

Of all the watering holes on this dead planet she walked into mine. I normally don’t spare a second glance for tailheads but this one, she was a diamond in the rough. I knew of course she’d come here, all the intelligence had said so. She casually glanced my way as I took a slow drag from the deathstick, its cherry ember illuminating a soft orange patch of the faded scar along my jaw. Using two fingers I took the deathstick from my mouth and tapped it out in the plywood board that the keeper called a table. I could see the Duros’s scowl as I exhaled the smoke and fumes but he was mollified when he saw the creds piled where I’d been sitting.

The tavern was dimly lit, just bright enough that most humanoids could navigate the minefield of tables and chairs. With those giant globes in his head the barkeep could probably see like the light of day was in here. Don’t get me wrong, I’m no Speciest, but I haven’t had a lot of positive interactions with aliens. I’m not certain, but I think I approached her to prove this point.

The Duros had a Corellian Whiskey in front of me before I could order and I put up no complaint as I saddled up to the bar. She stood to my left fingering the rim of her blue something or other. It matched her skin and I found that appealing. After a moment my regards caught her attention and she looked up.

“Can I help you”, her voice was low and husky, betraying some inner pain.

Her eyes were striking and I let her feel my cool gaze a moment before answering, “Can’t say I’ve seen you around here before. Hehd, Richard Hehd.”

I offered my hand to her in greeting and withdrew it when it was apparent she wasn’t going to take it. I leaned my back up against the bar and took my bourbon in hand, “Perhaps I can help you. Most people don’t come here unless they have business, and helping others with theirs is mine.”

“You fancy yourself a Dick then?”, I appreciate moxy in a woman and she had it in trundles.

“I’ve been known to take up investigations from time to time”, I took a slow pull on my drink and traced the line of my mouth with my tongue to grab at the flavor, “But acquisitions is my specialty. I’ve also been known to do some cleaning from time to time.”

Director Edo had sent his orders to me the day before and I was on the lookout for possible leads. The Rite of Immortality was my mission. Jedi and Sith nonsense but it clearly meant a lot to them and it was clear to me this woman was hiding a light saber under her long coat. I could play it hard or I could play it smooth and that’s what I planned to do. Smooth was slow, but slow was fast when it didn’t come to a fight.

She looked me over, all 5 feet 11 inches, and made a decision. Grabbing her blue drink she started toward a table, “Are you coming?”

She chose a dark spot beside where I had been when she entered and I took a seat beside her with my back to the wall facing the entrance so that I could keep my eye on the comings and goings, “I don’t believe I caught your name Misses—“

“Its just Miss… Ms. Ust’essi”, she interjected to my amusement.

“I apologize Ms. Ust’essi”, the name rang in my ears calling up dossiers and profiles on covert agents suspected to be on the planet. She belonged to the Dark Councilor Telaris Cantor who was still loyal to the Clan and to Jac Cotelin. Good, one of my own.

“How may I be of assistance to you? I know many people around here and I have connections in many fields of expertise. You’ll also find my price very reasonable; I like payment in kind if you take my meaning.”

She leaned in closely, her free hand falling on my own on the table, “I’m sure we can come to an arrangmenet Mr. Hehd. You have a smoke?”

It was an easy thing to slip a deathstick from my coat pocket, light it in my own mouth, and hand it to her. She took a mindless drag as she considered how to begin, “I’m searching for someone: Someone who has something of mine.”

She offered the stick back to me and I worried at it for a moment considering, “This someone is dangerous or you would deal with them yourself. The something: is it dangerous as well?”

She leaned back in her chair, her feet resting on the seat across from her. She regarded me intensely while I studied the fit of her shirt, the cut of her expensive jacket and the vest underneath it. Her well-loved leather boots were heavily worn. If Han Solo had been a woman, a damn fine at that, and Twi’lek she would have nailed the look.

“Yes, he is quite dangerous. He took it from me and my sist—Nevermind that. It, the thing, is dangerous as well but only to those who know what it is and how to use it.”

