

A Shadow in Shadows

The darkness would have been complete were it not for the lamps hung at intervals along the rough-hewn walls. The site was a hive of activity day and night. Workers and droids blasted and bored into the rock beneath the Bronze Helix Observatory. Emperor Thran Occasus-Palpatine had made the excavation of the ancient site a top priority. A sudden interest in ancient peoples appeared a sharp departure for the Emperor, particularly considering the attack on the Warspite. However, one did not question the will of the Emperor.

A solitary man accompanied by a droid went ahead through the site. No one knew who he was or where he had come from, but all knew instinctively that he should not be delayed. Sith Battlemaster NeMo strode through the tunnels with authority. His black coat and trousers were tailored to allow for freedom of movement, giving him a laborer's appearance were it not for the forcesaber that hung from the belt. A trained eye would reveal the subtle armor reinforcement that afforded NeMo a modicum of protection. The Sith's approach was completely silent as he stalked towards his destination. The only sign that anyone was walking down the tunnel was the staccato footfalls of the IG-100 MangaGuard droid, Kéto. If NeMo was a curious sight, Kéto was threatening; armed as he was with a heavy blaster pistol and vibrosword.

The workers became fewer and fewer as the pair moved through tunnels. At a junction into a side tunnel stood a pair of guards clad in the scarlet armor of the Emperor's personal troops. NeMo strode up to them and introduced himself, "Battlemaster NeMo and mine servant."

The guard produced a small device from his combat belt, "Right thumb, m'lord." NeMo placed his thumb upon the biometric scanner. After a moment the device chimed in conformation. The second guard inserted a similar device into a port on Kéto's chassis that likewise chimed after a moment. Satisfied at their identities, the pair of guards stepped back to allow them to proceed. NeMo idly wondered why the Emperor's personal guard were detailed in such a place. He decided it ultimately did not matter. This was his chance to make an impression. Hopefully, the impression would be a good one.

The guarded tunnel was lit with fewer lamps than the rest of the site and the tunnel far less refined. Twice NeMo stumbled over the uneven floor. The tunnel ended at a large double door. They appeared to be made of bronzium. No carvings or decorations adorned the metal slabs. There did not even appear to be a means of opening the doors. In front of the doors stood a tall Firrerreo man draped in a dark cloak. At once NeMo recognized him at the Quaestor of House Acclivis Draco, Kah'ri Marru.

"Hail and well met, Quaestor," NeMo stopped and bowed to the fellow Sith, "Mine apologies for keeping thee waiting in such a mournful place for mine arrival."

Kah'ri raised an eyebrow, "I haven't been here long." He was not sure what to make of NeMo's strange speech. "You understand the assignment?"

"Alas, I know naught. Only that I am to survey a discovery most ancient. Prithee, good Quaestor, can thee enlighten thy servant of thine expectations?"

Kah'ri furrowed his brow in confusion.

“Translation,” Kéto interjected, “Unfortunately, I do not know anything. Please tell me.”

“Aye, pray forgive mine language. I understand ‘tis archaic.”

“Explanation,” said Kéto, “Master NeMo was frozen in carbonite for over one thousand years. His speech patterns and vocabulary have not yet conformed to modern Galactic Basic.”

Kah’ri looked from NeMo to Kéto, then back to NeMo. He did not know why the Emperor tasked NeMo with the exploration, nor did he know how the Emperor came to know of this strange man. “Right, well we don’t know what is behind these doors. Scans have shown a complex of halls and rooms. The Emperor wants to know what’s in there and he wants to know yesterday. You are to explore and map out the complex.” Kah’ri extended one of his hands towards the doors. Calling upon the Force, he pushed the doors open.

NeMo stared into the yawning portal. He wondered why probe droids were not being used. Surely, that would have been a more efficient way to map and search the ruins. It began to dawn on NeMo that this could be an elaborate trap. “Aye, good Quaestor. I shall proceed thither at once.” NeMo bowed again to Kah’ri, donned his helmet, then he and Kéto walked through the doors.

“I will wait here until you return,” Kah’ri called after them, and closed the doors.

