig drew to a halt. "Here we are," he said.

"What?" Inmedua asked uncertainly. "What?" She looked around her. "There's nothing here. It's the same horrible place we've been marching through forever!"

"Oh?" Skellig was unruffled. "Why don't you try looking around. Then give me your conclusions. I'll stay within sight of you."

The last thing she wanted to do was remain here. It didn't appear she had much choice though. Maybe she would fail quickly and could go home.

When did I start believing I would fail? she suddenly wondered.

It was the dark. It was this place. She was afraid, and the fear was weakening her, making her forget her training. Inmedua's face screwed up mulishly. She was a Jedi, and Jedis didn't allow fear to master them. Sitting down, she closed her eyes for a second and quietly sang the meditation rhyme they had been taught when they were four. With her eyes shut, it wasn't so much different from doing it in one of the Temple's rooms.

When she felt she had finally mastered herself, she opened her eyes, stood up, and began to look around.

She quickly discovered an odd feature of this area; geometric shapes blocked out in the ground using stone bricks. They were everywhere, some large, some small.

A second strange thing; a shiny rock half buried in the mud, glittering white in the light of her helmet. A second one a little ways away. And a third.

Inmedua walked through the area, increasingly puzzled. Were the shapes in the ground the foundations of buildings? If so they were very strangely shaped ones, and some were very very small.

A tangle of broken wood loomed before her, and she blinked. "Is this recent garbage?" she asked hesitantly. "Should I be paying attention to it? Wood ought to have turned to dust by now."

Skellig shrugged, and she investigated closer. It looked to be the remains of a small structure... ahhh. She could tell that the original wood had been soaked in a preservative agent, and that what remained was more of a man-made fossil than actual natural timber. Squinting at it, she tried to reconstruct what sort of structure it had been.

The glimmerings of an idea started to dawn on her. She turned and walked, the shapes on the ground suddenly making more sense to her.

It didn't take long before following the logic she had used brought her to a wide open area free of the shapes, with a crumbling stone bowl in the center. Rising from it was a stained white block of marble, the upper half supporting a crumbling statue of the same material. A woman in some sort of clothing, a scroll clutched in one hand, the other held aloft as if gesturing to make a point while addressing a crowd. The inscription had long since been worn away, her features had crumbled, and the white stone was stained an unhealthy yellow. It still had a sort of majesty to it, though, and more...

...she thought that shape on the statue's belt might be a lightsaber.

Inmedua turned to face Skellig, eyes wide with wonder and melancholy. "This is a garden, isn't it. Those shapes are flower beds. That was a summerhouse. And this was a fountain at the center. A formal garden." She sighed. "And now it's this. I wonder who she was."

Skellig simply looked at her. She started to ask him what was wrong, and then darkness rushed in, sudden and swift, and she fell away with it.

The doors were shut, but unlocked. Min and the others flattened themselves against the wall on either side of it as Sloan and Gormal glanced at each other, nodded, and then kicked them open.

Blaster fire erupted almost immediately. Gormal got off five shots with his repeating carbine before a stream of fire from a crew-served squad weapon took him in the chest and flung him backwards. The Duros enforcer was dead before he hit the ground.

Sloan jerked back around the corner a split-second ahead of a barrage. Less than a second later Maradelle and Tiggy hurled thermal detonators into the doorway. As the twin explosions rocked the hallway, Min, Sloan, and the two police officers leaned around the corner and opened fire.

After ten seconds of shooting Geritte glanced around the door and held up a hand. "Cease fire, it's clear! Advance. Lieutenant, tell us where to go."

"Down this way." Guns drawn, they hurried into the station, walking swiftly over the smoking remains of droids.

The next corner brought them face to face with a medical droid whose surgical arms had been replaced with rusty butcher's cleavers. "AMP-PU-TATE! AMP-PU-TATE!" it screamed, and sped towards them on a sputtering repulsorlift. A hail of fire from them brought it down well before it reached them.

