

Nothing but a Job

Rating: R for sex, drugs and violence.

Summary: How Darth Sidious by proxy of his apprentice Darth Maul and a female trooper learned about the clone-creators of Kamino and claimed the heritage of his master Darth Plagueis who was murdered by him.

Timeline: Before TPM, because to grow clones for ROTS need some time. Featuring the Darth Maul between the fanfic "Urban Legends and other Oddities" (part of "Page 51") and Dark Horse's comic "Star Wars: Darth Maul" (published from September to December 2000).

Sources: TPM, CW, the comic "Star Wars: Darth Maul" and the Wookieepedia – as well as the air of the American crime stories of the 30thies and 40thies.

Acknowledgement: I bow to the superior power of my beta-reading master Dark Lady. Also I should not forget to mention the Wookipedia, which is as handy as a Sith Holocrone when it comes to all those little details important in the Star Wars universe.

Feedback to: saphsaq at lycos dotty com

Chapter 1

When the gate keeper droid of the grocery store asked me if I'd liked to go with assisted shopping, I answered its question ready for recording with an clear and articulated "No". A pointless habit every time I dropped in, because some sloppy engineer had forgotten to provide the gate keeper with the customer database to remember a shopper's preferences. Or perhaps it was not forgetfulness, but the store owners didn't expect people to show up more than once.

However, since the rest of the business was conducted in an equally lackadaisical manner as the entrance service, it was easy to outmanoeuvre the machines which posed for shop assistants, but were close to the end of their life-cycles. When my ears caught the approaching creak of badly kept artificial joints, I pushed the shopping trolley in a couple of sharp right and left turns around the next corners and had steered free of the nuisance. Or so I thought...

"Hello Lady! I'm your assistant and at your service as long as you stay. Shopping spree or day-long tour --- it's up to you," I heard spoken in an hoarse yet alluring voice. The lines were delivered with a most cheeky grin on a set of mottled teeth by a humanoid male which had suddenly sprung up on me like a flash out of clear sky. A fair-skinned, muscular flash with a ring of ten little, vestigial horns on a bald head. Bald by choice, not by age I should add. His oval face with the small and firm chin, the tight-lipped mouth, the long yet not protruding nose and the button-round eyes was wrinkle-free as a shirt fresh from the pressing-service. Stunned I let go my trolley when he - like it was the proper duty for the shopping assistant - took it with a sure grip and reeled off the standard questionnaire to learn what I might desire from this pedlars-den of tacky fare.

"I do not have many credits to spend," I growled to interrupt his babbling about the latest 'bargain' or 'special offers' and the 'sale of the season'.

He broke up in the middle of a word. Then, closing his mouth very carefully, he let his eyes travel slowly up and down me. Finished with that he drawled: "Certainly not, Ma'am." Of course a jaded looking woman in boots, military fatigues, and a loosely fitting tunic does not impress. That all pieces were of an indiscriminate grey didn't help either. For a moment I regretted not to have added at least a carmine vest or a scarf of light-blue to dress up the ensemble. Then I felt angry.

As if pleased with that reaction the shop assistant suddenly put up a conspicuous grin and said: "A man has to do his job, has he not?"

Instead of giving in to my desire and tell this boy to shut up and get lost, I giggled girlishly and pushed softly the trolley to indicate that I wished to continue shopping. I really can't explain why! Perhaps because I thought my shopping list was protection enough against overspending? Or perhaps because my companion was a nice diversion from the usual crop? He **was** special. Of Iridonian descent, young and pretty, yet with such folks natural arrogance already shaped by Coruscant's sophistication into something you could not stand. Not that his features bore the mark of deep thoughts! His commanding tone probably didn't originate from an towering and versatile brain, but it matched well the tall and nimble frame. That lad moved gracefully even when he only laid a box of insta-water into your shopping cart! As he bent over, the shirt of his uniform slipped and revealed a few fingers breadth of red and black tattoo on his yellowish skin.

"What's the matter?" He sneered, dropping once again from the role of the demure shopper's companion.

Dark Side knows how he became aware of my prying gaze! Zabrax sport no eyes on their back, do they? But like he was hit with a whip he had snapped to attention. "Wonder why you're here," I said and tried to outdo the toothy smile he had worn before with my own. "Does the shop need protection? You would make a nice bouncer at a bar ---"

He didn't take the bait - no muscle twitched in his clear-cut face. "Believe it or not, but the owners think sex sells."

Blunt enough to let even me understand! Well, I wouldn't press the matter further - Black Sun, Bando Gora, Exchange... There is a great many gang members out there in the megacities of the Republic, keeping a low profile after a job until it's all quiet again. The younger, the more expendable. But who am I to pity a henchman? Even if he was a hunk of a Zabrax.

To get the ball rolling again, I addressed a more harmless topic: "Know if they will add the new ceiling at least this year?" That grocery store had been built in an old hangar which was higher than wide. So high that, now and then, in its special micro-climate, drizzling clouds accumulated under the ceiling. To fix that, the room should become horizontally split, everyone interested could read a discoloured notice nailed above the entrance.

"Nay, they ain't in no hurry. Nobody tried to force me to live entirely on customers tips," responded my companion with a shrug but then was well behaved again. He even elaborated, noticing my puzzled look: "They will cut salaries to rake in the credits for paying the construction costs."

"Oh? Thought with such a business it would be easy to rise a decent mortgage."

The guy tilted his head backwards to eye the enormous space which was left empty despite the high rising shelves: "Yeah, it would double the shop floor. Worth some investment indeed. But," he gave me another conspicuous grin, "eventually it all hinges on our honourable customers. Mind if I show you --- Where are ---? Ah, just around the corner! We have some really hot sales ---"

"Naaaa," I laughed, "finish! Enough for today."

Proceeding slowly to the check out, much to our mutual amusement he made a point in sticking to this docile shop assistant role. A lad with the body of a prize fighter – bowing repeatedly,

applauding each of your whims, being soft-spoken through and through. It was great. But at the end he stunned me a second time. Instead of vanishing into the bowels of the store before I made the arrangements for paying and delivering, he waited barely out of earshot. When I turned and gave him an ironic: "A last bargain to offer, eh?", he pushed his hand toward me and said in a throaty whisper: "My name is Maul, and I'm from," here he opened his sharp eyes wide and shook his horn crowned head a bit in a slight, funny embarrassed way, "Iridonia as you can see. I enjoyed this today. Hope you did too."

"Longpress Kahuna. My pleasure." I took his hand. He had the dry and strong grip of a capable man.

Once out of the grocery store I cursed. When you belong to the flock, you go by the identity of the flock, not by your name! It's all failure when it goes by 'me'.

To complete my bad luck I discovered the airspeeder was not in the parking lot. I had wheeled it from another parking lot not a day before, so it would have done its job for several hours still. Coursecant Security doesn't consider a speeder stolen within 48 standard hours. They believe rather that you have forgotten where you left it. But regardless of the custom of the police, my mode of transport was gone and I had to find me another one without much ado. Plus the evening would go by with me hiding my traces, with checking the Holonet if the vanished speeder was taken for a joyride or towed by official forces. Such would be my next occupation, such instead of some blissful time in a thread mill. Oh well, when you need a change of plans most!

Chapter 2

Without the consolidation laying in a good workout and a nice shot of spice coming with it, I entered the 'Bantha Village' in the lower level of the Uscru District. Our meeting was set on the huge balcony of the food-court which hung like a constant threat of treat over the zillion of people milling about the shops and entertainment in the building. This piece of Coruscant's Underlevels had seen better times. As did I... It had been a long way from the breeding tanks, where the batch had its full number and life meant learning and not surviving. When I recognized the familiar features of Longshot and Oblong at the far end of a table, I felt a pang of guilt for my last thoughts. I closed the distance fast and sat down.

It was Longways who turned first to me: "Longrun is gone."

Her face – brown and round like mine - was more pasty than the last time we've seen each other. Also her compact frame had made a distinctive nod to the stumpy side. Yet her arms, ending in a pair of restless opening and closing hands, were still brawny. How long had it been? A quarter of a year? A half? Anyway long enough to let the side-effects of the growth-accelerators kick in more visibly. "Your hair is now thin like mine," I said.

Longways flashed me large, yellow teeth in a sneer.

I felt a hand heavily on my shoulder. I didn't need to look up. Longshot had moved swiftly and silent down from the end of the table. "Greetings Longpress. You're the last one for today."

"Tomorrow also Longrun won't show up," snapped Longways.

Longshot pulled a seat from under the table with his foot and sat down - hand still on my shoulder - before he answered: "It's not only Longrun. He led a commando of ten. But we don't know all details of the incident yet."

"Rest assured, I will find out," Longways did again only bare her teeth.

"**We** will," Longshot's fingers gave my shoulder a last squeeze before he hold his open palm to Longways. This motion was as even as his voice and his face, yet the maze of fine lines around his eyes deepened. The defiance drained from Longways features and I too had no further word to say. There were only twelve of us now... She handed him the menu, which he in turn proffered me: "There, Long. Make your choice now, I'm starving!"

Admirable. At another place, at another time Longshot would have been our commander. His parameters were above average. And I knew, even if I did look as tall and lean as he did, even if I did wear the black curls on my head in rows the same way he did, and not in a crew-cut, I newer could emulate him. However, from the files in the nursery's database which I hacked ages ago, I knew too, that he was flawed. Lacking decisiveness. Especially under pressure. Or something like that... Dunno, perhaps that had turned the scale for us, perhaps because of that our batch had been discarded.

My finger zigzagged slowly over the grimy menu sheet which offered stuff compatible rather with small purses than big stomachs.

"Starving?!" A joyous voice squeaked in my back: "Starving? The little eating Longpress needs, she can drink!" It was Daylong. The skin at his haggard frame had managed to become several degrees more dark-brown despite the fact its sagging must have put a lot of surplus square-inches to it. Once he had spotted me, Longtime, Longlist and Long-Long chimed in:

"Speaking of starving, why do we have to come here again and again? They got only five vegetarian dishes on the menu."

"Long, dear, your spoiled little belly ---"

"Hey, hey! All eyes on the line! On the waist line."

Amidst that friendly banter I eventually made my choice – fast of course, because if one was hungry we all were hungry – to recline and stay mute in my seat. What remained of my brothers and sisters was still a merry bunch, so my contribution to cheap jokes was not desperately needed. Across the table, A-Long and B-Long were big mouthing about some task they were up to do. That they refused to give details didn't made me wonder. There are times, when to get up in the morning could pass for an assignment. But today we would celebrate, job or not.

At a neighbouring table another meeting took place. The fact it was a family I gathered from their looks. Their behaviour didn't allow such ideas. Nevertheless it stroke me as mirror-wise. Like at our table... All of the same make. All with the same face. All being the same. Clones... Clones my ass! Despite the eerie similarity, which would sooner or later tick off our waiter, there was not a single character of us the same. Yet we were 100% interchangeable.

