

“Another drink sir?”

Jon lowered his visor to look at the attractive young Twi’lek barista; she was holding a platter with a variety of colorful drinks balanced on it, which she did a remarkable job of keeping balanced as she bent over in a decidedly -- and deliberately -- distracting manner.

Jon smiled charmingly at the girl; “I would be remiss to refuse, m’lady,” he said as he put his hand out for one of the drinks.

“Mm, m’lady?” she asked in a teasing tone. “Where did you ship in from, a Jedi-holonovel?”

Jon couldn’t help but chuckle at that; how many Jedi did he know back in Odan-Urr that would relax at a place like Lor Zatean? They wouldn’t exactly approve of the Naga Sadow owned resort, and he couldn’t exactly blame them for feeling that way.

That was what they had him for, after all.

“A long way away from here,” was the answer he gave her. “You know, I’m here all weekend. Maybe later we could--”

“Argon!” a gruff voice respond, and Jon sighed internally. So much for pleasure, then. Business called. Pity, he thought, as he watched the waitress’ departing form. He hadn’t even gotten her name.

Instead, he turned in his seat to take in the approaching, and decidedly less appealing, form of the approaching zabrak.

Jon masked his disappointment with the largest and most sincere appearing smile he could manage.

“Jarron, my friend, how good to see you!” he said, approaching the zabrak, one hand outstretched in greeting, the other still holding the fruity drink he’d received.

“Don’t gimme that, Argon, where’s my mon--”

“Relax, Jarron, she’s waitin for us both in the hotel suite. Come on, I’ll take you to her!” he said as he threw one arm around the zabrak’s shockingly broad shoulders, as if to lead him indoors.

Leaning close, however, he whispered: “Not out in public, the Sadowans have ears *everywhere*.”

Honestly, how such a tactless individual as Jarron Felch had survived as long as he had was well beyond the mind of Jon Silvon (or, as he was currently going by, Ferrus Argon, rich socialite with an interest in the forbidden and dark).

One very tense elevator ride later, and the pair of them were situated in Jon's hotel suite; the walk-in closet was, admittedly, remarkably spacious for an average sized human, but for an average sized human, an beyond above average sized zabrak, and an astromech droid with personal space issues, it became decidedly less so.

Unfortunately, it was the only room in the suite that had no windows, and one could never be too careful on a world that belonged to Naga Sadow.

One quick sweep for bugs, and they were ready to begin.

"Alright, Argon, now where are the credits," Jarron growled.

"Ready to be transferred into your account at a moment's notice," Jon said placatingly. "*After* I've verified your information."

Honestly, criminals these days. No patience, no manners, no sense of camaraderie. Really, he'd made the right decision, getting out when he had. Intel work for a Clan of the Brotherhood was infinitely better.

Jon looked through the datapad, skimming over the information. It was valuable stuff; the kind of thing the Odanites would pay a significant portion of credits for, and that Naga Sadow absolutely did not want in the hands of Jedi.

And, speaking of credits...

"Well, a deal is a deal, and I'm a man of my word," Jon said brightly, stashing the datapad in his pocket. "The agreed amount, then?"

The zabrak smiled in a twisted way, and Jon instinctively reached for a knife hidden on his belt; it was his only weapon, the others stashed safely in a undetectable box elsewhere in the suite.

"Yeah, about that," Jarron said in his gravely voice. "I think we should... *re-negotiate* the agreed upon price."

Sithspit.

"Now, dear Jarron, we had a *deal*."

"Unexpected expenses, you know how it is."

Jon did know how it was, and he knew immediately he wasn't getting out of this without a fight; in another time and place, he might've done more to try to talk his way out of this, but he'd been blooded in enough Great Jedi Wars by this point to know when word weren't going to cut it.

He sighed dramatically, putting his hands in the air.

“Alright, alright, I see how it is, just let me...”

Jon puled a dagger and spun, aimed directly for the zabrak's jugular. The sithspawn was faster than he looked, Jon would give him that. In the split second it took to reach the artery, Jarron's hand had already come up to grab his wrist.

Too occupied by that to see the other hand, with its own knife, however.

A loud squelching noise, and Jarron collapsed to his knees, one hand clutching the gushing wound on his throat. He tried and failed to stop the bleeding, before falling limply to the floor.

Jon panted in exertion, mind already concocting the means he'd need to dispose of the body without getting caught. He'd have to extend his trip here, which wasn't so bad, except that he'd need to come up with an excuse for the Quaestor to pay for it...

“Rrrm.”

“Huh?” Jon looked down at the body. Sure enough, and against all odds, it was twitching, and groaning sounds were escaping the mouth.