"Kh'veek," Greff muttered, clearly shaken. "This is like a fucking horrorvid."

"Actually it's been pretty mild so far in the fucked-up department," Sloan replied. "Trust me on that."

They hurried on, stopping at a stairwell. "This goes straight down to the deep core pistons," Chrobbtuit said. "The control room's a straight shot ahead. There's some side passages but they just lead to storage, parts, mechanical access."

"All right," Geritte said. "You're with me, Maradelle too. Soon as we've made sure the pistons are fine we'll be back up to help. Good luck." She gave Min a worried glance, then hurried down the stairs with the other two.

"Right," Sloan muttered. "Let's go."

Cheerful Neo-Zinthy music began to fill the air as they advanced, frothy, bubbly, upbeat stuff with lyrics about true love and fitting in. The hall was choked with half-opened crates of machine parts, droid limbs, ammunition, and the occasional carton of nougat-based candy bars, making rapid movement difficult.

A rolling noise was heard, and Tiggie screamed something and dived behind a crate. The rest followed him to cover just as a droideka tumbled down towards them, unfolded, and extended its weapon arms.

"Get down! Cover fire!" Min screamed, shooting over the top of a wholly inadequate crate.

The droideka braced itself as it took several shots, then swiveled to aim at Sloan and Min. As they cringed and fired, it gave an ominous hum... then the heavy blaster cannon on each arm erupted.

With party streamers and a roll-out kazoo.

They froze for a second in sheer bafflement. Small launchers on the droideka proceeded to shower the hall in brightly colored confetti.

Then the doors to either side of them burst open.

"Look out!" Lieutenant Greff, gun drawn, leapt between a startled Min and an approaching battle droid with what appeared to be live birds tied to it that were frantically trying to escape. It shot him in the chest with a riot blaster, then went down under Min and Tiggie's fire.

The second attacker, a protocol droid whose head had been covered with a sequined mask, swung a fire axe viciously down at Sloan, who dived out of the way. "It's only polite!" it wailed unhappily.

Frantically Min spun around, blaster spitting death. The protocol droid's head exploded under three shots.

"HAPPY BIRTHDAY HAPPY BIRTHDAY HAPPY BIRTHDAY," the droideka yammered, setting off fireworks that lit up the hallway in brilliant colors. Confetti continued to rain down, some of it burning.

Min's comlink chirped as she bent to check Greff. "Kiden. Guys, we have a small army of clankers heading for the south door from the woods," Lemma's voice crackled. "We're going to try and keep them off you but a few may get through."

"Camlann. You had fucking better, Lemma, we're already taking losses in here." Min grimaced; the policeman's eyes were glassy and staring, the holes in his torso obviously fatal. She looked up. "Somebody shut up that Kh'veek-damn droideka!"

"Hi there," a conversational voice said behind her. She spun around just in time to see a second laith-bear, twin to the one back at the cathedral, bounding down the hall at her from. "May I interest you in a thoughtful discussion about the New Order, bioethics, and why you should have all your internal organs torn out?"

"Fuck," Min muttered, and ran, shooting as she did.

Sloan and Tiggie followed her, heading straight towards the droideka. As they neared it, multiple shock prods popped out of its torso. "WHO WANTS A HUG!"

"The laith-bear!" Sloan yelled. "The fucking laith-bear does!"

"HUGGY BEAR!" the droideka keened, and rushed them. Somehow all three dove aside in time, Sloan being lightly grazed by one prod and nearly stumbling. The droid awkwardly spun around to rush at them again, and then the spurious bear crashed into it, the two bulky droids too big to easily pass.

With a shriek of stressed fury, Tiggie hurled a thermal detonator. They all threw themselves to the floor as the blast hit; Min's hair and coat caught fire, and she screamed and rolled to put them out. Charred confetti and streamers drifted down.