The solitaire at the family-table was a girl, very small and very bored. Listless she was sitting half turned away from her obnoxious siblings. I tried to make eye contact, to tell her, she was not alone with that problem. Or just to provoke a reaction. But she looked back without seeing me.

While I still wondered what might occupy her mind so strongly, I noticed a movement from the corner of my eyes - a flowing and billowing of coarse fabric in earthy colours. When I turned and bend forward to get the view in full, I saw three Jedi in a doorway at the bottom of the mall. Like a group of trees they stood close together and were scanning intently for something or someone. Then I noticed another movement. The girl sat upright, her eyes shining.

The connection was immediately clear – Longshot, at my side, clicked his tongue. Daylong fingered for his purse and gestured the waiter. Longwise and two more pushed their chairs back. In small groups we ambled casually but fast out of the Bantha Village's upper level, Longhand and Longrange making the rear guard. Our table was already occupied by new parties before the Jedi did arrive at the family, to take their prospective Padawan.

I have to admit, that the rest of the meeting left in a blur for me. Probably the beverage part of the menu in more than one of the tavernas we visited after that hasty retreat had found grace in the eyes of Longtime. And probably Longways as usual had succeeded in talking us into drinking too much. I only remember Longwise on our way back home – since we had more or less the same way, we shared a cab – demanding from the Bith driver a handwritten receipt and the folding of it into a paper plane.

“Long,” she mused playing around with the fragile thing, “Longpress, I will get me an assignment. Yes, I might.” Her fingers sharpened slowly a fold. Again and again and again, until it broke. “But I don't like it. We should go by the flock, we're not lone fighters.”

“Yeah,” I said, “like in olden times.”

Chapter 3

I don't know how I happened to hear again so soon the question of the gate-keeper droid: “Assisted shopping?” Well, probably I did know it all too well. “Assisted shopping?” The droid repeated its question, patient as only a machine can be. Still I did not say a word, but craned my neck. When I spotted Maul the Iridonian at the end of an aisle, I nodded: “Yes.”

He had noticed me too and moved up so fast, the gate-keeper hadn't finished its final greeting lines, when we were past two corners. This time the boy skipped immediately the whole demure shop assistant attitude: “Same stuff as last time?” Wondering if he really would remember every bit I bought in the past, I accepted this digression from my latest shopping list. Mute he pushed the trolley though the market, blindly throwing in item after item until I had to interrupt: “No!”

Unwillingly he halted, showing me only his beautiful profile.

“It's enough. That's all I need. Except ---”

Suddenly he resumed and interrupted me with his toothy and conspicuous grin: “Have you ever eaten meat?”

“Flesh? Lifeforms?” I omitted the 'sentient', since that was always the possibility if you sunk your teeth into a piece of meat.

Ignoring my hesitation Maul turned at his heels, and off he was toward a special shelf keeping me in tow, despite my reluctance.

This part of the shop was completely deserted. Reddish tinted light from indirect sources gave the displays a strange living complexion. Yet the temperature was distinctly deeper than in the rest of the shop.

Once there, my companion did not hurry to present me the unavoidable 'special offers'. He looked at me with a deadpan mug for a while, before he began: "You maybe can figure out what I am ---"

"Yeah, but I won't ask or tell. Otherwise you have to kill me. Right?"

My ironical remark rose a raucous but good-natured laughter from him: "Smarty pants, eh?"

"Kind of."

"I need a secure spot for a few days. Can you help me by chance?"

Poor lad. Still arrogant and still demanding. But if your boss will or can not provide you with a hideaway it's not a good sign. "Now, if that would be smart?"

Maul's eyes became smaller: "I saw you. You guys moved pretty fast out of the eatery when the Jedi entered. S'pose they didn't even notice you ---"

"So?"

"Hey, I --- I didn't stalk you. I just had some business to do in the Uscru last night. When passing through the Village, I heard laughter, looked up, and lo and behold ---," he tried to explain with a crooked, almost begging smile, his eyes sharp and piercing trimmed on me.

He was lousy at lying. But that made me believing him. Was it really a surprise that he had turned to me? I always had suspected my uniformly batch-mates would be like a beacon for the alert eye. However, should I correct the wrong ideas of a young man about the shady affiliation I might be in? Telling him we're not a gang seeking new members? Well, I'm a woman. And I know my chance when I see it.

Supposing the tacky warehouse we stood in would have spared the audio part of the surveillance I pointed randomly at the shelf: "This one. Give me this one!" With the package in my hands, I bend over the shopping trolley and patted the icy thing as if in the process of deciding. Over that show I muttered to Maul: "I load my coordinates up into the price tag. As long as it is in my trolley the ware flow system will not look for it. At the check out, I'll act as if spontaneously decided against buying. And back it goes to the shelf. At this way back, you can read the data out. Can you?"

"Sure," grunted he.

"It's an budget apartment tower. Thanks to your memory skills I'll need the next 72 standard hours for making a dent into this pile of groceries. But try to use the time between security and cleaning sweeps. Regardless how scarce the latter are," I closed with a chuckle.

The lad didn't need the whole of two solar revolutions to arrive at my door step and buzz the intercom.

"Small but mine. A little sanctuary."

"No, it's great," purred he and pressed me against the wall next to the door. Soon his tongue was in my mouth and his hands where I liked it most. But I pushed Maul away: "Shhh, the neighbours." Despite the fact that my apartment was situated high in the tower and the hallways had scarce footfall but ample light - real light indeed - there was always the feeling of being watched. The people of Coruscant are sitting pretty close to each other.

Well, I have no idea how the housing situation at Iridonia is, but judged from Maul's behaviour they couldn't have big, jam packed cities - or they simply didn't care. He let me barely close the window blends before he was naked and all over me.

The real moving in of my new lover was no big affair. After a hot night he disappeared for forty-eight standard hours, then reappeared with two man-sized bags. One containing clothes and stuff, one containing sport utensils and more stuff.

He threw the bags into a corner, sat down onto my couch and glanced over the room as if seeing it the first time and being bound to learn about every inch of it.

Well, there was not much to learn: One room, 20 to 15 foot with a kitchenette in an alcove and a real window. A couch that could sleep two, a wall-high shelf, a bare light bulb from the ceiling, a desk and four folding chairs in a corner.

"That's your favoured spot, smarty pants," Maul said suddenly. He had discovered, that from the couch, you could easily watch through the door of the living room over the tiny antechamber as well as keep an eye on the door to the bathroom and the entrance of the apartment. Yet from the next houses outside the window the couch was not visible. "Yeah," I grinned, "and in case you didn't notice: instead of carpet the floor is dressed with soft-cover. Takes no stains and muffles sounds."

"Oh, I did. Yes, I did," Maul laughed short and sharp and rose from the couch. With a few steps he was at my shelf and started to shove things around. I thought he would make way for the content of his bags, but he seemed just to be nosy. With a finger-flick he activated a data-pad containing my technical drawings: "What is that?"

"The line-out for the central steering unit of a defence squad. It consists of several groups of half-autonomous operating droids with light armament which will swarm attackers in waves. This wave-motion is a wee bit tricky to compute, but I have found it ---"

"Useless." The Zabrak uttered only this word. Its sound however left no space for speculating if he might hold a higher degree in weapon system design than I did.

I shrugged coldly: "My favoured spare-time occupation. And it feeds me and my landlord's bank account sufficiently."

The guy let that pass with an appeasing humming: "I just wanted say, there are other means of combat." He didn't comment further on that or the items he keenly eyed until he opened the

drawer with my goodies. Watching the assortment of ready for use spice, he snorted: "I'll get better stuff for you."

I stepped up, moved his hands away and closed the drawer: "No sweat. That's just the emergency stash. Like the perma-cookies one keeps for unexpected guests."

"Perma-cookies. Me likes," Maul chuckled. "On Iridionia the yarrok is often baked in too, know that?" Then he dragged his bags to the shelf and started to unload them. Probably the feeling he did invade my space made the young Zabrak as talkative as an Toydarian applying for welfare. "I do work out a lot. And yourself?"

"Daily."

Maul gave an approving whistle. "Suits me just fine. And know what? I'm extremely thankful for your help. I'll pay back my debt as soon as this streak of bad luck is over. Promised!"

"Yeah, we'll see to that," I said and engaged in the kitchenette with brewing a snack. I let water fill a skillet up to the nick I had hacked into its smooth, silvery inner face. While I opened a package of all-purpose self-baking flour, the water heated. A drop of oil and a pinch of salt later it was ready for reaction and I just had to contemplate what to serve with the bread. Of course the boy would for a long time fully depend on me. With the well tailored black breeches and tunic he wore now, he did look definitely better than in the flimsy shop assistant's uniform. But that he didn't bring a single piece of it with him meant, he had quit his job.

After a short while Maul appeared at my side in the kitchenette: "Mind if I call you Kahuna?"

I hesitated, but said: "Nope."

"Yeah, I mean, Longpress or - Long. That's so silly, isn't it?"

"Is it?"

Maul made a slight gesture and a piece of bread from the plate I was arranging flew into his hand: "Are you Mando?"

Impressive. But I didn't even flinch: "And you're of the Jedi."

"I'm what?!" Growled Maul, "I'm ---? Oh, --- oh, of course --- because of that ---," He let the bread orbiting around his stretched out forefinger. Then he rasped a sharp laugh: "No smarty pants, I'm not one of those weaklings."

With faux solemnity I responded: "That's good. A big, tattooed guy like you who is not a bouncer and dislikes war-machines - honestly, I was more than half convinced you might be sprung right from the Temple." I didn't tell him, that one who dabbled with witch-craft, regardless if dark or light, seemed a good deal better compared to my last lover, who had been a Chiss and a gambler. Not that one naturally must beget the other, yet my ex was and went to pay for that eventually as serf to the mines of Kessel.

The young Zabrak nodded proudly: "Yeah, I have power over the Force! And you, you're human, are you not? But Mandalorian, because when I saw your pals moving --- hey, they were not of the square folks. Like one man, like one body. It reminded me of military ops!"

Force, that was a close miss. "Mando, yes."

His eyes were brightly fixed at me. "So you're Coruscant native?"

"No," I responded, but regretted it immediately, because Maul - levitating some more bread from the plate - continued with poking: "But your bunch appeared like all from the same village. I mean, you look like all of the same family like the Yawas do."

Well, somehow he had got me that far, I gave a damn to the nicely crafted story of a solo-journey I had so often fed immigration or any other offices. "We belong together. We're mercenaries, kind of. From Kamino."

"Kamino? Can't remember to have heard that in a song yet ---"

Certainly he could not. The gangsters' songs, lauding their home-bases, did not know of a lil' Wild Space planet inhabited by a folk with a penchant for cloning. Yet it wasn't my job to enlighten him about that. I let the corners of my mouth meet my ears: "We like to go in stealth mode."

Apparently impressed Maul nodded. "I would be happy to become accepted by your cousins."

