*Fifty Lashes*

***The Lazy Mynock Cantina***

***Nar Shaddaa***

The stench of spoiled ale, desperation, and wafting opium smoke filled the lungs of Zagro Fenn as he sat awaiting his guest in a plush corner booth. The Hapan was familiar with dens like this. He had spent his adolescence in Hutt Space and Nar Shaddaa was the closest thing he had to a home for many years after being forced from the capital of the Hapes Consortium.

Strega the Hutt was late. “How very common for her,” thought Fenn. The Krath sat his bottle of ale down on the translucent table and arched his shoulders against the high bench seats of his familiar booth. Eyeing the bartender, Zagro motioned for the female Twi’Lek to bring another bottle of ale and an additional glass. The bartender dutifully sent over the bottle as Fenn reached into his robe for his Andros pouch and needle. He began to draw the illegal substance when a wet, clammy, feminine Hutt hand came upon his wrist.

“Friend, it has been a long time. You should have been done with that vice a long time ago,” sternly warned the Hutt.

“Strega the Hutt. I am not use to giving you that honorific. Fully indoctrinated cartel member now? How far we have come since running guns together and selling information to the highest bidder,” stated Zagro.

The female Hutt laughed a guttural laugh, sinister to all not inculcated in Huttesse. Fenn had learned the language long ago, Strega had taught him well. “And you Zag? I do not dare to know what outfit you are with these days. Once my associate, then a Hapan Royal Navy officer, then an Information Agent, and now…this...”Strega looked straight into her friend’s eyes.

Old friends caught up on their youthful days and fresh adventures. They both drank deeply of the ale and looked fondly on each other. This friendship was more than passing. It was the friendship born of childhood and wildness. Of unbridled joys and potential. How the galaxy had aged them, neither spoke.

“Your familiar table? Do you truly not trust me? The only table with a clear glass so no one can get the drop on you. Do you have no faith?” asked Strega.

Fenn sighed heavily and smiled the famous Hapan smile at the female. “Strega, I once trusted my life to your hands. You spoke on my behalf to the cartel and allowed me to operate in Hutt Space as an associate. I can never repay you for that. But trust is a quality I can no longer enjoy. I fear neither can you.”

It was the Hutt’s time to sigh. “Very well Zag, I will not waste your time. The challenger tomorrow has been groomed for a long time and my masters have put untold credits into ensuring his triumph. However, more money can be made on a loss. Such is fate and the fancy of my people. I can promise you he has not been tampered with and you shall have a fair fight as the arena has ever seen. My masters wish you to defeat him tomorrow. Klattoo is a master staff wielder but is also headstrong. You are not to engage him until he has shown his vigor. If possible, you are then to execute him in one blow,” stated Strega.

Fenn rose to his feet and wrapped his arms around the bulbous head and shoulders of the slender Hutt. They parted company and as Fenn made it to the doorway a cloaked stranger approached.

The Nar Shaddaa skyline was darker and more constrictive than Fenn ever imagined from his childhood. Age will tarnish all things he mused. The mysterious man spoke first as the pair walked down the labyrinthine alleys. “Protector, it may be you will cost that Hutt her life. “

Fenn did not miss a beat. “Koryn, you are a great Rollmaster and a better mentor. But if she must die so be it. Fate owns us all. I just hope I can make peace with her if I must be the tool of her demise,” plainly stated Fenn with a resigned nature.

Koryn Thraagus placed his arms across Fenn’s shoulders and pulled his face to his own gaze. “Zagro, her own people will pull the trigger. I am sure of it.”

Fenn smiled his trademark grin. “I never had a moment’s doubt. Come master, let us ready for tomorrow.”

***Hutt Syndicate Ring***

***Nar Shaddaa***

***Following Evening***

Klattoo of Kintan was as agile and deadly as he was hideous. The Nikto stood a full two and a half meters and was built of solid muscle caged within burgundy scales. The first thrust of the double-headed staff took Zagro by surprise, he was only able to deflect the blow with both his vibro-knucklers with much effort on his part.

The impact sent the Hapan reeling towards the wall of the arena. “Ominous tidings already,” thought Zagro Fenn. The Hutts were wont of action and the Krath knew the walls of the arena were electrified. He dared not use them as refuge from the savage blows coming his way.

Distance established between the two warriors, Fenn took stock of his surroundings. The arena was several stories tall with a vaulted ceiling that opened up to the stars and was illuminated sparsely. The Hutts cared to do their business in the dark and this was no exception. The seats were flush with the arena walls containing many luxury boxes at all levels of the arena. The noises and smells were potent in the arena as hundreds of tongues could be heard through the cacophony. Several holo-vid recorders hovered above the floor of the arena, beaming the combat across Hutt Space and beyond.

Fenn regained his feet and ran parallel to the massive Nikto, the adversary launched his staff with one lunged arm and clipped Fenn in the shoulder. Rivulets of blood pooled slowly down Zagro’s cloaked arm.

“Damn this dark…I can barely see,” yelled Fenn to himself. He knew better than to betray his weaknesses. The Nikto may know Hapan or Basic. It was highly probable.

Klattoo wasted no time in chasing his opponent. Zagro stood his ground and repelled two swift blows that knocked him backwards a meter at a time. “How am I to withstand 50 blows? This is madness.”

“Such a pretty foe. I would confuse you for a woman yet I know your lady-folk are far more dominant than this pitiful mess affronting my honor to vanquish,” snarled the Nikto in Huttesse.