Sithspit, the poor bastard was still alive? Jon had been certain his cut had severed the man's vital arteries, and sheer amount of blood pooling on the ground had confirmed that.

Well, if he was still alive, he wouldn't be much longer.

Only if that were the case, Jarron absolutely should not be capable of pulling himself up, much less twisting his head to look at Jon.

“Ah, Jarron, nothing personal but—”

Sith hells, what was wrong with his eyes? Jarron's eyes had clouded over with a cloudy white film, the kind you normally only see in bodies much longer dead than this one was – his body shouldn't even be *cold* yet. What was happening?

The corpse lunged.

For a man who had been so slow and uncoordinated in life, his body was capable of surprising acts of speed and strength when his mind wasn't present – and it was clear there was no mind present in whatever ghoulish thing this was – leaping from lying prone on the ground to having its hands on Jon's head faster than the mercenary could properly register what was even happening.

It was muscle memory, more than skill, that saved him. Years of training with the blade caused his arms to react faster than his brain, the latter still frozen with shock and fear.

In the split second the thing that had once been Jarron had leapt from the floor to Jon, Jon had already brought his knife up, and through the once-man's jaw, stabbing directly into his brain.

It twitched and writhed for a second, its hands grasping around Jon's throat with a strength that would've destroyed his windpipe if it had persisted a few seconds longer, before suddenly going limp.

This time, it stayed down. Jon stabbed it a few more times in the brain just for good measure.

He looked over to the corner where Artemis had been watching the fight.

“No, no, don't mind me, how are *you* doing?” he asked the droid sarcastically. “Clearly you were in the most danger here, that's why you didn't help me fight off the actual living corpse on the floor!”

A line of beeps and whistles was his reply.

Jon frowned.

“What do you mean ‘all over the island?’”

More beeps and noises. According to Artemis, emergency reports had started cropping up all across Lor Zatean.

Well. That couldn't be good.

Jon quickly gathered up what of his belongings he couldn't afford to replace, and made for the door.

Vacation over.

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“Stupid space wizards, with their stupid magic,” Jon muttered to himself as he rushed down hotel corridors, Artemis trailing closely behind.

“I mean really, trust the Sadowans to kark up a routine espionage mission *they don't even know about*, completely by frakking accident!”

After Jon had retrieved his weapons and gear from where he'd stashed them, the first thing he'd done had been to have Artemis tune in to the planet's holonet. From what little he'd been able to deduce from the frantic and conflicting signals flying across the net – the ones that weren't just comprised of screaming and other, worse things anyway – *something* was happening that was effecting the entire planet.

His mind flashed back to Jarron – to the *thing* that had once been Jarron, in any case – and imagined that happening all over the planet.

He forced down the urge to vomit at the thought and urged himself to move faster.

The hallways were occasionally occupied by other, more panicked sapients; Jon ignored them. They would either get to safety or they wouldn't, and he had neither the time, nor the resources to help organize them into any kind of evacuation.

Besides, the kinds of people who willingly came to a Sith-owned resort weren't the sort of people Jon would lose *that* much sleep over.

He burst out of the hotel gates and onto the beach. The sight he saw nearly made him vomit again.

A medic-transport was tipped on its side, as a group of the ghoulish *things* were crawling over it; based on the clothes they were wearing – what could be made out under the viscera that is – they were its crew, and if he had to guess, the extremely elderly pantoran gentleman had been their patient.

Guess he hadn't made it. And whatever was happening, it let him make sure they didn't make it either.

It was worse than that though, so much worse; as the newly-risen medicae got their hands on bystanders, their numbers were growing. Jon watched in number horror as a younger pantoran woman, the old man's adult daughter by the look of her, was held down and bitten in the throat by the ghouls.

She was only still for a few seconds before she started moving again.

Based on the screams, this was spreading, and *fast*.

The resort was on an isolated island. If the outbreak could spread this fast *here*, the results on the rest of the planet must've been... *apocalyptic*.

He needed to leave. Immediately.

Jon raised his arms, and his wrist-blasters fried the brain of one of the ghouls that had tried to come near him; pity the sound had gotten the attention of the others, and now several sets of clouded-over, glossy eyes were locked directly on him.

Karabast.

“Artemis, how far’s the *Grande Carnival*?” he asked the droid, slowly backing up.

A series of very-concerned sounding bleeps.

Sithspit, that far?

New plan then, he was going to need transport. One problem at a time, though.

The first ghoul leapt at him with a shriek no human throat should've been able to make, its unnaturally pale eyes wide with instilled desperation and hunger. It dropped with a single blaster bolt into its skull.