"We will see to that."

Chapter 4

With approaching Festival Weeks I still had to 'see to that'. Because we had each other and couldn't get enough of us, I had not wasted a single thought about contacting my batch-mates. I also missed some deadlines for my technical stuff, which reduced the stream of republic dataries into my bank account to a trickle.

It was one day, when I counted and recounted the credits in the vain hope to find a number higher than I knew already, that my lover stopped abruptly in the middle of a series of sit-ups and yanked a small device from his hip pocket. The bluish light of a holo-transmission bloomed on his palm.

"Boss aches for you," I suggested jocularly.

He nodded, eyes glued to the figure in the transmission, from time to time barking in what I supposed was his native tongue. Eventually he grinned. Handing me the messenger, he remarked with satisfaction: "Something in for you too. As I said, I'll pay back my debts."

When the hologram cast its pale shine on me I had an odd feeling of isolation. 't wasn't true, 'cause my lover still kept his place and had resumed with the sit-ups. But 'u know... it was a thing just between me and the hologram. Like a meeting in a glasshouse. A blaster-, water-, and what not else -proof glasshouse. Now, the source of all this intimidation was an amiable human. "Ma'am, I'm delighted to make your acquaintance. My young friend told me a lot about you - only the best of course. And I might happen to have a task for you."

The meeting was set on a pouch of the eastern sky-way around the 'Grain Paper' shopping mall. Just in the middle of the Glitannai Esplanade, it was a place for vintage media and related stuff,

with some posh eateries thrown in for good measure. A magnet for Coruscant's intelligentsia and glitterati. Or people who longed to be either this or that. For my obscurity, any crowded public place is as good as this one, however, my lover's boss obviously didn't like to go very low.

When I noticed him eventually amongst the throngs of idlers, I corrected the didn't to a wouldn't. A middle aged, middle sized man yet with a fresher look than the average Coruscantian, dressed in a plain but costly garb which wore the label 'robe' with proud dignity. His face, dominated by a pointed nose, a puff of carefully dishevelled red hair and a benevolent smile, did put a decent equilibrium to that dignity. And he had class! No surplus motion when I was recognised, no staring or flinching. Moreover, he didn't over act when he turned to an aide, handed his purchases and said the lines my lover had told me the password would be.

As the aide vanished into the mass of people I dropped a book – 'Successful Moisture Farming in Desert Climates' – and, in a proper fit of clumsiness, let follow a stack of datadiscs.

"Moisture farming!" Exclaimed my contact when he knelt down to help me with my stuff, "you're either from Tatooine or planning to migrate!"

"The later one," I answered with the other half of the pass phrase.

Genuine amazement showed up in his face and I noticed he had very light and blue eyes: " Now that is interesting. Mind if we have a word?"

"I don't know --- I'm short on time. But if we could here ---," more and more I became confident with my role when the script neared its end. I began even to consider the slightly revealing dress I wore because of Maul's suggestion as absolutely appropriate for this stage show.

"Oh, I understand. Of course! Let's take a seat --- over there," with an surprisingly firm grip the man steered me to an empty bench where he was suddenly all business.

"My greetings trooper." He sketched a bow and glanced casually over my boobs. "As I said in our holo communication, my Hand told me a lot about you. It's only fair, I tell you something about myself: My name is Palpatine of Naboo and I'm member of the Chommell sector delegation to the Republic's Senate. In this affiliation I'm 'External Negotiator' which is also known as 'Head of Communication for Interplanetary Affairs'." Abruptly he raised his hands with a chuckle: "Sounds mighty important, hu? But I'm just an old politician who likes to talk."

"You are not old." The moment I had said so, I bit my lip. He was fishing for compliments and I fell for it! To fuel my anger, Palpatine was not above to squish my hand thankfully for my response.

"Well, some of the issues I have to care for are of a rather --- err --- special kind." If he was embarrassed, it didn't show much. He had put his hands flat and leisurely on his knees.

"Odd jobs," I nodded understanding.

"Odd jobs," he repeated with a relieved sigh. But his hands laid still flat on his knees.

To short-cut this affair I summed up: "And usually Maul is doing them for you. But now something bigger has coming around and suddenly you need more than one man. What's the matter?"

"I need an heiress," he said, tilting his head gamely to the left.

"An heiress?!"

"An heiress," he confirmed at my incredulous question with a kind of light-hearted earnest. "An heiress travelling interstellar with her bodyguard."

I was taken aback and probably it showed on my face: "Excuse me Sir, but do I look to you like one of those wealthy ---?"

"That is the key-word my dear Lady," he interrupted me with a smile which reached not quite his eyes, "wealth!"

I can't stand people who fancy odd jobs with frills just for the drama - I felt a chill running down my spine. Yet I ignored it: "Okay. So you pay all the expenses to bring me into ship-shape and Kuat-fashion. Then you put me and your tail into a big boat to let us play golden girl and companion. And then? I mean, for what ---?"

His smile deepened and he said dreamily: "Wealth --- wealth has such a lot of meanings ---" But bracing himself, he addressed me suddenly with a sober voice: "You two fly to Muunilinst. There you'll open a bank account. By that you'll get close to the man who runs this bank. Very close. So close, one day you will decide to withdraw your money for mixing private and business issues. Sooner or later --- and I do," here he shot me a sharp sideways gaze, "prefer sooner. Sooner or later the three of you will have an accident. Exit heiress. Exit bodyguard."

Trying to copy his soberness, I responded: "Can do. What is the name of the bank? And some details of the target's living and circumstances if you please."

"No my dear Lady," Palpatine declined again amused by something funny only he found in his plot, "no my dear Lady, that part of the intelligence is preserved for my Hand. He's also been instructed about the staging of the accident. But," he added, when he saw my furrowed brow, "but, he doesn't know the place - Muunilinst - nor will he have a chance to put his hand on this."

I nearly fainted when I took the cheque of more than ten billion republican credits he presented to me like it was the invitation for some nice but dowdy party. I was so shell shocked about that sheer amount of wealth, I almost lost the words he accompanied his payment with: "I often found it supportive for the accomplishment of a task, that people stick to their part of it. Sharing the burden evenly, so to say. You know the place and have the money, my Hand knows the target and the way to do it."

I held the plastic billet gingerly when he closed his speech: "Well, I suppose you'll like to remain a few moments longer and enjoy the vista while I retire. There will be no other meeting before you two leave, but my Hand will contact me if necessary." He bowed courteously out - a manoeuvre which gave me for a glimpse indeed the feeling of being an heiress. But when his impression waned, two thoughts came to my mind: How damn well this guy knew to get done the things he wanted done, and that I would like to learn, what he had done to secure that he was the only one who came down to help me with dropped book and discs amidst a thick crowd. I folded the billions as small as possible and stuffed them into a sleeve pocket.

Following a sudden impulse, I found me a public com-booth to call up Longwise. The seconds trickled by but no one answered. When I was about to give up, the holographic relief of a face sprung out of the screen. Longshot.

"Hello," he said.

"Hello," I answered, "didn't know you've moved in with Longwise."

"You would know more if you would come more frequently to our meetings. But no, I didn't."

"Can I speak to her?"

"You can't. She's dead."

Longshot had spilled all this without much emotion. Yet I felt the reproach for my selfish self. He always was miffed when I did abstain from catching up with the batch for so long. "How --- How so? She told me she had a job coming up."

"Yeah, she got killed in action. Not suicide like A-Long and B-Long seemed to have decided."

If he thought to shake me up with such news, he was wrong. A-Long and B-Long had been spice-heads - the 'evil twins' - even before our batch came to Coruscant. "Something wrong with that?"

"Maybe. With Longwise probably. Its the same like with Longrun - in case you remember ---," Longshot let his last line hanging at a poise. He was a systematic man. He didn't get over my misconduct so fast.

"Shall I come 'round and help you with searching the apartment?"

"Uhm, no. Not now. I just taking a gander at it. I have another task to attend in the next days."

Of course. He feared, that, whatever he would find, he had to make his mind up. "Aye, Commander. I too. Then take care."

Longshot smiled: "Nice dress by the way. Your assignment?"

"Thanks," I'm smiled back, "this is just the beginning."

"Another reason why you shouldn't forget to check in at our next meeting," chuckled Longshot.

"No envy, Long," I winked back at the holo-image. "Over and out?"

He nodded: "I'll contact you as soon as I'm back from my job. And good luck with your own appointment --- however, **take care**. Over and out."

Maul switched immediately from meditation to reception mode when I entered my flat. He added those sessions to his daily workout routine as naturally as taking a steam bath or a sniff of spice or any other muscle relaxant. It was eerie to see him sitting motionless for hours with an forbidding expression on his otherwise beautiful face. But he could shed that state as fast as taking off his trousers. "You're late. Cheating on me?"

I plopped on the couch and shook off my shoes. "Plenty. The last one was the concierge."

"The concierge is a droid, smarty pants," laughed Maul. He threw himself on me, buried a hand into the cleavage of my dress while the other one cradled my head. "My boss couldn't have kept you so long. I got an message from him already."

"Thought it would be nice to call my folks."

"Oh?"

"Yeah. But nobody at home." I interlocked my fingers with Maul's horns, dragging his head down.

"My boss said stuff is set-up. We can come over any time. How long we'll need do you think?" Murmured Maul close to my mouth.

"Two standard hours minimum," I whispered back. Call me stupid, but I thought to make up in advance for the time I would be incapacitated after the surgery.

The beauty surgery took us to 'The Works'. To be precise, not only the beauty surgery but also what the lad called his 'signature'. The intricate black and red tattoos which covered already his whole torso from neck line down to the buttocks should become completed at arms, legs and head.

With the aide of a swoop craft, which Maul had conveniently conjured, the bridging of the long distance between my home and Coruscant's 'Iron Underbelly' was no hassle. We landed on the cargo quay of what seemed to be an abandoned power plant. Or out of order water plant. Or maybe it had manufactured the handles for kitchenette drawers once. Whatever it had been, today nobody needed it.

An oversized mesh basket of an elevator carried us down. There I noticed there was much more life in this carcass of an industrial park than one who never enters it might suspect. Hatches and scuttles we passed with the elevator and later on foot on the ground exhaled buffets of warm, moist air. At some places I heard faint sounds of tinkering.

"No worries with the meat-job. Won't leave you that much alone," said Maul. As if to make up for the forced silence during the flight, he was brimming with words for the rest of our way. "Besides I have to look after our mission transport, I'm ordered to brief you extensively about your part in the task. And I'm a sucker for rehearsals," he flashed me a fast, dirty grin I responded likewise. "You'll not simply open an bank account. You got deep pockets and you'll invest! Or at least act as if. Our target has connections to weapon manufacturing. To pique his interest you should learn a few facts about this issue."

"Really," snorted I.