Blackness enveloped the explorers. Only the dim light of Kéto’s eyes gave any sign of their presence. NeMo took the glowrod off his belt and surveyed his surroundings. They stood on a small landing about two meters square. The walls were cut from the stone perfectly smooth and ending in an arched ceiling about three meters high. Before them a stairway descended into more darkness. NeMo took the scanner from his belt and tested the atmosphere. No toxins, noxious gases, or contagions were detected. Satisfied he was safe, NeMo removed the respirator of his helmet and inhaled deeply of the cold air. It was stale and stagnant. The only discernible scent was of dry stone. After a few moments of acclimatization, NeMo descended the stairs.

The stairs descended approximately twenty meters to a large room with openings to the left and right. “Kéto, keep a weather eye open, for we do not know what vile creatures may dwell within yonder passages.”

“Acknowledgement: Yes, master. Query: Shall I start a patrol?”

“Nay, keep near. I shall be preoccupied and desire thee to guard mine back.” He swung his backpack off his shoulders and took out his datapad and turned it on. As it booted up NeMo prepared the scanner for attachment to activate the mapping function of the datapad. He picked his datapad back up to attach the scanner and noticed a message on the screen, “Update Required”.

“‘Update Required?’ Vexation and damnation!”

“Query: Master, is everything all right?”

“Nay! Mine damnedable datapad is in need of an update and thus doth not function.” He sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose. “How, now, shall I map our explorations?”

“Answer: I do not know, Master.”

“Mayhap I shall find some paper within these halls. Let us go.”

Dejected, NeMo gathered his equipment and proceeded to the opening to the left of the stairway. The hallway had one doorway on the right side that opened into what had been living accommodations. NeMo stepped into the room to look around. There were a few simple wooden chairs, small tables, and four beds. Nothing adorned the walls or floors nor were there any lamps, cabling, or indications of technology. The room was of bare rock. A closer inspection of the tables revealed some ancient paper. NeMo could not believe his good luck. There was no telling how old the paper was, but it was in good condition and perfectly serviceable. Further inspection revealed nothing of value or anything that may have hinted at the earlier occupants. Satisfied the room had given up all its secrets, NeMo moved on down the hall.

The wall along the right side of the hall had alcoves cut into the stone every two meters. NeMo took a closer look at one. A shallow circular indentation in the bottom suggested a statue or bust may have been nestled in each of the alcoves. Further down the hall another opening on the left side led to more living accommodations. This room included another room consisting of latrines and laundry. As with the first room, these rooms had a smattering of plain furniture and nothing more.

At the end of the main hall was a metal door. Thus far, it was the only door NeMo had encountered. The door appeared to be made of bronzium with no obvious means of opening, like the double doors that lead to the stairs. NeMo reached out with the Force to push the door open only for the door to remain closed. He then tried pulling the door toward him. Again, the door remained steadfast.

“Conjecture: Perhaps the door slides open like a blast door.”

NeMo cast an incredulous look at Kéto. “A blast door? In these depths?”

“Observation: There is no apparent means of locking this door. You have tried to both push and pull the door open.”

NeMo looked back at the door with a tilted head. He did not want to admit the droid had a point. He considered cutting his way through with his forcesaber but did not want to damage the Emperor’s ruins. With a sigh of resignation, NeMo called on the Force again to slide the door to one side. The door squealed in protest as it slid open to the left. NeMo frowned. He did not like being out thought by a droid. The explorers stalked into the room and looked around. The room was large; about six meters to a side. In the center of the wall across from the door was a large bed. The walls were lined with shelves and bookcases. Against the left wall was a large desk with a chair. Everything was empty.

For several hours NeMo and Kéto mapped the halls and corridors of the mysterious complex. At times NeMo felt as though something was in the complex with them. He searched with the Force, scanner, and even had Kéto search, but found nothing. It was possible the nothingness of the depressing halls was playing trick on his mind. An entire wing appeared to be nothing but store rooms. Another wing was a kitchen and dining hall. Both wings were completely devoid of any artifact, document, decoration, graffiti, or anything that may have shed light on who may have occupied the complex. The most mysterious wing of the complex was what NeMo referred to as the temple. The temple was an

enormous room almost twenty meters across with a domed ceiling as high. Four walls had antechambers cut into them, each facing the center of the room. Directly across from the entrance was large room with walls lined with empty shelves and cases. As with the rooms before, nothing remained. Just empty shelves and walls.