Gasping for breath, eyes streaming, Min felt Sloan pull her to her feet. Her blaster was lying in a corner smoking; at some point it had been knocked out of her hands and become collateral damage. Hurriedly she picked up Greff's police carbine, checked the charge on it, and then followed the other two down the hall. Sloan was noticeably limping.

"You okay?" she asked anxiously.

"A bit of shrapnel in my thigh," he grimaced. "Didn't hit an artery, but it hurts like hell."

They emerged into a control room, computers humming, a railing spanning the second level with doors leading off. Tiggie hustled over to one of the terminals and plugged in immediately. After a few seconds the little Ugnaught turned to them and chattered.

"What?" Min asked.

"He says the station's been set to generate a magnitude 9.7 centered on the city," Sloan translated. "He thinks it's still early enough that he can reverse things as long as the pistons are still working."

"Good," Min said. She glanced around anxiously, then got out her comlink. "Camlann. Lemma, tell me something I want to hear."

"Kiden. We're keeping them off the south door and I don't think there are too many left."

"Camlann. Good. We've got the control room. We're trying to shut things down now."

"Kren," the comlink crackled abruptly, Geritte's voice joining the conversation. "Min, we have a problem. Ardrame was down here, trying to fuck with the pistons. We drove her off before she could do anything serious but the bitch is FAST; she disarmed Maradelle and grabbed her, and dragged her out the east door before we could do anything and sealed it behind her. Chrobbtuit says according to the station plans there's a hallway off the second level of the control room, heading east, that the stair she took will intersect. It leads to a power battery chamber and then to an exit on the east side. I think she's going to try and make a break for it with a hostage."

"Damnit!" Min cursed, then turned to Sloan. "I'm going after them. You'll never catch up with that leg, and we need someone to guard Tiggie's back."

"Be careful, Sparky." Sloan's voice was unhappy. "Don't be a hero."

"Yeah, no shit," she muttered, then dashed up the metal stairs, down the walkway, and into the east hall.

She ran past closed doors, then past a staircase down. She emerged into a large, multistory chamber spanned by a catwalk, the space around it vanishing down into darkness, huge red power cylinders jutting up from the depths and humming with energy. Other columns of machinery contained giant gears, grinding together in a shower of sparks. She could see Ardrame just ahead, dragging a struggling, semi-limp Maradelle. Snarling, Min dashed forwards, raising her blaster. "Stop right there, bitch!"

Ardrame turned, and gave her a sheepish grin. "Oh, hi. Look, this isn't what it looks like."

"Let her go and put your fucking hands up or I will shoot you right now," Min said coldly. Actually she planned to shoot the woman the second Maradelle wasn't in the way.

"Shoot her," Maradelle slurred. She looked to have taken a blow to the head or something similar. "Don't let her... take me..."

"I just want you to know that I think we can share a boyfriend," Ardrame babbled cheerfully. "Also, I looked up the fisting thing and it IS real, so that's on the table too. I just have to make my escape and maybe experiment a bit on this hooker. That's the only reason I have her! I'm STILL A VIRGIN."

"Shut the fuck up!" Min screamed. "Let go of her NOW or I'm shooting, I swear to Kh'veek!"

"Oh, uh, well, okay," Ardrame said, sounding taken aback. Grabbing Maradelle by the hair, she pushed the Devaronian's face towards the grinding, spinning gears to her left.

Maradelle screamed. Min, a sick feeling in her stomach and unable to get a clear shot, dove for them. She grabbed Maradelle and yanked her backwards, throwing the woman back just millimeters before her face went into the machinery. Maradelle stumbled backwards and with a second shriek went stumbling over the edge of the walkway, barely catching hold of the rim in time to herself from falling.

Min swung her carbine around only to have Ardrame kick it out of her hand. The green woman's featureless eyes of solid round black stared at her, and then the genetic aberration snapped a strut free of the flimsy rail.

Taking a step back, Min did the same. Now each of them had a metal club of roughly equal length.