"It's a wee bit bigger than what you love to doodle in your spare-time," laughed the lad dryly. "We'll make you a member of the House of the Tepasi Barony. Not an important one, but one well off from her inheritance from TaggeCo and --- anyway, since your make-up will need some hours, you'll get a nice shot to support the memorising of what I've prepared." With that he held up a green datacard and a phial with an oily liquid.

"And," he continued, "and, I fed the medics a story: You're the old love of my father - a wealthy Iridonian magnate - which wished to get a face lift to surprise him at his 50th anniversary. I for

myself am the devoted son who is pursuing his own interest by using a part of the money thought for the beauty surgery on his tattoos. Hence the hidden place, hence the hushed staging."

After that confession Maul looked at me with a hard to read expression. Was it pride? Was it embarrassment? I however was baffled: "That's a pretty thick yarn --- you should apply as a journalist for the Holonet!"

"Crap!" The boy could not longer hold back his laughter. "The butchers know nothing. Just what is necessary to do, as I just know how much it will cost. No questions asked, no answers given. There is nothing to fear if the med-team consists only of droids. A droid can delete its memory chip at leisure. Good for the customer."

"Good for the customer," I agreed. With some relieve I joined his mirth.

Eventually arrived at our destination, Maul opened a large rolling shutter. Behind this gate a segment of a huge empty hall with low ceiling was separated by movable screens. Within the screened area sharp, cold, white light shone on a pile of med-stuff. Someone had even cared to spread out an antiseptic rug.

"Welcome, Sir." The chief physician was a stately thing with lots of blinking lights and blinking cutlery mounted on its spotless surface. "Is this our patient? Welcome, Lady. Today everything is here just to serve you." A flash of green lights at its side summoned a lesser droid, which applied an assortment of analysers on me. More of these service machines gravitated toward me, leaving only one for Maul. Well, neither the preliminaries nor the actual realisation of his tattoo job needed many of them to complete: He stripped, the pattern was outlined - then the needles whirred.

Meanwhile the droids had conferred over the first readings from the analysers and the chief physician made an inviting gesture toward an operation table: "Ma'am, please make yourself comfortable." I laid down and the machine got my hand, tapping casually on the back of it to elicit a vein: "Just relax while we work toward your perfection." With that promise a syringe emptied its contents, which resulted in an immediate blackout for me.

From far away I heard a conversation - or maybe it was only the echo of some stray memories in my head... *"What is it?"*

"I said, its interesting. Someone seems to have administered growth-accelerators to her for most of her juvenile and adult live."

"That is interesting?"

"She's younger than judged from her appearance."

"Really? How much?"

"Ten, fifteen years. Maybe more. From where did you say she comes?"

"Kamino."

"Indeed, they have a tradition of genetic engineering. Did you see others like her?"

"No."

"But, it's Kamino you say?"

"Kamino."

Somewhen I drifted out off the blackout. Faint sounds and soft light were around me. I turned my head, and sound and light congealed into an Iridonian stretched out on a bunk while a blinking and beeping machine hovered about him.

"Good job," the young Zabrak said, rising from the operation table and gingerly touching the fresh pattern at his forearm. "Good job." The tattooing droid made some more beeps and whistles, telling, that the pleasure was his, because of the special customer. The twittered eulogy went on while Maul inspected the black and red ornaments on his face in a hand mirror. While I still pondered if I liked the new features of my lover, he had already come to a decision: With a movement so sudden, it was barely visible, Maul shattered the mirror on the optical unit of the droid, then ripped out its steering unit with his other hand.

An unarticulated outcry of disbelieve and agony answered this act of violence. At first I thought it was sparked by the dying currents in the demolished tattooist. But when Maul knocked off two more droids which were in the reach of his feet, I became aware of the chief physician tottering and blinking wildly. It repeated again and again in an ear-breaking high pitched voice: "How could you dare!" Some folks out there in the galaxy think droids have no heart but a lump of iron - well, that is of course nonsense.

Giving me his toothy grin, Maul hissed: "Hurry up, smarty pants!" Not expecting a response, he turned, grabbed the standard-lamp from his bunk's side and swung it in a nice roundhouse toward the approaching formation of droids led by the chief physician.

If it hadn't been for my long training as soldier, I would have tried to figure out first what's going on. But as it was, I just jumped of the operation table and, dragging cords and tubes behind me, aimed for the shutter door. In my back I heard sounds of destruction.

It was a long way and I thanked the Force – dark or light – for the overdosed painkillers the med-droids had fed me. Otherwise I would not have made it for more than ten steps. Nevertheless I must have been slow, because Maul appeared soon at my side. Half shoving, half carrying me, he got to the exit.

Right in front of the heavy door some remaining droids cornered us, humming angrily like a flock of insects. Yet Maul hold suddenly a thermal detonator in his hand. Thankfully we were at the other side of the gate when it exploded.

"Force," I said catching my breath, "if I only had had a blaster in there!" The rush of action and drugs made me giggle. "But what was the issue with the med-team? Did they suddenly ask for more dataries than ---?"

"I'll tell you later," declined Maul, "now come!"

Home! I couldn't agree more: "Yep, lets beat it. However, I'm afraid you have to sleep on the carpet for a few days. Now it comes handy that I knew this Quarren from the 260th floor in my apartment tower. A hasbeen doc. Lost his licence or got never one for Coruscant, but still ---"

Maul interrupted me saying matter of fact: "You won't go back to your flat."

"Oh?" I still did not feel pain, but suddenly I was about to swoon.

Maul grabbed my arm and steadied me: "I mean, I have something better. Much better," he repeated with emphasis, looking intently in my eyes. "We'll go to my ship and I heal up what's left from the surgery."

"Your ship?! You got a ship hidden somewhere? And you asked for shelter like a stone-broke spacer ---" Not that I did mean that accusation too serious.

The lad chuckled: "Didn't I say, boss said, stuff is set up, didn't I? Besides, ever tried to live on a space ship at a public parking lot?"

"Oh well," I laughed and leaned heavily in him, "but for the medical issues I'd definitely like to relay on professional service."

Maul sneered - with his new features a quite impressive grimace, but thankfully my perception was cushioned by nausea. He reached out, cupping my face with gentle hands. It gave an eerie sensation, half burning half freezing, then it was over and my dizziness was gone. The 'Touch of the Force'. You can do everything with that - even smooth out scars remaining from a beauty surgery. "Certain your not of the Jedi?"

The young Zabrak twitched, but laughed out loud: "Dead sure."

Chapter 5

We woke up from a refreshing sleep when a small ray of light groped through the cockpit window of Maul's ship. He had introduced this folding-winged mean little beauty to me as 'Scimitar' after a noisy ride on his speeder bike through a long stretch of underground tunnels in The Works. In-between the echoes of the swoop's humming thrown back at us by the walls, Maul had shouted bits of the next steps of the mission at me: "At my ship you'll find everything, ammo, food concentrate, ornate robes --- we can start within twenty-four standard hours --- but not from here --- first I move the ship to Newport --- it's home of a line which isn't too picky about the cargo --- the Scimitar will become carried by one of their freighters a good distance along the Braxant Run --- from then on we'll have to find our own way ---"

The hatch of the freighter continued spreading open, letting in more light. Eventually we saw the star-decked vastness of space. A sun rolled into the picture, a red dwarf, making the mock-up of a dawn complete. My lover had already powered up the engines and manoeuvred us with great delicacy out. The bulk carrier fell back faster and faster at our larboard. I barely saw the lid of its cargo bay closing before the vessel was swallowed by hyperspace. We were alone in this bright morning. I leaned back in my copilot's chair: "I don't mind to have a proper breakfast."

Maul rummaged in his pouches: "I told the boss that you complained you lacked personal armour. Here is something to cure that." With this Maul didn't kiss me - which would have cured a lot - but produced a dark-brown, thin and foot-long bundle. Stunned I hesitated. Growling at my stupidity he opened with a zippy flick of the wrist a folding fan. "It's made of Rancour leather." Intrigued I let my fingers travel over the dry and sleek surface.

Maul withdraw the fan: "And when you change your grip this way, it's secret comes out!" At the end of each spine of the fan a stiletto-like vibro-blade appeared with ominous whirring.

"Smashing!" I said, "but I still want to have breakfast."

Closing his eyes for a moment, then shaking his horns, the lad unclipped his seat belt and pushed himself slowly with both hands out of the pilot chair. Finally standing erect, he dropped me a datapack into my lap: "You shouldn't bore yourself stiff while I fetch chow."

I noticed the bluish colour of the stack of plastic - coordinates. Eagerly I broke the seal indicating I was the first one to read them and put the pads into the nav comp to calculate the route.

"Is that where we will go to?" I had expected Maul to leave the room, though not heard it. Now he was leaning over me with an devastated look on his face. "Is that the destination?!" The last line he almost yelled.

I stood up and squared my shoulders: "Easy, baby, easy. I don't make mistakes when plotting flight courses."

Maul's backhander was not meant to be serious, but had enough momentum to turn me in a full circle.

The table of controls however stopped me and I came back with the fan ignited. Its vibro-blades grazed the Zabrak's forearm. Two or three drops of blood fell to the ground from the scratch. With an irate snarl he flipped into a fighting crouch. I did likewise. The tattoos on his face had twisted into a blur of hatred and anger where only his eyes shone yellowish out.

Mute we stand there and stared each other down. I don't know what would have been the outcome of this situation, yet it was interrupted by the blaring of the convergence sensor followed by the flash of an explosion right in front of the Scimitar.

Like one the two of us jumped into action. I have to admit though, that Maul was strapped faster in than me. So the first damage and vicinity report I gave with one hand fumbling with my seat belt and the other one clasping the chair's armrest: "Not hit so far, EMP Grenade. Grenades - two, three, four and coming, still no hit - but shields up and running. Attacker is capital ship size, but non-military - probably modified freighter, no signature. Shall I answer with a broad side? They have us close enough I can blow their bridge with some luck."

"Vicinity scanners again, near past," demanded the lad instead.

Obediently I continued reporting: "Dropping carrier entered hyperspace five standard minutes before, attacker exited hyperspace also five standard minutes before --- wait, they came out a moment later, but roughly at the same coordinates," I bend forward to understand the readings of the instruments better, "like, --- like they were trading places?"

Maul growled something unintelligible while still dodging the explosives with great skill.

"What?"

"I said, the 'Braxant Runners' just make a lot of wind."

"Thank the Force I love inclement weather."

The corners of the young Zabrak's mouth twitched. "Then let's see where it blows us." His hands on the steering relaxed. The Scimitar still drifted a bit, yet moments later it shuddered and took a slow but straight course in direction of the other ship.

"Tractor beam," I sneered.

Maul flicked his communicator on and spoke into it: "The pedlars have betrayed us, master."

The tractor beam worked faster than it appeared at first. It seemed to me as if not even a couple of minutes had passed until a wall of grey, pitted metal did cast its shadow over us. In this wall however was a gaping oblong of white light welcoming us like a sarlaac a flock of nerfs and their herders with brains cooked by the desert sun.