I leaned forward as her scent filled my nostrils, pleasant and sweet, “And only a *Jedi* would know how to use it?”

She tensed and I watched warily as her hand instinctively shot to where her lightsaber hilt would be. He eyes became wild and focused, “Who are you Mr. Hehd? I can’t read you, or your emotions. Who do you work for?”

Satisfied with her reaction I popped my neck with a crook of my head and moved back into my chair, “I suspect we have similar objectives, you and I. You work for the Voice of the Brotherhood while I take my orders from the Taldryan Secret Intelligence Service. I believe I know what it is you seek and you’ll do me a great favor in telling me who it is in the possession of.”

It was clear that she was floored. He face was blank, her color had turned a noticeable shade lighter, and her breathing had stopped, “Well Mr. Hehd, it appears you had me a considerable disadvantage. I take it our meeting wasn’t a chance encounter then?”

“Hardly. No more so than those two characters that just walked in”, I smiled.

The Twi’lek woman glanced toward the door over the rim of her drink. She had good instincts in the field, I liked that. Her eyes studied them and as she casually set her drink down and took another drag from the last of the deathstick. She reached forward, grabbed my collar and pulled my face close to hers. The taste of the smoke and liqueur on her lips paled to the intoxication of the act itself. Everything told me to commit myself to the deception but the cold voice in the back of my head that’s kept me alive all these years reminded me to keep one eye on the men at the back of the bar.

The two men approached the bar and began questioning the barkeeper. I couldn’t hear what they were saying but it was clear that the keeper was becoming more and more uncomfortable. The men were tall, human, and wearing dark encompassing robes. They were Dark Jedi. Taldryan and its allies didn’t have any Foxtrot Uniforms in this sector yet, that’s why I was here doing their dirty work. I pulled the Jedi closer. She read my intention and climbed out of her seat slowly, crawling forward until her bosom was on my collar bone and she was straddling my lap.

Leading a line of kisses up her neck I whispered in her ear, “Follow my lead then out the back in ten, nine, eight—“

With my cadence in her head she nodded and trailed a hand down my chest and then into her jacket to where her saber was. My hand caressed the back of her thigh as it sank lower and across her lap and my chest to the shoulder-holstered 22T4 Hold-Out hanging there. In my mind the numbers ticked off and reached “one” at the same time the Duros barkeeper waved his hands and pointed urgently at us in the corner.

Simultaneously we burst into action. The gun was in my right hand, drawing across my chest. Ms. Ust’essi knocked the table over and barrel-rolled off of me as I opened fire. The two men had red lightsabers in their hands in an instant and had deflected the orange blaster bolts. Her lightsaber, blue like her, was in motion flying through the air. The man closest to us blocked the spinning blade and swiped at empty air to cleave the hilt but the weapon was already returning to its master’s outstretched hand. I looked for a way to distract them so we could make our escape and saw my salvation in a pipe labeled ‘hot’ over their heads. I took aim swiftly and fired two more shots, striking it with my first. A superheated blast of water exploded from the pipe upon the Dark Jedi and they cowered from it. The second one took one of my bolts to the face as I grabbed Ust’essi’s hand and darted for the back door while the first clutched his eyes from the steam. I fired a parting shot, catching him in the chest.

In an instant we were out the bar and racing down an alley way. I led her down its cramped confines, littered with trash and excrement, at a jog. When we made it out the other side and joined the crowd walking the street we slowed and caught our breath. Dreshdae wasn’t an exceptionally large city, nor was it bustling, but as the sole center of commerce in the system is made do for itself. Carts and stalls lined the street selling goods and necessities while people browsed, pushed their way through the mass of bodies, and avoided talking to one-another.

We walked side by side and I casually glanced about, ensuring we weren’t being followed. Finally convinced we were in the clear I grabbed her by the upper arm and forcefully shoved her into a door’s vestibule near to me. There I pinned her and got very close.

“Ok, let’s clear something up. Those Dark Jedi weren’t looking for me. You’ve got a mark on your head. Who knows who you are?”