"I knew you liked me!" Ardrame said happily, then rushed towards her.

Min was almost caught by surprise at how fast the green assassin was. She took a nasty knock to one shoulder before parrying a vicious series of strikes with an ease that surprised her. She had mostly avoided using melee weapons since starting work for the Family, and Ardrame was obviously skilled at it; it was odd that she was doing so well. Reflexively she countered one set of thrusts with a riposte that took the other woman in the chest, drawing a shrill squeal of pain.

"That's it! Like that!" Ardrame's voice was mad, gleeful, breathy. "Hurt me like that!"

The sheer madness of the woman made her hesitate, and she nearly took a beating as a result. Instead, though, she parried the attacks without thinking about it.

Shii-Cho! she suddenly realized. Kh'veek, the bitch is using Shii-Cho, Form II! What the hell? Where the fuck had she learned-

Ardrame suddenly made a dash towards where Maradelle was struggling, and Min had to leap to intercept, driving the assassin back with a series of quick blows.

Hissing in frustration, Ardrame's dark pools stared at her. Then the other woman took a quick couple of skips back. "I think we've made a real connection that is the start of a relationship between women, like in holovids about meaningful friendship and maybe fisting but if you just want to be friends that's cool too. This whole killing people thing is lonely and not very fulfilling and I never get to talk to anyone really. So this is nice. Anyway, here is a symbol of our eternal

sisterhood!" Her free hand plucked a candy bar from her coverall and tossed it to Min's feet. "I was going to eat that, but I'm giving it to you!"

Min took a step back suspiciously, raising her club, and Ardrame giggled. "Here's another!" Her hand dipped into a pocket, pulled free a grenade, yanked the pin, leaned back to throw.

Blaster fire echoed from behind Min. Ardrame took a bolt on one shoulder, dropped the grenade, stumbled left. "But I'm STILL A VIRGIN!" she wailed, then tumbled screaming into the black.

The grenade exploded. Min dropped the club and dove to grab hold of Maradelle as the catwalk was broken in two, both halves sagging downward. She grabbed the Devaronian's arm like a vise and clawed hold of the catwalk with the other, trying to keep from sliding down.

"Don't let go," Maradelle gasped. "Please!"

"I won't, just hold on!" Min scrambled for purchase on the catwalk half. "I need to brace myself before I can try pulling you up."

With an effort, she managed to get into a position where she could haul Maradelle up over the edge without sliding down herself. The Devaronian enforcer squirmed over the side into her arms, and the two lay there for a second, catching their breath.

"Thank you," Maradelle said with effort, voice shaky. "She told me what she was going to do to me. She told me as if she expected me to be happy about it." Her eyes were a bit wild and almost pathetically grateful, in a way wholly out of character with the person Min had come to know. "I know I'm not a saint myself, but she was..." Maradelle shuddered. "Thank you."

"Uh, sure," Min mumbled awkwardly. "No problem."

A cable tumbled down next to them. "Get your asses up here before this bridge breaks," Chrobbtuit called down. "I've got the other end secured."

Slowly the two scaled up the broken catwalk, Min helping the still shaky Maradelle, until they crested the top. The policewoman looked down at them irritably. "Civilians!"

"Thanks for the assist," Min said, getting to her feet. "I owe you one."

"Just doing my job." Chrobbtuit stared moodily out into the chasm. "Damnit! I wanted that bitch in a cell!"

"Well, this'll just save the state the cost of an execution," Min replied. "Let's get back to the control room."

The surviving members of the group were there when they entered. Sloan looked up in deep relief as they entered. "You get her?"

"Yeah. The cop shot her." Min shrugged. "Just in time, too, because I wasn't doing so good."

"Thank you, Gracia," Sloan said to Chrobttuit. The officer nodded, gave him a half smile, then sat down in a corner.

"How's Tiggy doing?" Min asked.

"Well, the bad news is there's gonna be a quake," Sloan replied. "The good news is it's only going to be about 2.2 or so. So a few windows may rattle but nobody's going to die."