Maul put back his hands on the ship's controls, sitting perfectly motionless. Because of the tattooed face it was hard to say if he was brooding over a clever plan or just idling. The only movement I recognised came from a sudden, small deviation on one of the screens before me: "Now we're three ---"

"S-o-o-h?"

"Yes," I confirmed, "ship out of hyperspace. Jedi ambassador shuttle."

A deep, hissing exhale made me turn my head. The lad looked at me, mouth open. In his face had crept a faint smile.

"Distress signal?" I suggested.

The smile became bigger without looking exactly nice. "No distress signal. We're not even here."

Whatever plot his Iridonian brain had hatched, it was certainly not the measures laying at hand: Namely to join forces with the Jedi and after a successful battle use their testimony to strengthen our disguise. I leaned back and folded my arms in front of my breast.

Maul waved his hand: "Get yourself blasters and ammo. There will be some shooting in the pirates' ship before we could deal with the Jedi."

"A real party, not just a meet-and-greet? Then I'll better pay the bathroom a visit too, for peeing and a little eye-liner to make a favourable impression." With that I unclipped my seat-belt and went out of the cockpit.

When I came back, the Scimitar was already settling inside our captors' vessel.

"I marked the positions of the surveillance and lasers within the cargo bay in the close vicinity hologram and switched it to your screens," said Maul quietly without looking up to me. He sounded sober and determined. "Can you make sure they'll be destroyed in five standard minutes from now?"

"Done," I responded without taking the seat, just bending over the copilot's instrument table and adjusting the configuration of the Scimitar's solar ion guns. If the boy had really caught all cannons, it would be a little miracle. But even if it was only half of what was pointing at us, it would be better than nothing.

Maul meanwhile continued: "The Braxant Runners don't need no beaters to search for prey, get me? Besides, they don't have a home-base but a bunch of those flying ones. So they will extort ransom at the spot. After that ---"

Whatever the boy was about to explain in regard of the situation was drowned by an ear-breaking voice which ordered in the accent-less Basic of a protocol droid: "Leave your ship! We mean no harm if you cooperate. Leave your ship and wait five foot from it's hatch." I made sure the blaster as well as my fan-with-blades was not visible under my robe, then left the cockpit with Maul. As we stood in the vast and well-lit space, I wondered a bit if we might rely on my weapons and the Scimitar's only – a fast glance over the Zabrak told me nothing about his.

The room had indeed been a storage unit. And still was one of sorts. Measuring roughly 200 to 300 yards on the ground, it contained besides heaps of various boxes a nice assortment of smaller and middle-sized shuttles. None of them was ready for start or otherwise connected to the ship than with the holding clamps. This orderly display along the walls was meant for potential customers and I felt tempted to guess the lot the Scimitar was booked to join them. The whole hall was overlooked by remotely operated blasters and cameras coming in about 50 feet right out of the wall's casing. They were so cheap bolted in, I had doubts the heavy gantry crane, a piece of the original cargo bay fixture, was still workable.

"Dear guest," there was the voice again. And, as I now understand, it came from powerful speakers somewhere in the ceiling. "Dear guests, as your ship's scanners certainly have told you, we hold you at gun-point. Don't try anything clever. Soon someone will fetch you and bring you to our conference chamber."

Now it was the time for the canons of the Scimitar to speak. Their voice too filled the huge space of the cargo bay – but with a much more desirable effect: shards of duraplast and metal filled the air, turrets falling on the ground like cut off flowers, spilling their content of automated guns, pieces of surveillance were melting under the hot blaster rays. The lad and I found us both crouching under the ramp of our shuttle.

Just the moment that it was silent again, I heard the air-conditioning of the cargo bay kicking in full force. That indicated another ship landing. I felt Maul tugging softly at my sleeve. We crawled from under our shelter.

The approaching ship was of course none other than the Jedi ambassador I had discovered before. It touched down accurately right at our side. From out of it's small cockpit a Jedi master and her Padawan sprung. She was a blue Nautolan with yellow embellishments on her tentacles, he a yellow-green Mirialan with blue tattoos. They complemented each other as nicely as an couple of podrace fans in the colours of their favoured driver.

With hurried steps the two approached us. Leaving courtesies like formal introductions aside as surplus in dangerous situations, the Nautolan master spilled: "I see you made short work of the threads in here. Good work indeed! However, you can now continue your journey as planned before the assault. We will engage with the pirates and bring them to justice."

I smiled and made a bow, but Maul drawled: "Beg to differ. After the eyes and ears of the pirates in this room have been muffled, they will swarm us like scurriers. We can hardly go."

How much he was correct revealed in this moment the main gate to the cargo bay. A detachment of the Braxant Runners stormed in. It was led by a Twi'lek. He wore his lekku 'half-up', the latest fashion yet, which meant the right tentacle forming a neck-warmer while the left

one was hanging down. Not that this helped much. He would always look like the fat and brutal bloke he was.

"Fire and cover!" Hissed Maul now miraculously holding blasters in his hands. We two did the thing almost simultaneously - rolling, kneeling, firing. Yet, I found the long dress made of thick brocade and laden with embroidery very hampering. I glanced to Maul. He had solved that problem with slipping out of his coat and tunic. Where I had cut his forearm was a barely visible line crossing his tattoo. More pirates came in.

The Jedi took their time. Having the advantage of a superior weapon they received the wave standing in the open, deflecting each blaster bolt within their reach. Especially the Padawan showed some skill, even if it was more of the erratic sort. His master however fought from time to time single-handed to place with her other hand a hearty force-push at the most meddlesome of our attackers.

It seemed like an little eternity for me 'til just a quarter of the pirates was downed. Nevertheless the Jedi under the support of our cross fire started a sally. But more pirates poured in. Following a sudden impulse I reconfigured my blaster, took aim and shot bolt after bolt with highest energy at that part of the panel I guessed the gate steering was under.

The duraplast changed first its colour, then it became mobile, flowing, bubbly. I could see the electronic guts but for the blink of an eye before they went off in sparks. The slamming gate stopped the our enemies coming in. I didn't care to reconfigure. I peppered now any target I could catch a glimpse of. I knew it was a waste of energy, but there were probably other doors to the cargo bay, so we had to be fast.

"Good idea with the gate," Maul's warm breath grazed the back of my neck.

"Your smarty pants sincerely," I growled.

"Can you keep me clear for a moment? I have something to do." Without waiting for my acknowledgement the lad rose and left the shelter. Casually like being at an Iridonian fun fair he sauntered into the open and gave me a hard time securing his ass. That idiot just stood there, holding a longish, cylindrical thing of light and dark metal with both hands and watched the Jedi doing their work.

Yet suddenly the one and a half knights seemed wary. Something besides the pirates had caught their attention and taken the rhythm from their sabre ballet. Like drawn by invisible wires the Jedi turned to face the lone tattooed figure.

Three light-sabres clashed in the same moment. At least that was like it appeared to me - I had not seen when the Zabrak had ignited his. He left no doubt he was faster than the Jedi. He used first one side of his double-bladed red sabre to block the Nautolan's attack, just to decapitate her Padawan - for whom to fight man-to-man **and** to dodge blaster rays was too tall a order - with its other side. The Nautolan was almost able to exploit this gap for a successful counter-attack. But just almost.

My companion deactivated his light-sabre with a smug face and jumped back into the cover. He brought a sickeningly thick smell of charred meat with him. "Don't swoon," he said hoarsely, "we're not quite through."

From another gate entered a fresh detachment of Braxant Runners to find out what it was with this disobedient prey. "Fire and retreat!" Ordered the lad having now the double-bladed light-

sabre traded for his two blasters. We broke from our shelter and upped the rate of fire another notch. This trick bought us a decent slot of space and time and we were halfway up the Scimitar's ramp before our attackers could decide to lower their weapons and crowd us seriously.

That came not without a high toll of blood for them, because Maul and I didn't stop to dish out in hard currency. Yet a little Sullustan fancying himself as brave, dashed past my blaster and got close enough for scuffle. Maul seemed to have no feeling of imminent danger, even as the pirate lunged at him. With a hand on the hatch' closing button he simply sneered at the guy - who shrieked and whirled on his heels to run. From the vantage of the Scimitar's ramp I could see him dart panic-stricken through the cargo bay instead going into cover.

Maul shouted to me: "Last order!"

"I don't shoot people in their back."

The lad fired in response just a single bolt, which let the Sullustan slip with a cry and rotate around his axis in a half-circle.

"You're so funny," sneered I when my finger pressed the trigger.

Chapter 6

I was aboard as fast as Maul, strapping in for a kick-start. Clean like a bolt we came off the cargo bay. I saw Maul's grip tighten on the Scimitar's steering. Then a g-shock blew me out of consciousness. Only glimpses later I was back, trying to blink the last remnants of the dark-red veil of anaemia from my eyes. At my side I heard the calm rasp of Maul's voice: "Now you can try your luck with the bridge. And please, make it final." Mechanically I calculated the rate of action, recognising on the screens in front of me the section of the freighter I had at first sight suspected the most vulnerable spot.

The success of my shot - or better Maul's successful manoeuvre to avoid the brunt of the shock-wave - hurled us deep into space and brought me again close to a blackout.

Yet it was all over now. Maul's hands slid from the controls. His eyes were like embers under ashes too thick to shine through. The colourful tattoo could not mask his drained features.

"I'll check the ship. Damage report and stuff --- and compute the route to Muunilinst." With a fast glance I made sure he had heard me - Maul nodded. Despite the things happened at the pirates ship and earlier, I had an odd feeling of pity for him: "It **is** the route. We'll go to Muunilinst. This is the place where your boss is sending us to. I'm sorry if this is not to your liking."

Maul gritted his teeth, yet flatly he said: "It's okay."

I waited if he would spill whatever was the matter with our destination. And he did me the favour...

"My mas --- my boss has awful good connections to Muunilinst. And if we pull our stand there, he will get incredibly powerful."

I shrugged: "Can't see anything bad for a Hand when the boss gets a boost ---"

"You don't know," declined the lad annoyed, "after that it will be almost impossible to overtake him. But I have to."

This statement zeroed my pity-credit for him at once: "Overtake, hu? And you call him 'master', eh? Regardless what little private games you two are running, I think you - we - have other things to worry now."

"They're wiped out. Nothing left," responded Maul softly despite my scoffing.

"There is always a trace left - a broken up communicator message, a piece of metal, a --- whatever. Go figure."

Maul let hang his head but said a bit louder than before: "That doesn't matter. The boss will care."

"So, he'll care you say --- who is this man, this Palpatine? You can't seriously expect he'll cover up two dead Jedi!"

"If it is necessary for the mission ---"

"As necessary as bringing sand to Tatooine. Killing Jedi might be necessary for Sith. But even if Palpatine did provide you with a light-sabre - of which only the Force knows how it came into his hands - it doesn't make you one." Maul gave me a hard-to-read look and there was my pity for him again: "Thankfully you know pretty darn well how to use it."