She struggled and squirmed. Though a little taller than I she was slender and lithe were I was the finest block of muscle and tendon the SIS could produce, “Let go of me you ape! If you don’t—“

The Model Q2 that had slid from under my left sleeve fit snuggly in my palm and could be easily concealed though now it was pressed in her ribs, “If I don’t you’ll what? By now you’ve realized you can’t sense my thoughts and my feelings. Your suggestions and innuendos won’t bend me to do you bidding. I’m immune, Jedi. Now talk.”

“Not until you get your hand off of me”, Once my hand was gone she stood up straight and rolled her shoulders to work the tension out, “I recognized one of those two. He was from Clan Naga Sadow, the Grand Master’s alma mater.”

I knew enough of the Dark Jedi to know that Darth Ashen was a Sadow but I let her keep speaking, “My sister and I are covert agents for the VOICE. If *You* know that, then I suppose it wouldn’t be that great of a leap to say that they do as well.”

I didn’t buy it but it was all she was going to give me, “And your sister? You’re twins. Which one are you?”

Her Lekku twitched in irritation and sadness with a hint of fury. To those who could read the movement of the Twi’lek head-tails it made for excellent tells, “I am Rhiaen. My sister, Nalia, was killed.”

Well, that hit me in the gut and I backed off a step. I’ve done some ugly things but I’m thankful that I can at least still feel some emotions. SIS hadn’t taken everything from me in that regard, “Sorry to hear it. I’ve got a mission though, and so do you. Who has the Rite?”

“His name is Grey. He’s a Sith and a Conman. Like I told you, he’s dangerous.”

Satisfied I stepped back into the street and let her out of the vestibule. We walked in silence for a short while. It was getting dark and the street was beginning to thin out, “We should get a place for the night. My apartment is across town; too far away.”

She agreed and we found a seedy Inn. I paid for two rooms without asking her opinion and chose the one closest to the exit. I walked her to her door, opened it with the key card and entered. I checked the room for any surprises, not that there were any but old habits die hard. The telecom was probably bugged but that was a standard practice here in Dreshdae for blackmailing individuals. I told her as much before retiring to my room. Before I could close the door entirely I paused and looked at her.

“Listen, I think we got off to a bad start. I saw an Ithorian place next-door. Meet me there in an hour for dinner?”

She looked at me, framed in the doorway for a moment considering before nodding. I opened my own door and went in. It looked much the same in my room as it did in hers: Just clean enough to pass a visual inspection, a small gated window facing nothing at all, a fresher, and a bed that had more in common with a valley than a field. I passed the hour by cleaning up as best I could. I stripped my shirt off and wiped my upper body down with a wet wash cloth. My five o’clock shadow was coming in full now and it drew a dark cloud across my jaw and cheeks.

As I’d hoped the walls were thin here and when Rhiaen left her room the door clicking shut was perfectly audible. There’d be no sneaking out tonight. I gave her a several minute head start and followed her out. Dreshdae wasn’t known for its cuisine but anywhere you went in the Galaxy you’d find Aliens and Cultures cooking dishes in their own traditions. Ithorian was spicy, saucy, and barely edible by my standards but I’d survived on much worse.

She was seated at a table by the window, her back to the door. I’d have to teach her to mind her blind spots and exit paths. I sat down in the chair across from her anyhow, “What’s good here?”

She smiled coyly, “Its Ithorian, I wouldn’t describe it as good let alone edible”.

I liked her, I decided then. A good Broad with a head on her shoulders (and tails coming out of her head but I liked her). Business didn’t have to be drudgery and I did my best to clear the air between us. We were on a team, seeking the same outcome. There was no reason we couldn’t get along. She was less aloof than most Force Users I’d met. The Dark Jedi I’d encountered in training and in operations tended to be dusky characters; gloomy, serious, and dangerous. The few Jedi I’d seen had been righteous, holier than thou, and condescending in a passive-aggressive way as though they could smell the blood on my hands and detested it. I found them all to be hypocrites when it came to it. Clan Taldryan wasn’t Dark and the Jedi of Odan-Urr weren’t Light.