The comlink crackled. "Kiden. Got some good news. The second police transport seems to have crash-landed fairly successfully, and the cops on board set out on foot, then commandeered a speedertruck at a farm. They're going to be here in ten minutes to help secure the site."

Chrobttuit looked up gratefully. "Good. I was afraid I was going to be the only survivor."

Min sat down next to Sloan. "You okay?"

"Yeah. Ms. Kren gave me some first aid. You?"

"Yeah. Sore shoulder." She sighed. "What a fucking week."

He squeezed her hand, and the two leaned against each other. Around them, uncaring, the power station shook and quivered as the pistons deep below did their job in the planet's crust.

The sudden cloak of darkness gave way to light, light so suddenly bright it made her eyes blink and squint. Fresh air scented with green and growing things blew past her nostrils, and she instantly realized she wasn't wearing her helmet. Or her previous clothing; instead she was in an archaic, fancy costume of sorts.

Inmedua was standing in a bright, sunlit formal garden. It was laid down on a temperate plain, with a ridge of rolling hills in the background and a wide, slow-moving river to one side. Small sailboats and swan-like birds glided across it, and she could see humans in strange garb strolling along the banks. A great manor house of primitive wood and brick construction lay at one end.

Up here, in the garden itself, flowers of all colors grew alongside shrubs and tall stands of herbs. The paths between the beds were lined with crushed white quartz, and men and women in well-tailored clothing of a sort literal ages out of date walked to and fro, enjoying the sun and the blooms.

As if drawn by a magnet, she turned and walked towards the gurgling, musical fountain in the center. There was no statue there now, just the play of leaping water. Standing beside it was a woman in a long, jeweled white dress with white gloves, and a small but fancy hat, accepting a paper scroll from the hands of a bowing man in dark clothing. She took it, opened it, read for a second, then closed it and turned to Inmedua. With a smile, she beckoned the Youngling closer.

Calmly, taking things at face value, Inmedua approached. "You're the woman from the statue," she said. "And this is the garden, before there was a city."

"Oh, there's still a city," the woman said with amusement. "It's just two miles to the north, and I believe the tallest structure in it is no more than four stories."

Inmedua looked around, breathing in the air, unused to smelling something so... natural. Bees hummed in the bushes. "Who are you?"

"My name is Lady Coruscant." Inmedua's eyes widened, and the woman laughed. "There were a lot of us and they didn't just name the city after me. It's not entirely clear to me whether my name came first or the city's did. It's been a long time."

"I don't understand." She looked around. "Why am I here?"

"Because this, and myself, is where it begins." The woman held up the scroll. "It looks peaceful here, doesn't it? But this is a time of turmoil, child. The Force is starting to be understood, in a rudimentary way. Tensions are forming between those who are seeking to understand the light path, and those who prefer the dark. And both are spread across the classes and institutions of our society."

"What happens? Is there a war?"

"No, there isn't," Lady Coruscant replied. "I recruited a number of friends and set them to watch and sometimes act. And now and then they'd come for a walk in the garden. A common enough activity." She held up the scroll. "We kept the peace by listening, using a light touch, and being a part of the fabric of life. Not like the scholars and philosophers who shut themselves away in hermitages and only came out to stir up trouble. Some of us had been doing this for some time, but it was in my day that we united in common cause and began to work together."

"But this is long in the past, isn't it?" Inmedua looked around. "I don't even see any evidence of spacecraft in the sky."

"Yes. We're still confined to this world. We haven't met the Jedi yet; they don't exist in this time, I believe. We are simply the Sentinels. We are here before the Jedi, and we will be here when the Jedi are gone."

"The..." Inmedua knew the term, understood it in general terms. "But that's just a sort of Jedi, isn't it?"