I fell silent for a moment, because I was not sure - I thought a faint, proud smile tugged now at the corners of the young Zabrak's mouth. However I had not made my point yet: "Your 'master' deploys you where it suits him, but it is - according to your own words - worse for you. Yet you say 'he cares', expecting him even to fix the Jedi-issue. You treat this assignment as an obligation. It is not! Of course it needs **commitment** on both sides. But there are limits! And the side not aware of them will become inevitably the loosing one. Believe me, I know plenty about that. I'm a clone. Therefore what you called my 'cousins' look all the same. Therefore the similar names. We originate from an secret military development program at Kamino. Secret of course only to the galactic public. On planetary level it was a job-creating-scheme for the army. Therefore our 'stealth mode'. Right after the hatching everything seemed okay. Yet with maturing it came out, our skill set didn't match the expectations. But as grown-ups we could not be stuffed back into the breeding tanks, could we? So we got a handful of credits and a heartfelt farewell."

"Breeding?! But you said, you're human and I never heard humans hatch from eggs."

This stupid question boggled my mind. His grip of the Force was one thing, but he was definitely not the sharpest tool in the shack. I bend forward, got hold of Maul's arm: "For me this here is nothing but a job. No questions asked, no answers given," I quoted what he had said regarding the med-droids, "and when it reaches a point where it becomes likely my client could let me down, I call it a day and mind my own business. Are you game?"

"**No**," a shudder jolted the whole of the Zabrak's body and let my hand fall off his arm, "no. You don't know. You can not know --- I gave my oath." With some effort the boy braced himself and lifted his head to stare out of the cockpit window. In an even tone he asked then: "How long will you need with the calculations and check-up?"

"3, better 4 hours."

"Take your time. Prepare a protocol. I will meditate. When you've finished, I'll take the wheel and follow your instructions while you can sleep."

"Aye." My mind went back to another ride - *"Longpress, I will get me an assignment. Yes, I might. But I don't like it. We should go by the flock, we're no lone fighters."* As soon as hyperspace communication was available I should contact Longshot. The Scimitar did not have the necessary devices. It's just a prototype, this ship, Maul had said.

Chapter 7

High Port is at the outside a demure pile of seven bulbs, dominated by the two bigger ones of the 'High Port Stores' and the 'Residential Sphere', all hold together by the circular tube of the 'Hub' and tethered with a skyhook to Muunilinst. The inside however received us, after inserting the Scimitar into the slit of the stardock and going through a xenophobic security check, as oppressing as a jungle.

It was not only the high temperatures and the humidity - I learned later, this was a temporary installation to honour a delegation of star-drive developers from Rendili - but the gold. Gold! Gold plastered in places only an designer unhampered by shortage of dataries could come up with. It seemed to grow as tree-like columns out of a moss-thick carpet and spread out into a rich foliage at lofty heights. The austere-clad Muuns did not quite match this picture. Like pale and gaunt stalks of weed they strode in stiff dignity through their glittering forest.

Nobody seemed to take notice of Maul and me. Or rather took notice but did not want to talk to foreigners. I picked one of these reluctant flowers to introduce us. At least I thought I would. But my mouth formed involuntarily the words: "I'd like to speak to Al Feler." Despite knowing that my lover possessed powers beyond my grasp, I was shocked. However the next moment I realized it was a tit-for-tat - I had revealed the place to go, Maul had revealed the target.

And the result of the question was quite promising though: Each Muun within earshot seemed to be startled yet relieved by it. Like they were softly touched by an invisible hand they moved until all looked at one specimen which unsuccessful tried to retreat into the cover of a golden palmetto the size of a dreadnought's cannon.

Head and shoulders sinking, with reluctant steps the one such singled out came eventually forward, followed suit by an dark-skinned, bulky Iotran guard. With shawl and pendant of the Banking Clan the Muun's grizzled garb appeared even more high-necked than those of his brethren. Its colour repeated itself in the fields of grey blotches which moved to the hectic beat of a triple-heart over his pink skin: "I'm his brother. Al's brother. Bar. Bar Feler."

Despite the stammer I liked this voice. A deep and rich baritone, which produced Galactic Basic without too much of the nasal tune common for his race. I smiled up to the Feler-bro, my face a question-mark. He had now braced himself so far, he dared to look up and down on me several times. Yet he didn't continue to speak until his eyes had found a secure harbour, the floor in front of the hem of my sweeping silken dress: "My brother isn't available. I perform his business as a proxy for the time being."

That might be a setback or just the end of a rope you had to tug until what you wanted came out. "How unfortunate, I wished to negotiate a contract with him. I hope it's nothing serious. My name is Kahuna Tagge. I'm from Tepasi."

The prospect of a deal seemed to console Bar Feler about the presence of two aliens. The grey blotches paled and he said quite lively now: "You ought not have made the long way from the L9 sector for nothing. I am fully capable to stand in for my brother."

"Well, since I haven't signed anything with your brother so far ---"

"Exactly! Mind to follow me? There are places more adequate for discussing such things. Things of importance." With that Bar Feler made an inviting gesture. His Iotran guard gripped the handle of his blaster so hard, the knuckles and stubby spikes on his hands protruded visibly. He opened his nostrils and bared his teeth when he exchanged glances with my 'bodyguard'. As an Iotran he was not bad looking - if you like broad shoulders and a head like it was hewn from Corellian hardwood. However he had the low self-esteem of undersized people and I wondered if working amongst the tall Muuns was really something he should do.

It was too much to expect that I should be brought directly to the Residentail Sphere. Instead Bar Feler guided our small group to one of the conference chambers within the Store Sphere. These were - in absolute astounding difference from the golden main halls - covered in plain platinum. Silently I thanked Maul for his advice to dress in rich blue. It did not only compliment my brown skin, it looked good either with a golden or platinum backdrop.

Our guards, two looming black shadows, cradling shiny blasters of silly dimensions in their arms, took post left and right from the entrance of the room. Some merciful interior designer had ordered to build this part of the wall with a bulge to aide a boy-in-waiting's bottom during over-long negotiations. Also he or she had allowed a big circular window.

I went for the window to watch space, and waited to let Feler make the first dive. He however seemed suddenly not concerned with signing contacts or the like. But perhaps he felt now, on the homey turf of business secure and able to chit-chat. "Tagge is a well known name around here. How is Baroness Tagge, if I may ask?"

Before I could answer, a servant, a female, colourless and more of the haggard side of gaunt, scurried in. She decked the table with glasses, a water carafe as well as a small tray of tempting looking titbits. But I behaved, just nodding a silent smiling thank-you to her mirror-image in the window. When she was out, I said: "Aunty Sanya? Well I hope. I mean, I can't remember her being not well. She's so energetic, is she not? However, I've never seen much of her anyway. Most of my live I spent on Lorr." "

"But you can't be more than a freshman!"

Someone must have told him, human females love it to be flattered, but omitted to warn of the dangers of cheesiness: "And then some. The military university there keeps a decent boarding school as well as some nice post-doc programs."

"I heard so," agreed the Muun fingering nervously at his Banking Clan pendant.

Yet I couldn't resist to recharge: "I also was trainee at Carida Academy in-between my last trimesters at Lorr University. It's true, you have to go through mud and dirt. But it teaches you valuable lessons about weapon construction. However," I changed the subject to prevent our

budding connection getting seriously spoiled, "these are Golan Space Defence Platforms, am I right?"

Bar Feler, who had hovered at the table, but not dared to sit down before I decided so, stepped up to my side: "Yes, they are."

We both contemplated the darkness of space where two huge, dagger-shaped patches blotted out the light of the stars. And we would have contemplated for a much longer time, if I hadn't taken the lead again: "I've never seen one, not even get an eye-full of the blueprints --- I really would love to visit these ---"

"That is, ah, impossible. Almost. Almost impossible I'm afraid," responded Feler.

"Thought so," I said quietly.

Oh his face appeared again the grey blotches: "Perhaps ---"

"Yes?"

"Today a delegation from the Golan Arms joint venture will arrive. Follow-up counsel of the purchase, you know? Perhaps in the wake of this, a visit could be made possible --- At least it would be an interesting statement, an advertisement already, if a member of TaggeCo is ---"

Now that went into a direction I was not entirely sure I would like to go: "No. Leave it as it is. I appreciate your courtesy, but keep it for someone more deserving. It was just a whim. And one shouldn't give in to whims. Besides, I'm not CEO of TaggeCo nor in the board. With some stretching I could be called a neice of the baroness. My father had more right to claim the title of a nephew, but even he and my mother were just silent shareholders of our family's enterprise. They died early and I inherit what left."

Feler was again out of words. I hoped that it was of empathy rather than annoyance, because I had objected that this deception was too easy to expose right after Maul had fed it to me during mission briefing. An rich orphan's life spent at military schools as explanation for lack of manners or knowledge of ones family was hard to swallow, was it not? Yet I had another string to my bow.

With a flick I produced the Palpatine-cheque from my bosom: "You should take this. It's your brother's. I ---, I had some ideas. Your brother was recommended to me as an investor with understanding for these ideas. We had just but one talk, yet it came out he was the best man I could wish for. This cheque was his token of a claim on the project. From my side some issues of a private nature made it necessary to postpone the next steps, namely the signing of the treaty. After these issues were solved, I tried to contact him, but couldn't reach him. And now he's not even at Muunilinst. I feel that's a sign." With that I turned and accosted Feler directly: "I feel, I should bury my ideas and you should give the money back to your brother."

Bar Feler's small eyes darted between the plastic and my boobs. "Perhaps you would like to think this over?"

"No. I've already made my mind up."

"I'm absolutely positive, you should think this over. How long will you stay at High Port?"

Feigning my final decision being not so final, I said: "Well, I have not made arrangements to spent more than a few hours here ---"

"Oh, there is an easy remedy! We have cabins at the Store Sphere."

"They're all occupied," I heard the Iotran say unexpectedly - I stared at him and noticed Maul had tilted his head toward his colleague as if wishing not to miss a single word, "because of this delegation, this f ---"

"Ah!" Bar Feler had turned swiftly to face his bodyguard and nipping the curse in the bud with an icy gaze. "If so, there is still the Feler-suite in the Residential Sphere."

The four of us went faster out of the conference chamber than we had entered it. We boarded a elegant little walking throne which carried us through the Hub toward the private parts of High Port. Shortly before the entrance we were stopped by three very arrogant and officially looking Muuns. Mentally I prepared for another heavy security check. But only Feler was called from the vehicle. Outside earshot they quarrelled – but decently, I assure you!