Fenn ran headlong at his foe, and slide by Klattoo missing the next blow by millimeters. The vibrations of the staff ruffled the purple cloak and tangled Zagro’s left arm. Zagro knew he could only keep up the martial prowess for so long before he was forced to act. More time. More distance.

The Nikto was ever upon Zagro raining blows that slide off the vibro-nucklers, each hit repulsed sending searing vibrations and pain down the entire spine and skeleton of the Hapan.

“Twenty-five,” said Fenn to himself, “almost there.”

Fenn held his ground, and Klattoo ran at him with the speed only the musculature of a reptilian could reproduce. Raising his staff in a high arc he thrust down where Zagro was and missed. “How!” bellowed Klattoo.

The Nikto looked around in confusion and could not see his enemy. He swung defensive blows to his left and right, swinging his body wildly with each movement. Again Klattoo saw Fenn and launched at him at half pace, clearly learning his lesson.

“Ugly bug. Do you know how many of your kind I killed during the Vong Wars? I am amazed your kind didn’t help the Vong more. Aliens. All liars and murderers. Your kind has no honor, bug. If only I could find a Nikto hatchery and burn your hideous offspring in one blow!” screamed Fenn.

This enraged the Nikto, who swung his staff in blind abandon utilizing unprecedented force behind each blow. The man was not tiring, though, and was instantly on Fenn once more.

The staff took Zagro in the left knee, crumpling him to the ground. Klattoo bellowed in triumph and with both hand pounded the ground with the staff onto Zagro’s skull. Nothing.

“How? What sorcery is this Hapan?” snarled the Nikto.

Fenn appeared behind Klattoo and taunted him more mercilessly. “Idiot bug. Your mind is weak. My kind may be blind in this atmosphere because our suns bask us in light of the Gods and the beauty of our consortium. Yet, your kind is the hired slaves of the Hutts. It is too bad your kind is so ugly that the Hutts don’t deem it worthy to harass your women elsewise you would have been bred out ages eternal ago!” answered Fenn.

Klattoo spun around and opened his stance for the defensive. Yet the Hapan did not advance. “Come on now Hapan. You dishonor me with your words and lack of action.”

Zagro Fenn spat audibly in the direction of the Nikto. “Your speech is remarkable for your kind. Were you a household guard of a Hutt noble woman? How fair are your scales and words. Could it be a cartel member taught you to be his domestic lover perhaps?”

The rage was building in Klattoo. Abuse at the hands of the Hutts was an injustice his kind had become accustomed to ages ago. This from a weak and woman-like human was too much for him. Klattoo backed Fenn towards the wall with blow after blow that missed just barely each time. Klattoo was as frustrated as he was confused.

“I count fifty,” stated Fenn’s disjointed voice. The Nikto could see the Hapan before him yet the voice came from his rear. He twirled majestically spinning his staff creating a barrier before him. He spotted Fenn sitting not but nine meters away from his location.

Klattoo slowly inched towards the Hapan who did not move. “Die Hapan bitch!” screamed the Nikto as he dove headfirst with his staff at the ready, spearing the Krath through the stomach. “Look at you now pathetic coward!” bellowed Klattoo in prideful triumph. He removed his spear and the apparition of Fenn disappeared.

Dread and confusion perplexed the Nikto. He thought nothing. Two vibro-nucklers drove deep into the back of his neck, buckling the tall man to the ground, his legs flailing wildly like a dying beast.

“You had strength and power no doubt. But no brains bug. My manipulations and illusions bested you from the start. You were an honorable foe. May your people take solace in your legacy.” Zagro spoke slowly to the dying man.

An eruption of applause and hisses echoed the mood of the arena. Untold fortunes had been made and lost during this fight. It was unfair, however, thought Fenn. This should have been harder. The Nikto were notoriously susceptible to mental suggestions and manipulation. Fenn walked off cradling his left shoulder.

**The Lazy Mynock Cantina,**

**Vault Room**

**Nar Shaddaa**

***2 Hours Later***

The Weequay guards thronged the room eyeing all movement with a keen yet bored demeanor. Strega the Hutt sat on her bench and awaited the final count of credits the arena contest had brought in from the various gambling dens and personal arrangements between the leading kajidics. Initial counts suggested a staggering amount, even for Nar Shaddaa standards. Things were working exactly as Strega had planned. The fact that an old friend was the boon of her soon to be rapid rise up the cartel ranks was a thankful aspect she never planned for.

Her mind thus preoccupied, it was with a startled snap of the neck that Strega saw the wall projector come to life and a corpulent, event by Hutt standards, member of the Cartel appeared before her.

“Strega, congratulations on ensuring this windfall. The cartel is pleased with the results. This is just the beginning. Once the final counts have been arranged you are to report directly to me. There…have been complications for the next phase of this operation,” boomed the hologram.

“Syndicate Kreeggror, I will comply…next phase? This was not briefed to me?” asked Strega visibly startled.

The hologram betrayed an agitated and hostile look. “Strega. Now is not the time to be childish. Your champion Zagro Fenn is in grave danger. Do not dare to interfere.”

“Sir, he is my friend. The cartel comes first I have proven that. If any harm comes to him it will be by my actions alone,” rebuffed Strega.

It was the hologram’s turn to be startled. “Young one, how little you know and little less you understand. It is not the cartel that he needs to fear. It is his own people…”

The hologram flickered off. Strega was left alone in her thoughts and remembered better days and a friend now lost to her.