Our meal ended late in the night and we retired back to our rooms in better spirits and with a better appreciation of one another. I hovered at my door as she unlocked hers and entered. She saw me standing there and stopped. Without any words she smiled at me and closed the door behind her. I stood there a moment longer, considering, before I went into my own and stripped down to sleep. With a blaster under my pillow I listened to the night for an hour before drifting off to sleep.

Morning announced its arrival with the argent light of Horuset peeking through my tiny porthole of a window. I pulled myself out of the bed and sat there on the side, my elbows on my knees, for a few minutes working the night’s kinks out of my shoulders, back, and neck. Kitted back up I left the room and rapped gently on Rhiaen’s door. She answered shortly after similarly ready to go. We left, deposited our keys with the Inn’s owner, and began to discuss our course of action.

“This man Conner has the Rite. Last night you said you didn’t know his whereabouts or destination, right?”

Rhiaen nodded, “Yeah, but I gave that some thought I had an idea. Grey knows he’s got to get rid of that thing as soon as possible and he can’t give it to Esoteric, Cotelin, or Ashen; they’d kill him on principal. He needs a middle-man.”

I knew just what she meant, “An artifact broker. Good call. I know of a guy, on this side of town actually, who deals with the highest rollers. If anyone has heard from Grey, its him.”

We walked there and made it to the store I was thinking of in about an hour. It windows were boarded up and the sign announcing the shop’s purpose has leaning against the masonry. Rhiaen looked at me, confused, and I shrugged, “This is Gru Haama’s store. Let’s see what’s going on. Follow my lead.”

I tried the door and found it unlocked. I noticed a pile of scrap metal by the door and the various empty shelves around the store. The door’s movement was announced by the dangle of bells attached to it and the sound of crashing in the back answered it. A small man, a Rodian, came scurrying out, alarmed, and stopped when he saw us.

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m very sorry. I’m closed. Please leave.”

“Whoa there, settle down Mr. Haama”, I put my hands up before me to calm him down.

The little man, barely five feet tall and rat-like, gestured emphatically at the door, “No, I must insist! I am closed. Good day! Leave or I’ll put my Security Droid on you!”

“Would that be the droid by the door with the hole through its processor?” Rhiaen asked.

The Rodian froze allowing me to walk up to his sales desk, “Where’s the rush? What’s going on here?”

“There’s a war on, if you haven’t heard! War is bad for business and war is bad for health. I’m getting out of town and you will too if you know what’s good for you!”

“Listen, friend, I only want to ask you a few questions”, I drew the 22T4 from its place under my arm and gently placed it on the counter where he could see it.

Gru’s eyes went wide, “Listen! I told the guys who came in yesterday! I don’t know where Conner Grey is. He came in two days ago, didn’t like the price I offered, and left! That’s it, I swear.”

I looked at Rhiaen, incredulous and pleased, “Okay… Now pretend that we don’t know who came in yesterday.”

I think he realized he’d said too much and became nervous, “I don’t want no trouble, Mister. I just want to close my shop and leave, okay?”

“And I don’t want to give you any trouble but unless you answer my questions, truthfully, you might get some.”

The Rodian put on his tough face and stood up tall, his whiskers bristling, “I already told I don’t know anything! Now leave!”

I picked up the blaster pistol though I didn’t aim it anything in particular but I let the threat speak for itself, “Okay. I don’t think you’re understanding something here so I’ll lay out straight for you, got it? My friend over there has ways of telling me if you’re lying or not. You understand?”

Tapping the side of my head with the gun barrel so he got the meaning I saw it take hold in him, “Jedi? Oh no-no-no… Listen, the other two—they told me they’d hurt me and they were Jedi too!”

“I’ll hurt you now if you don’t start talking. There are two outcomes here Mr. Haama. One: you tell me what I want to know and we walk out of here and you’re alive. Two: I don’t hear something I like and we walk out of here and you’re dead. Do we understand each other now?”