Nevertheless it seemed as if the threesome had managed to put an solid obstacle into our host's way. He came back like I had first met him: shoulders sagging, head hanging: "A mishap. A annoying mishap. We had learned from a trustworthy diplomatic source Rentili is a hothouse planet. Therefore we had adapted the climate of the Stores Sphere to welcome the Golan-Arms delegation, which consisted of only the Rentili party of the joint venture. Now it appears, this planet is temperate instead! To reset the climate control takes too long, hence the delegation has to be accommodated at the Residential Sphere."

"So there is a claim on your suite? I don't mind, I can stay at the Stores."

"No. That would be not good enough for you. And, --- and no, if we can't have my brother's rooms --- no. To the skyhook!"

The last line Bar Feler had spoken loud enough to be heard by everyone interested. The result was a desired one by him I supposed – three heads turned speedily, three jawbones dropped.

Chapter 8

After arrival at the bottom station of the skyhook in Harnaidan our host did not waste time with sight-seeing me around. Perhaps it were the disturbed faces of the other Muuns – or he wanted to bring home the expected profit literally. So from the IGBC's headquarters I got only the fleeting impression of an uncountable infantry of glaucous marble columns heaving triangular pediments in endless rows along the feet of skyscrapers. Skyscrapers, which reached two and a half miles up into the air. Vault-spires the Muuns called them. And what would have been at Coruscant an exclusive penthouse on top of the building was at this planet just the hood of a chimney. From these chimney's came the acidic and sulphuric odour of the city.

The four of us transited in a private sedan to the harbour, where a private yacht was waiting with powered up engines. The Feler-family originated not from the administrative capital I learned, but from the money-capital – Mariunhus. With an elegant, wide bow our boat left the harbour and started to ride with zest the waves of the ocean.

Maul draped dutifully a stole around my naked shoulders as I stood at the railing and watched the skyline of Harnaidan falling behind the horizon. I closed my eyes to compare sound and smell of this sea with the one blanketing Kamino. But there was no likeness. Due to the fast developments of events I had not been able to see and find me a public hyperspace com-booth as I had planned. Well, our next destination ought to be also a civilized place. All I knew of Mariunhus was, that it was a small town on a small island. But if this meant only small compared to the capital, it should be big enough to possess an infrastructure beyond mounted messengers and cable communication.

"We're not quite there," whispered Maul menacingly.

"Did you notice the initials of the boat?"

Maul snorted: "P.B. - for Plague Bearer."

"I heard the crew did call it Platinum Babe," with that I went downstairs to see which topic of conversation would not elicit grey blotches on the shy banker's face.

Our destination had grown from the biggest patch in a string of dots to the jagged cone of a volcano surmounting its siblings, before I had succeeded in talking Bar Feler on deck. Of course the vista of the harbour of his home town didn't hold anything new for him.

The moorings of the marina were inside a broken volcano, of which only a circular wall a foot high above the water-line remained. The water inside this lagoon was smooth, yet waves appeared to be in the distance around other boats. When our yacht passed them, it showed the reason for this motion were divers. Numerous Muuns descending on underwater meadows, harvesting, coming up, emptying their baskets into the bellies of waiting boats. Again and again and in such a harmonic fashion, it seemed rather a dance than work.

As I leaned into the guardrail to eye the picture closer, Feler took a step back: "Ah ---" So I thought to say a nice word to him: "What beautiful scenery!"

The Muun made a face as if I had done something obscene but politeness forbade him to tell me: "These are poor people, low-casts. Poor low-casts."

"Really? But if one is doing his or her work with grace I would not ask for rank or title."

Feler did cast his eyes down and responded silently: "That is a very interesting point of view. Very interesting." In our back the ship's crew – also a handful of low-cast Muuns - hurried to and fro in preparation for the landing.

After a hour of circling the baseline of the central volcano under a dark-green canopy of leaves, our ground-speeder hovered over the last few yards of the smooth grey road in front of a flock of two-storeyed bungalows. From there, the road lost itself as a bunch of gravel walks into a flower-decked briar patch. Behind the bungalows the surf hissed.

It was that sort of establishment, where even the pageboy was above raising a brow when you wore your eyes on stalks or walk on your hands instead your feet. Posh as it was, someone had

of course taken the time and explained to the architect there are more precious materials than gold. And that quantity alone makes but a poor effect.

Bar Feler showed not only a mighty refined taste but a good deal of cleverness with accommodating me in this resort outside from Mariunhus. He would stay in his town-house there, keeping me in reach, but not officially claiming what was his brother's. Maul too appeared to be contend with the arrangement - if one could say so after a look at his deadpan face. I missed only one thing... "What of my baggage?"

"I took the freedom to have it sent down with the express lift," admitted Feler.

My eye caught one of our cases keeping itself out of the way beside a wardrobe. I opened the next best drawer - indeed there was the stuff neatly stacked in. "Thank you, that was very considerate of you."

My warm words let appear a coy smile on the Muun's small and hard mouth. With a furtive gaze at Maul he said: "Your bodyguard ---"

"Will sleep at the foot of my bed." I nodded to Maul, who in turn snatched a blanket and a pillow-roll from a sofa and throw them at the carpet where my finger pointed.

Feler's Iotran guard rolled with his eyes and suppressed a groan. The Muun cleared his throat: "Then I will see you later?"

"You will."

Once alone, I took a deep breath and asked Maul: "So far okay?"

"Not bad at all."

"This delegation stuff came in quite handy, didn't it?"

"Timing depends on knowledge."

"Wait! You knew about the Golan Arms visit in advance?"

"Remember, the boss is a politician with specialisation in interplanetary issues. Big deals like the one about the space platforms are the talk all over the senate's breakfast clubs. Therefore we had to hurry a bit with the pirates."

That understatement made me chuckle: "Force do I need a drink! All this sweet talking makes one dry throat."

"I think, I saw a table-trolley at the balcony, near this whirlpool," responded the lad but forgot not to urge: "Keep it small. You know, we have a dinner date with your banker tonight."

"Killjoy," I growled and mixed me a stiff Alderaanian and Soda. Taking the first sips I looked over the scenery. Right under the balcony belonging to our suite was a beach, stretching its crescent of dark volcanic ashes for about half a mile to the left and the right. With the setting sun the waves had become smoother. Their hushed noise when running out was now and then swallowed by a whisper of wind in the trees. I spotted only a few lights in the woods reaching up the steep mountain flank at the other side of the resort. Either the Muuns preferred a nightcap in the dark or they loved to work over-hours.

I had hoped Maul would come out too, but he didn't. Nursing my drink I went inside. "Do you think, they have hyperspace communication in this house?"

The Zabrak sat at the bed. He flashed his mottled teeth in a conspicuous grin: "Put your glass aside, I got something better for you."

"And I thought you had already forgotten how to make love during our journey from Coruscant," I laughed.

"The Mariunhus flea market is widely known for its datadiscs," remarked Bar gravely. The sleeve of his robe brushed mine. A mere coincidence I thought – until I felt this tender touch again, and then a third time. Obviously I had left a mark last evening. Hopefully it was not overdone. The earlier the Muun decided to trade the loyalty he owed his brother for his own profit and landing the billion-credit deal himself, the scarcer would become the chance to get through to his brother, the absent Al.

The traders had put up their tables against the fence of the 'Old Mint'. Its time-worn but still edgy, black and gold spears made an impressive background for the accumulation of works of fiction and science. A big crowd – yet with Maul and me almost the only aliens - had massed up at this attraction.

Bar and I flipped idly through the datadiscs, taking now and then a peek at the content of one or another - there were reading-pads held in our way by the traders competing for our attention. Bar made several attempts to separate us from our two shadows, the sentinel and Maul. He showed the skilled hand of a man grown up in a gated community. Yet the Iotran had probably been too long in his attendance not to know all the antics of his employer. And Maul was keeping up splendidly - his tattooed face appeared repeatedly out of thin air at our side or even in front of us.

So there was never enough freedom but for some hushed words: "Do you always have this --- bodyguard with you?"

"Why? He is my heirloom. His family owes mine a life debt and he's paying it back with servicing. Besides, you yourself have one."

Bar huffed nervously. "Ah, yes. But that is something completely different." I could see how his mind started to calculate ways to get rid of that irritating Zabrak without confrontation. And I was keen to learn about the result.

Maul leaned back in his seat. I reached for the cockpit light of the sedan. "Leave it," Maul growled quietly.

I shrugged regardless he probably couldn't see it in the dark and said: "Okay, from here on I take a cab. I'm back in about five standard hours. If it takes me longer, I'll give you a buzz. Anything else?"

Wordless Maul showed me a small box. It was finger-long and grey.

"And I thought you would kiss me goodbye."

"No," the boy chuckled, "but I can promise you a welcome-back kiss." He grabbed my hand, hit the box squarely on my palm and closed my fingers around it. "This is a sensor of sorts. When you encounter a device which is looking such or similar in the banker's home ---," with that he ignited a tiny but razor-sharp holographic projection of a column with a bunch of tubes going in and out, "stick it in. The hatch should be easy to discover. If you're forced to remove it, make sure it has rested at least ten minutes."

"Aye."

I hailed one of the pastel-coloured, oversized couches which are considered a cab at Muunilinst. The moment I boarded it, the ground-speeder Maul had 'borrowed' from the parking lot of the resort zoomed away on the road along the sea.

I ordered the driver, an old, grey-skinned female: "The nearest hyperspace communication booth."

She pleated her high forehead, uttering something muunese. I made the intergalactic intercom-gesture - her face lit up and after a swift ride we ended up in a quarter of Mariunhus which smelled of seaweed, grease and bad food but provided the service I needed. I keyed in Longshot's code. Nothing. He didn't answer. Without a second thought I tried to reach Longways. And was successful. In a way...

On my call appeared the holo-relief of a dirty droid: "What's up now officer? Shall we stop work again, because you forgot another piece of evidence? The landlord is getting peeved." Its breast-plate was engraved with 'Heavy Duty Cleaning Service'.

I switched immediately to my best high-brow emulation: "Sir?!"

The machine discovered its mistake: "You're not from Coruscant Security?"

"And you're not from the Galaxies Opera House ticket counter!" With that I shut the line. The cleaner would only remember a veiled lady dressed to the nines who was stupid enough to come out at the wrong communicator.

The cab-driver had waited. I presented her the small slip of paper written in Bar's meticulous hand. She read it with the help of her index-finger, moving her lips soundlessly, then nodded. Once tucked again nicely in the back-seat, I had no qualms to survey the 'sensor-box' throughout. It wasn't sealed, but none of its lines hinted an opening mechanism of sorts. However, some prying and brooding let me succeed at last: I took a thin cylindrical item out of its protecting container. Made of a light, glassy material, it showed its dark-red, thick yet liquid content.

Carefully I put it back and closed the box. I had to think. The cab meanwhile had pointed its nose uphill and flew silently over the grey ribbon of the street. After some time the smell of the ocean ebbed and eventually became replaced by the metallic breeze originating from the volcano. To the same degree the lights of the city became scarcer 'til we passed just now and then a spacious mansion ablaze with light in the night-dark woods.