NeMo and Kéto walked back toward the first room they entered. Since the first hall NeMo had remained mostly silent. He would occasionally ask Kéto for distance estimations but mostly concentrated on his map and investigation. Kéto sighed with disappointment.

“O, Kéto. It seems naught is left within these benighted halls.”

“Agreement: Yes, master. Commentary: It appears that whomever occupied this location took all their belongings with them when they left.”

“Verily. A single corridor remains. Mayhap there art artifacts therein.”

At length the pair came to the final door. The hallway angled off to the right instead of perpendicular as the other halls. NeMo stood in the doorway with his glowrod pointed down the hall. The vague feeling of a presence returned to NeMo. Once again, he focused his mind. The presence was elusive, if it was a presence at all. He shook off the feeling and stepped into the hallway. A few steps into the hall NeMo stopped in front of a track across the floor from one wall to the other. A similar track was present in the walls and arched ceiling.

“Kéto, this may be a sliding doorway.”

“Acknowledgement: It is possible, master.”

NeMo eyed the track warily. Except for the door to the large bedroom, all the other doors in the complex were made of wood. However, there did not seem to be any power in the complex. If this was a door track, it was not likely to close. Satisfied with his conclusion, NeMo stepped over the track and down the hall. A few more steps brought NeMo to a corner in the hall. Just as he and Kéto rounded the corner a loud *clang!* rang out behind and in front of them. Kéto whirled around and drew his virbosword and blaster. NeMo dropped his glowrod and ignited his forcesaber. The possible door track was indeed for a door and two had closed to trap them in the hall.

The two stood at the ready without moving for long, tense minutes. The only sound was the low hum of the forcesaber and NeMo’s even breathing. Just as NeMo began to relax to take stock of the situation, his scanner began rapidly beeping. Gas! NeMo expelled all the breath from his lungs, dropped his forcesaber and reattached the respirator to his helmet and shut the visor. The forcesaber deactivated and clattered to the floor. Kéto turned his head a full one hundred-eighty degrees to his master.

“Query: Master! Are you functional?”

NeMo bent down to retrieve his glowrod and weapon. “Aye, good Kéto. ‘Tis a foul, poisoned gas. A trap most sinister. I am in no danger for the mask upon mine helm doth filter the poison.”

Seemingly reassured, Kéto turned his head forward but kept his weapons ready. NeMo began to walk toward the door further down the hall when he began to feel a itching sensation on his hands

and neck. At first, he absentmindedly scratched the back of his neck and hands, thinking it was possibly just the adrenaline wearing off. Almost immediately the itching became a burning then a searing pain. NeMo cried out in pain and fear as blisters began to form on his exposed skin. Kéto at once rushed to his master's side but was helpless. With no other option and a desperate desire to survive, NeMo ignited his forcesaber and attacked the door in front of him. In seconds that felt like an eternity NeMo cut a large hole in the bronzium door, Force pushed the free slab out, and dove through the opening. The burning continued and NeMo thought the gas was still around him. He jumped to his feet to flee the caustic gas. In his haste NeMo dropped his glowrod. Blinded he ran headlong into a wall, knocking himself senseless. Kéto was at his master's side in an instant and dragged him off away from the gas.

NeMo awoke to excruciating pain. The burning of his exposed skin remained, and his head swam. As his senses returned, he noticed that the skin under the openings of his neck and wrists began to tingle. In the dim light of the glowrod he could make out the form of Kéto crouched over him.

"Query: Master, are you functional?"

NeMo groaned, "Kéto, fetch the medpac within mine pack."

Kéto obeyed his master and presented him with the opened medpac. With shaking, painful hands NeMo withdrew several vials and a pair of auto-injectors.