"Yes and no. We let ourselves be absorbed. The Jedi have the same end goals that we do, and one can serve both faithfully and without conflict. But we are older, wiser, closer to the Living Force than any regular Jedi could ever hope to be." Lady Coruscant leaned forward intently. "The Sentinel dwells among the people, be they of high status or low, moves through them, knows their worries and joys, speaks their tongue. The Sentinel does not stand aloof behind Jedi robes, never shows their lightsaber or overtly uses the Force save as a last resort. As the Force flows through all beings, so does the Sentinel, a fish in the ocean of society. The land, the people, and we are one."

"This is what this has been about, hasn't it?" Inmedua asked, comprehension finally dawning. "The evaluation."

"Yes. Not many manage to enter the garden. Almost none quite so young." The woman smiled at her. "This isn't quite what you had expected, is it? Not what you'd planned?"

"No." Inmedua sat down next to the fountain. "I always thought of myself as a straightforward sort of Jedi."

"That's fine. You're very young still. And being straightforward, about most things at least, actually helps a Sentinel." The lady placed a hand on her shoulder. "You will do fine, I believe."

Inmedua glanced over. "Is that it, then? It's just... decided?"

"You always have a choice, Inmedua Shorereach, on how you walk your path. But you can't always choose what path you are set on. Just how you choose to walk it." The woman's face was hard but sympathetic. "It is the will of the Force that you be one of us."

Inmedua thought about this for several seconds, then bowed as gracefully as she could manage. "I will do my best, Lady Coruscant."

"I know. Just remember, child. When the great winds come, the noble and the foolish stand and strive against them, tall and proud, and are blown down without accomplishing anything. But the animals closest to the land go to ground, burrowing among roots and bushes until the storm has passed, and then they rebuild their nests. The Sentinels are the oldest of the old, and we are

one with the people and the land and the Living Force. We were here before the Jedi. We will be here when they are gone. While there is life, we endure. There is no death. There is the Force."

Inmedua looked at her, and suddenly she beheld not a woman in a fancy archaic dress, but something entirely beyond her comprehension, a being that was not a being at all, but many, reflected in one, and one of the reflections was herself...

"Give Skellig my regards," Lady Coruscant's voice said, and then suddenly all was dark again. She was standing where she had been, helmet on her head in the squalid blackness of Level 0, with Skellig still gazing at her expectantly.

Slowly, Inmedua took a deep breath in the stale, sterile air of the helmet. "Lady Coruscant sends you her regards," she said quietly, uncertain.

Skellig's eyes widened, and then his face broke out in an honest smile. "Welcome to the club, Shorereach."

"Thank you." She looked about and shivered. "Can we go now? Please? Seeing what this place was makes it even more horrible."

"It was beautiful, wasn't it?" Skellig answered wistfully. "Sometimes when you progress, you lose things." He glanced at the statue. "But some things refuse to be lost, stubbornly."

Turning, they walked away, leaving the block of white marble sightlessly watching the barren garden with chipped stone eyes.

Min leaned back in her chair, coughing, and set the hot wine down. Geritte laughed. "You used to be able to do that without the sputtering. You're getting soft, girl."

"Yeah, yeah." It was mid-morning in the bakery, but Ms. Kren had put a Closed sign in the window. "I know."

"Well, after the week you've had, I don't blame you." The old Separatist took a bite of a roll. "Your young man going to be okay?"

"Jirik? Yeah, he's fine. Just a bit of minor surgery with our medical droid. Better than poor Gormal. Or that cop, Greff." She grimaced. "I feel sort of bad in a confused sort of way. The guy was a corrupt asshole, but he saved my life. Took that riot blaster's charge for me."

"It happens." Geritte shrugged. "I had a couple people who were absolute sentient garbage of the worst order sacrifice themselves to save the rest of us during the war. Bad people sometimes do heroic things for reasons even they aren't sure of. And vice versa."

"Yeah. I guess." Min bit into a pastry, chewed a bit, swallowed. "You going to be okay? I mean, with the larger Separatist movement, when they put two and two together and find out what you did?"