The Muun must have had his ear on the door, because it opened right after the speeder was gone and I had made but two steps on the gravel walk. He was a thin silhouette in an aura of grandiose light. "I'm glad. I'm glad you didn't object to this unconventional invitation."

That happiness froze him obviously to the ground. He neither stepped aside nor moved a hand. I couldn't prevent brushing softly against his lanky frame as I slipped around him to get into the lobby, then threw my gossamer veil over the next best sideboard. "Unconventional but not unwelcome. I never before received a billet hidden in a bouquet of flowers."

The Muun just beamed in response.

I shook my finger at him in a feign rebuke: "I wonder what other conspicuous things you did."

"Oh, I thought it would be nice to have --- would be better to negotiate without --- I sent the servants away for tonight." Having said so, Bar closed hastily his mouth. Grey blotches bloomed on his rosy cheeks and he busied himself with the front-door.

"Oh, well Bar," I waved his embarrassment away, "you should give me a tour of your house before we talk business. I had not expected such a beautiful estate that high in the mountains above Mariunhus."

"I will! I'm glad to --- please this way. We can enjoy a nice little supper afterwards."

After a hour I knew, I would need this supper dearly. Not that the tour was boring, but the house was simply too big. Not big in terms of an ancient palace of an old family - the sort I supposed Palpatine lived in. Nor big in terms of the fortresses of the newly-rich Hutt's I've seen examples of on the Holonet. But someone had year after year diligently transformed every surplus credit into a new room, another annex. The result was a endless maze in a style eclectic yet conservative enough to pass for good taste.

For all his owner's pride, through a short passage in the back of the house the Muun just swept. He had lowered his head between the shoulders and didn't comment on the several rooms lining the corridor. But I stopped as I spotted laboratory stuff through a not quite closed door: "What is this?"

The few steps Bar was ahead of me he retraced reluctantly. Placing a hand on the door-knob he seemed at loss of an simple explanation why we should not enter this room - his lips worked but no sound came out. I smiled up to him and he was too good a host to stay in the way of my curiosity. Bar opened the door wider, allowing me to step in: "This is my brother's studio."

"Most exiting!" I discovered immediately the machine from Maul's holo-projection. "All those scientific instruments! This must be a expensive spare time occupation."

Bar's longish Muun-face became even longer. He appeared to be torn between eagerness to show the Feler's financial power, and embarrassment of, well, brotherly sort. "Ah, yes. His spare-time, not mine. Not mine. But yes, it's from the best enterprises of Galaxy. Look here - GeneSculpt ---"

"I thought your brother Al to be an educated man, but I didn't know he had such a broad range of interests. What is he exploring?"

"Yes, broad. Very educated, very wise." Bar's gaze had followed my way through the room and I had taken care to show not too specific an interest in any of the installations. Quite innocently I

stood eventually at the column-with-tubes, letting a hand travelling over its cool surface. "Now, what is your brother exploring?"

Bar still hesitated, then squared his narrow shoulders: "Life itself is the centre around which his quest revolved. Revolves."

"What a noble task! This is a field of science which should draw the attention and the admiration of the whole Galaxy on him." The hatch was indeed easy to discover. I did hold Maul's gift already hidden in my fist.

There Bar did cast his eyes down and moved his head slowly from left to right and back. When he spoke again, he sounded as honest as a bounty hunters oath: "A field of survey making him not only friends. Some even went that far to accuse him of --- They went too far. Way too far! You might have heard the rumours of him leaning to the Dark Side. Yet, can these rumours be true?" The Muun made a quick break and shot me one of his furtive gazes before he continued: "The Sith are extinct. But, alas, envy for a wise man not."

"Aww," I only let out this sympathetic noise not to interrupt his train of thoughts.

Bar however dropped the issue: "Nevertheless there are some good friends too. All over the Galaxy. Influential ones like a Nubian politician amongst them. He will take care that the Feler-legacy will carry on, even when Al and I are no longer."

I lowered my hand with the sensor-box, concealed it again in the rich folds of my dress. An idea ricocheted inside of my skull like a small bore bolt. Just a tiny deviation of the task... I hoped what I would find in closets and within my own stuff was enough of makeshift tools for realising it later when I was still in this house: draining, flushing - twice of course - refilling. But first I had to respond to the Muun's uneasiness. I said lightly: "Well, rumours are ---"

"Exactly!" Bar nodded with emphasis and made a gesture to guide me out of his brother's studio.

He closed the door very carefully and heaved a deep breath, almost a sigh: "Mind if we postpone the supper for a few more moments? There is one last thing I really wish to show you."

I was amazed that a Muun's eyes could implore you like a beggar a hole in the wall: "Of course not. What is it?"

"It is --- It is in the garden."

What he had called 'garden' was a well-kept park-like stretch of wood. We went into it, deeper and deeper - yet we reached our destination before we reached the boundaries of the park. 'It' was behind a trellis.

"This is where we come from. Without that my brother and I wouldn't have risen to the position we - I - hold now."

I looked at the diminutive vault-spire rising like a pock-mark in the middle of what had once been a pretty flower bed. It was a little, very steep cone of gold, a column almost, which at its top convulsively ejected more gold.

I didn't know if Al was a more outgoing and gaudy type of person or if by Muunilinst standards Bar was a decent and not the least odd fellow, however, with a private gold well in their back yard, both of them had to be the hit amongst their peers.

"This is beautiful," I whispered.

Finally the Muun's hand had found its way around my hip... And let's it put this way: he exerted himself candidly, as people with an expertise close to nil in such a field usually do.

Chapter 9

When I entered my suite at the resort laughter greeted me. It was male, two-voiced and came through the open door of the balcony. Maul and Bar's Iotran guard sat in the whirlpool, a ice-filled crate, from where promising bottle-necks peered, at a handy distance. On the tiles of the floor glittered some lost spice crystals. I didn't say a word, just removed my gloves very slowly. Maul leaned back with a smug face, his tattooed arms stretched leisurely on the pool's rim. The Iotran pursed his thick lips to an "Ooops!" and scrambled from the tub displaying a firm little bottom and a pair of gorgeous thighs in a whirl of water and hastily snatched cloths. I stepped aside to not hinder his way out.

The door banged and the Zabrak spoke up: "You're back early. Was the banker such a disappointment?"

"Bar? Oh, Bar --- Bar has class. But I'm sorry to have interrupted you and your new pal."

The lad entertained himself with making little waves with his hands and grinned: "Reddick is a nice fella. On the way back from Mariunhus I decided it was way too early and too nice a night to deliver the speeder at the resort. I picked up Reddick for a joyride. Was a lot of fun. Oh yes, we had a lot of fun! He also told me something about Al."

"That elusive Feler-bro?"

"Yep! He's the older one of the two. And by that I mean a good twenty-year difference between him and Bar. Brainy Al began his banking career humbly enough, but made it suddenly big. Nobody know nothing. Bar, despite being considered equally clever as his brother, always has been second. The 'little one'. Regarding one thing he probably doesn't mind that. The older one is rumoured a sorcerer of sorts around here. Holds galaxy-wide connections which resulted in frequent visits of aliens."

"Yeah," I agreed, "visits of outlanders are suffice to make you a sorcerer in the eyes of the Muuns." But I didn't speak of the little private gold spire in the garden of the Feler' house which had paved the way for two low-cast Muun-boys to reach up to High Port and beyond. Also I omitted to explain that 'sorcerer' meant 'dark sider' according to Bar.

"Maybe. Yet more than a week before our arrival he's gone. Not exactly in an fiery cloud like Reddick swore, but gone nonetheless and never seen again."

"Oh?"

Maul looked with bright eyes at me. "The Iotran showed me where to find hyperspace communication."

I went to the crate and searched for an unopened bottle. It was all cheap stuff. Any glass of water was better. Thankfully the boys had not touched the soda the table-trolley carried. "Good to know for the next time we're in Mariunhus."

"I had already contact with my master."

"Well?" The water without the real stuff didn't taste great, but it refreshed me.

If Maul appeared at the outside unruffled enough, he had been talkative and still was: "Of course he was not happy. But he's a generous chap. Recommended to stick to it and promised to pay all further expenses of the mission. I think he wants it. He wants it and he has the patience to wait for the best result," encouraged Maul himself. "By the way, do you know a Chiss going by the name of Asa?"

I hesitated to refill the glass. I had never spoken of my ex: "Why?"

"Perhaps it might interest you that he's not in the Kessel mines, but found a place under the wing of one of the vigos of Dark Sun."

"Really?" I felt a chill running down my spine like the day I met Palpatine. Yet also I could not hold back to think 'good luck', because Asa, my ex-lover was the kind of guy who always got the short end of the stick.

"I learned another bit from Reddick. And when you join me in the whirlpool I'll tell it."

"I rather have a shower."

Maul chuckled: "Your banker has spent himself in arranging for tomorrow a surprise-visit at one of the Golan platforms for you."

Bar bend over and whispered into my ear: "I spoke with my guard and he said the crews of the platforms are always looking for new recruits. Perhaps your Zabrak will like the idea of squaring the ransom he owes your family from a mercenaries salary? The Muuns are not known for keeping their purses sealed!"

Even if the last statement might not find widespread approval, I laughed melodiously out and laid a hand at his chest. "You're ingenious!"

He caught my hand, led it to his mouth to kiss each fingertip before he kept it resting on his breast in a tight but tender grip.

Our two bodyguards whispered in our back. I had expected either Reddick or maybe Maul would fly the shuttle, but Bar himself did it. Single-handed and leisurely. That shy Muun banker certainly had some qualities. From the speaker broke a string of nasal syllables. Must be the defence platform asking for our accreditation...

It had never occurred to me an Iotran might be capable of moving absolutely noiselessly. So I heard first the muffled plop-sound, then felt the warm blood of Bar on my hand and only after that saw Reddick's square head peering over the pilot's chair back. However, for the rotten and last clone of my batch I am, at least I'm ambidextrous - my fan ripped through the thick neck of

the Iotran. Not elegantly, but powerful enough the wound was not cauterised by the vibro-blades and he bled himself out on Bars slumped frame.

The voice in the speaker repeated its tune.

I turned, tearing apart the restraining security-belt - there were **two** empty seats in the back of the cockpit.

The nasal tune in the speaker sounded now inquiring.

The accident. Exit banker. Exit heiress. Exit bodyguard. Exit has such a lot of meanings. I waited for the soft shudder, indicating the ejection of an escape-pod. The Scimitar was still parked at High Port.

After a moment of silence the voice in the speaker released a barrage of sharp and short lines - probably ordering the shuttle to stop.

I would only last seconds longer. But what neither my ex-lover – I think it's fair to call him such at this point of the development – nor his boss did know: I had exchanged the bosses blood-sample with mine. Most likely it wouldn't work. But if! But if, **I** would be reborn. I. And not some highbrow Sith Master. Force was I keen to learn if I was right...