"Query: Master, what manner of attack was that? Commentary: I have never seen a weapon like that."

NeMo applied burn ointment to his badly blistered skin. "'Twas a gas, Kéto," he answered between heaving breaths, "A blister agent. Had the gas made it's way into mine lungs, these blisters upon mine skin would hath afflicted them as well."

Kéto watched his master inject pain reliever and stimulant into his leg. "Query: Master, have you experienced such an attack before?"

"Not that I remember," he answered while sitting up.

"Query: How did you know to react to the attack and treat the wounds?"

"Alas, I do not know." He handed the map and pen to Kéto, "Survey and map the immediate area. I must call upon the Force to heal."

Kéto did as his master ordered and returned. The wing NeMo and Kéto occupied housed the life support and power regulation for the complex. Kéto was able to determine that the complex still had power for its various systems, though most were offline. The life support systems appeared functional but were likewise offline. NeMo was still healing when Kéto returned. Knowing not to disturb his master's meditation, Kéto stood guard until NeMo finished. After about an hour NeMo decided he had healed enough. He looked down at his hands and flexed his fingers. His hands still hurt, but the blisters had completely healed on his palms and fingers. The blisters on his neck and backs of his hands remained but were much smaller.

Kéto went over the additions he made to the map and led NeMo to what he had discovered.

“Statement: Here is the hallway, master. There is a track in this hall like the tracks from the gas hall. Conjecture: It is possible this hall is also trapped.”

“Aye, Kéto. A trap most vile.” NeMo gazed down the hall. Of the entire complex, this wing alone had the only trap. The presence returned, stronger. “Something is in here with us, Kéto.”

“Statement: I detect no lifeforms or droids, master.”

NeMo slowly shook his head. “Nay, ‘tis neither.”

With a renewed determination, NeMo boldly strode into the hallway with Kéto close behind, weapons still in hand. To his surprise, and relief, the doors did not shut. The short hallway opened into a large room with walls lined with shelves and cabinets. Until all the previous rooms, the shelves were full of beakers, jars, boxes, and all manner of containers. Much of the containers were turned over or broken, but there were also a great many that were intact and their contents intact. NeMo inspected the labels but did not understand the script. He thought of Kodais Solatus and how he could have likely been able to read them. Well, the old fool had his time. This would be NeMo’s time.

NeMo swept his glowrod to the left. Through a doorway another room seemed similarly furnished. He walked through and into what appeared to be an alchemy lab. Work tables were strewn with all manner of scientific devices. Though NeMo did not know what any of the equipment did, he knew what a laboratory looked like. Some notebooks and papers were left on the tables all written in the same script as the labels. NeMo gathered up all the material he could and packed it away in his backpack. A grin spread across his face. This would certainly please the Emperor.

After gathering everything he could NeMo continued his exploration. He spied another hallway and headed down. The hall split after an angle. The left led to a storeroom for scientific equipment. The right led to another hallway. NeMo walked down the right passage that stopped at a T intersection. Looking down to the left, NeMo could plainly see the hall end in rough rock. Upon further inspection NeMo figured the passage had collapsed. The floor was covered in dust and small rocks. Strange that the collapse was localized to just that spot. There did not appear to be damage to any part of the complex except this specific hallway. He made a note of it on his map.

A chill suddenly ran up NeMo’s spine. It was not a disturbance in the Force. It was something primal. He looked around with his glowrod to find nothing. His mouth suddenly went dry, and he took his forcesaber in hand. Cautiously, NeMo followed the hall to the left. A doorway loomed to the right. That must have been where the presence was. NeMo ignited his forcesaber as he padded toward the doorway. Kéto thumbed the switch on his vibroblade. The ultrasonic vibrations of the weapon hummed alongside the forcesaber. NeMo’s heartbeat quickened as he approached the doorway. Sweat began to bead on his forehead. He stopped just outside the doorway. The light of his glowrod shone on the floor just inside the room. NeMo shivered as he prepared to round the corner. He took a deep breath and jumped into the room. Kéto followed closely behind with his blaster raised. They were met with nothing. The only thing in the room was a large puddle of oil. The fluid shimmered iridescently as NeMo cast his beam of light across its surface. NeMo let out the breath he didn’t know he was holding.