Geritte laughed. "Girl, they already know and I'm a heroine. Do you know what would have happened if Ardrane had succeeded and leveled the city? Kh'veek! Any support from Celanon and this sector would have dried up like a tear in the desert. Public opinion would have been immediate and savage. The Empire would have had a field day." She laughed. "The group that hired her has disavowed her actions and put a bounty on her head, which seems sort of useless to me given she's dead."

"Uh... about that." Min squirmed uncomfortably. "They went to retrieve the body from down the shaft. It couldn't be found. Also, when they went to raid her ship, it was gone."

Geritte stared, then buried her face in her palm. "Oh, for..."

"They've got posters with her description and a reward on them all over the city," Min said unhappily. "And there's a huge bounty out as well. She's not going to be able to just come back to this sector without a mob of people trying to collect and every law enforcement officer around eager to run her in. She did kill herself a lot of cops. Anyway, the visit is over, pretty much."

"About time." Somehow the city hadn't exploded. A lot of Nalroni had wound up dead, though, including the ones who had run the restaurant Min and Sloan had eaten in the night this had started.

"Yeah." Min sighed. "I hear Turgid's going to crack down hard on the holdout funding."

"Yeah. Well, D'Asta and his security detail scared him, and the green freak's plan nearly going off scared him even more." Geritte snorted. "There's a definite cooling in the opinion of the holdouts in planetary government."

"At least they're going." Min sighed and stood. "Well, on the bright side, I did something really positive at least once in my life. And Maradelle's decided she wants to be friends with me, which is nice."

"You need to make friends who aren't criminals," Geritte chided.

"I'm a criminal," Min protested.

"A terrible one." Laughing, Geritte stood and gave her a warm hug. "Off already?"

"Yeah. Got a job this afternoon." Min hugged the older woman back, then broke away and walked out the door. "See you around, Geritte."

"Watch your back, my girl."

It was cold, grey, and pissing rain as she stepped out the door into the near-empty street. Most people were staying inside until the Imperials left. Yet, looking around, Min saw no stormtroopers anywhere for the first time in days.

Hatless, she walked slowly into the center of the street, wet hair blowing in the cold wind, and took out a cigarillo. Cupping her lighter between two hands to keep the flame from blowing out, she bent her head to light it, and stood there, gazing up at the grey wedge hanging in the sky. The end of her tabac glowed like a red ember, smoke trickling from her mouth.

With a banshee wail, two TIEs roared up from behind her, flying low. Min stood and smoked as they passed directly along the course of the street, just above roof level, the backwash from their passage splashing her legs and coat with water from the puddles of the street. They sailed up the ridge as she watched, then banked sharply up, and disappeared into the Star Destroyer's hanger.

Several more pairs from around the city followed, as Min shook the water from her coat with one hand and watched, unmoving. When the sky was clear of all but the massive capital ship, the sublight engines on the back flared, and it slowly began to move upwards.

Min's green eyes watched it as it rose up into the rainclouds. On the ridge, every bell in the cathedrals began to toll, the iron peals washing over the city through the curtains of rain. They rang and rang as the great ship rose into the storm and the rain and slowly vanished, leaving behind only a cruel grey sky frowning down on a tired, beaten city.

She stood alone in the center of the road and watched the clouds for almost a minute, face unreadable. Then she took the cigarillo end from her lips, bent it, and dropped it to the ground. Her booted foot crushed it out in a puddle. Stuffing her hands deep in her coat pockets, shoulders slightly bowed against the weather, she slowly ambled off down the street.

An urchin girl emerged from the alley behind the bakery, looking up in relief at the empty sky, woken by the sound of the bells. Then she glanced curiously down the street. The small woman in the black coat didn't turn, walked on with her hair streaming and her hands balled into fists in her pockets, finally vanished into the grey sheets of rain. The urchin watched her go, ears still filled with the sound of the iron bells.