A heavy silence hung in the air. I had a feeling Rhiaen’s delicate Jedi sensibilities were standing on end but the Rodian was near hysterical from fear. After a moment Gru began to nod, “Okay, okay. Two men came in yesterday. Tall, dark, Human. They showed me their lightsabers to scare me and asked where Conner Grey was. I told them I didn’t know.”

I looked at Rhiaen, she was leaning against a wall with her arms crossed over her chest, and she nodded to me that he was telling the truth, “Well, that’s one thing we’ve cleared up. The good news is that we killed them yesterday afternoon.”

Gru Haama’s eyes popped open in surprise, “Truly?”

“Truly”, I agreed, “Now… Where is Conner Grey?”

The Artifact Broker swallowed and took a long look at Rhiaen who stood against a wall silently, “He’s—He told me to meet him at the Mynock Café in Town Center two days from when he came in. He said if I was there with a buyer in mind we could do the transaction then. If I didn’t show up, he’d find someone else.”

Again, I looked at the Jedi. She bit her lip lightly in concentration and then nodded, “He’s telling the truth.”

I smiled, “Good. Did he give you a time?”

“Uhh, yes. I’m supposed to be there at 2.”

Checking my chrono I made some calculations and determined we could get their by 1 if we left now, “Great. Grab whatever you need, we’re going”.

“We? Going?”, the Rodian stammered, “You said you’d leave when I told you what you wanted!”

“You told me, and now *we* are leaving. Grab your stuff.”

We left the store: Rhiaen, Gru, and I. I set a brisk pace towards Town Center where the Mynock Café was. It would be busy, populated, and a perfect place to conduct a meeting. From an accessory pouch I pulled two nubs. I squeezed one into my ear and moved my jaw around to fit it properly and handed one to Rhiaen who did similarly while Gru was unaware. We could now hear and speak to one-another without lifting a finger.

“Listen Gru. I want you to tell him you found a buyer, but when he asks how much you’re willing to pay I want you to low-ball him. Don’t gouge him, make it realistic. Get him to tell you where the artifact is; ask to see it to verify its rarity and authenticity.”

“If he’s a Jedi too, won’t he know if I’m lying?”

Rhiaen spoke calmingly, clearly making an attempt to settle the poor man’s nerves, “If he seems to suspect something, you tell him you’re aware of who is looking for this artifact and it has you on edge. Your nervousness may play to your advantage.”

The Rodian was jittery and he nodded as he listened, “And where will you two be? You’ll protect me? How will I signal you if I’m in danger?”

Rhiaen placed a hand on the short alien’s shoulder, “We’ll be inside the Café with you but you won’t see us. Don’t worry, we’ll be listening and watching.”  
  
 “And once he show’s me the artifact? What then?”

“Draw him outside, tell him you have to take him to the money at your bank or something”, I suggested.

That seemed to calm him somewhat though he still looked like a frightened rodent to me, “Gru. Go inside, pick a nice table for yourself on the first floor.”

I walked up him and straightened his collar and preened his tweed jacket of a few stray hairs; he didn’t notice the small transmitter I placed under his lapel, “Order a drink if it will help you calm down , but don’t overdo it.”

With that Gru walked in to the Mynock Café across the street. We followed him in after a few minutes and split up ourselves. The Mynock was really more of a bazaar than café. It had a large interior courtyard where drinks soft and hard could be ordered and enjoyed. Ringing the courtyard were several terraced levels of shops and boutiques. Rhiaen found a table on a patio a level up from the courtyard with a clear line of sight on the whole place while I walked around examining the people and goods present.

Gru took a seat in a corner, his back to two walls of brick masonry, facing the entrance. Good on him. A server delivered a small cup of Caf and a rock glass of something amber which he immediately began to worry away at. I hoped he didn’t frek this up too quickly. After I had inspected the entire Café I found my way to a table opposite Rhiaen’s and similarly looked down on the courtyard.