“Kéto, methinks we hath completed our task. Let us leave this cursed place.”

The two left the room and continued down the hall. The hall ended in a final room. NeMo reluctantly entered the room and mapped it. The two turned to leave the room only to be met by a figure blocking the doorway. NeMo ignited his forcesaber and Kéto opened fire with his blaster. The blaster bolts struck the figure directly in its chest but had no effect. The figure rippled and shimmered as though made of oil. NeMo clipped the glowrod to his belt and gripped his forcesaber in both hands.

“What art thou,” he asked the creature.

The figure made no response but took a strange sliding step toward the two. NeMo thrust out his left hand and shoved the creature down the hall with the Force. The creature was flung back ten meters and landed with a sickening thick splashing sound. NeMo and Kéto ran through the cleared doorway and down the hall to their left. Just as they made it to the first alchemy room NeMo’s leg was grabbed by the creature, throwing him prone to the stone floor. Whatever the entity was, it could move with terrifying speed. Kéto fell upon the oil creature with his vibroblade. The weapon simply passed through the being as though it was water. It did not appear to be damaged by the vibroblade, but it did not appear to appreciate the distraction. NeMo was able to turn over onto his back and slash his assailant with his forcesaber. As with the vibroblade and blaster, the energy blade seemed to have little effect. The creature still had an oily tentacle wrapped around NeMo’s leg. As the oil began to spread up his leg it began to burn like the gas. He suddenly had the terrifying realization that he was being eaten alive.

“Away,” NeMo screamed as he sent a desperate Force push directly into the thing. As with before, the creature was flung back. NeMo’s leg ached as he rose and put weight on it. The creature reformed into something vaguely humanoid and launched itself again at NeMo. Kéto let loose with a withering barrage of blaster fire into the thing. The blaster fire seemed to stagger it a bit, but it was almost on NeMo in mere moments. Knowing the Force had an effect on the thing, NeMo raised his hand. Blue-white tendrils of electricity flew from his fingertips and into his attacker. The oil creature lost its form and writhed on the floor. The blob quivered and lashed out with random tentacle attacks. Kéto continued to pump blaster bolts into the creature until the gas cartridge went completely dry.

Several seconds of Force lightning and numerous blaster bolts seemed to have stunned the beast. NeMo’s breath came in great gasps. They needed to leave. If the creature followed perhaps it would die by the gas. NeMo needed to survive. He called out for Kéto to make for the exit. Instead of turning to run down the hallway, they backed away from the recovering creature. The light from the glowrod danced all over making it difficult for NeMo to track the oily blob. He abstractly realized he and Kéto were moving through the supposed trapped hallway. If nothing else, NeMo could shut the door with the Force.

Before NeMo could focus to close the door, the creature had reformed into a humanoid. Kéto alerted his master to the threat. The pair had made it though the hallway. NeMo put away his forcesaber and focused on the door nearest to him, but it was too late. The creature launched itself down the hall. NeMo refocused to summon another burst of Force lightning. Kéto prepared to jump in front of the creature. As the creature crossed the first doorway of the hall, an earsplitting siren screamed throughout the complex and the doors slammed shut. The siren stopped and all fell silent. NeMo stood in disbelief at the door in front of him. He wondered if the traps were to keep that in and not keep intruders out. After a few moments of contemplation, NeMo began to feel warmth coming from the door. The warmth grew in intensity until it became uncomfortable. A fire trap.

NeMo and Kéto left the complex the way they had entered. The gas had dissipated from the first trap. NeMo ached all over. He would need some time in a bacta tank. At the large bronzium doors, Kéto knocked and stepped back to stand behind his master. The door opened to reveal Kah'ri Marru waiting for them. His mouth half opened when NeMo stepped out. His clothing was torn and singed, helmet cracked, and skin badly blistered.

“What happened in there,” he asked.

NeMo cleared his dry throat. “My lord, Quaestor. I must speak with his Imperial Majesty.”