Jon learned quick, and his first encounter with one of these things upstairs had clearly demonstrated that the only way to put one of them down for good was to go for the brain.

A second – the pantoran man whose death Jon assumed to have started all this – dropped quickly after, but that was all the reprieve Jon would be getting; in the time it had taken for him to fire off two blaster rounds, the rest of the mob had closed the distance, and it was all flailing limbs and inhuman shrieks after that.

He drew his blades, and backed himself up against a wall; he was cornered as it was, at least this way there was one less angle he needed to cover. He crouched low against it, and kept his arms close and tight, so they couldn't be grabbed; he'd seen their insane strength, and knew what happened if one of these ghouls bit you, and he wasn't about to let that happen to him, no sir.

Low and tight, like a ball, he punched out in quick, clean strikes; his preferred disabling cuts wouldn't do anything against things that didn't seem to feel pain, but if he was precise, he could aim straight for their brains.

One after one the ghouls fell this way, until Jon was left panting and heaving, drenched in sweat, and surrounded by the unnaturally pale corpses.

“Ok, I admit he,” he huffed. “Some space magic really would come in handy in this situation.”

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Jon was quickly able to find a speeder for Artemis to hotwire; it helped that the rich and powerful who visited the island loved to bring along their gorgeous (and expensive) speeders. He only hoped whichever one owned this particular craft had as much taste in fast engine as they did in aesthetics.

As soon as Artemis gave the go-ahead, the pair of them ripped out of the parking lot, roaring through down the streets and pathways; everywhere they went, they saw more and more of the ghouls, and fewer and fewer living people.

Jon prayed to whatever was listening that taht meant there were evacuations underway, and not the alternative. He rather doubted it though.

He was pulledout of his reverie as he had to swerve to avoid a pale nautolan-ghoul that had been standing in the middle of the road.

Why oh why had he thought to stash the *Grande Carnivale* on the opposite side of the island? Stealth protocols be damned, he should’ve known to prioritise a quick exit!

Still, soon enough he could spy the tree-hidden grove the *Phantom*-class spy ship was spirited under; a convenient spot, just large enough to hide the ship and far enough away from the actual resort to avoid detection by eye.

So why, oh why, was it positively *swarming* with ghouls?

A dozen at least, maybe more of the corpse-pale, cloudy-eyed once-men were prowling the area, tearing apart the corpses of sapients wearing the uniforms of the resort.

All at once it clicked for Jon; a hiking trip. A karking *hiking trip!* Out here in the middle of nowhere, right by his ship!

And now he had to figure out a way past them to get to his ship; he was still too worn out from his previous encounters to even think he could take so many of them in a fight, and he had no back-up.

Creative thinking time then.

Jon roared the engines, as loudly as he could; on a custom job like this stolen speeder, that was pretty loud even if it was more for show than effect. Show was what he wanted right now.

It was, in any case, more than loud enough to get the attention of the ghouls; Jon swallowed bile and rising horror as twenty-four milk-white eyes snapped up to look at him, viscera and bits of organs falling from their jaws.

Jon swallowed the mounting fear he felt, as he rushed the group with all the speed his stolen speeder could manage. If they had any self-preservation instinct, they didn't show it, as they rushed towards him.

Jon didn't want to bet on this speeder's ability to keep intact through a mob though; a second before impact, he swerved left, down the hiking trail. The mob of ghouls followed.

"Artemis!" he yelled over the roaring engines, "Take control!"

As the little astromech droid took hold of the speeder, it sped, and Jon was free to take his hands off the wheel; instead he turned back, and aimed his vambrace – not at any of the walking-corpses, no, but at the ones not walking, the ripped apart pieces still laying there. He chose the one that was most intact, and fired!

A grappling hook burst out, and latched into the dead flesh, quickly dragging it behind the speeder. Once Jon was certain the corpse wouldn't fall off, he detached the grappling hook, and quickly tied it to the back of the speeder.

"Artemis," he said again, "Program this thing to keep going, and then *jump!*"

As the word left Jon's mouth, he did exactly that. He leapt out of the speeder, and hit the ground tumbling, rolling into the foliage.

He lay there for several moments, not daring to breathe. When he finally poked his head out of the greenery, he grinned. His plan had worked. The mob of ghouls was following the corpse that was being dragged along behind the now out-of-control speeder as its overlocked engines blared down the hiking trail.

Artemis, on the jets built into her legs, lightly touched down next to him, and beeped angrily.

"Hey, it worked didn't it?"

With that, man and astromech began to make their way back down the trail, towards the *Grande Carnivale*.