*“Do you see anyone you recognize?”* I asked Rhiaen over our ear-coms.

*“No. Not yet.”*

I accepted the Caf a server brought me and took a sip, *“You look like an Ebon Hawk over there. Tone it down. Look at people while drinking, look away from your newspaper occasionally like something caught your interest. Conner will be on the lookout for surveillance.”*

Over the next few minutes I watched her from my table across the courtyard and smiled, pleased that she was doing better. She and her sister were covert agents, but it was clear that they’d engaged in a far different Game of Espionage than I. Several small birds took flight as a square-built man in a flowing cloak walked in from the entrance. The man looked around the enclosure like he was looking for someone, which caught my attention, before he went to the bulletins pinned to a nearby wall. I yawned.

*“That man, in the cloak, who’s examining the bulletins: what about him?”*

Rhiaen took a moment, *“No, his shoulders are too broad and his head too round.”*

I took another drink and looked around and came back to the same man and again felt drowsy. I tried to focus on him but my eyes began to grow heavy. I had to blink a few times and yawn to get the weariness out of my system, *“Force Users can sense others when they use their powers, right?”*

*“Generally.”*

*“If Conner were using a power, to say cast an illusion over himself would you be able to feel it?”*

*“Maybe. This whole planet emanates with the Dark Side and casts a lot of, call it background noise. He’d have to be casting a hell of an illusion.”*

The more I tried to stare at the man the more tired I became, *“Look at that guy again. I can’t seem to keep my eyes focused on him.”*

*“Me neither. I keep getting tired and have to blink it off. Wait, he’s approaching Gru.”*

Rhiaen was right and I watched the man make a circuitous route around the courtyard until he was standing in front of the Rodian artifact broker. Through our ear pieces we could hear everything they said.

*“Mr. Grey, I’m glad to see you”*, the alien took the man’s hand and shook it vigorously.

The man took one last look around and then seated himself beside Gru with a view of the courtyard and entrance, *“I am relieved to see you here, I’ll admit. Your tepidness the other morning concerned me.”*

*“I—well it was so hard to determine which of my buyers to contact, you see, without having verified the goods myself”,* Gru spread his hands before him apologetically.

As if by magic, and I suppose it was of a sort, the illusion surrounding Grey dropped leaving a shocking top of blonde hair and a weathered face smiling amicably, *“But you did find a buyer?”*

*“Oh yes, yes indeed!”*, I really hoped Gru wouldn’t overdo it and blow the show so soon but it appeared Grey was buying it so far.

*“What do we do if Gru screws the pooch? Grey is going to take off like a Mynock out of hell”*, Rhiaen didn’t seem to be aware of the allusion she’d just made.

*“I’ll improvise”*, I had a plan.

*“My buyer is interested, Mr. Grey, but I’m afraid that they can only offer you—let’s say seven-hundred”*, I had a feeling the word thousand was implied.

Grey leaned back in his seat and took the glass containing the last of Haama’s liquor, *“Oh. That’s really too bad. I had a sum, slightly larger, in mind…”*

Gru watched the man down the liquor, *“Well it’s difficult to assuage my client’s doubts without seeing the artifact first. Perhaps if I could examine it?”*

Grey’s eyes narrowed as he studied the Rodian, *“Something have you edge, Mr. Haama? I can feel your thoughts and they are… uncertain. You wouldn’t be lying to me, would you?”*

I clamped down on my nerves as my heart rate shot through the roof. Gru could ruin everything right here, *“No! Of course not! Its just that… Well some men came looking for you yesterday and gave me an idea of who was after this artifact of yours. I told them to bugger off but they destroyed my security droid anyhow.”*  
  
 Grey seemed to consider the matter for a moment before nodding. Conner hefted a canvas satchel from the ground to his lap, rooted around in it and pulled out a plastic tube, perhaps 40cm long and 15cm in diameter. He handed this to Gru who looked it over and discovered the screw off cap. From the tube he extracted a smaller cylinder but this one was wrought of silver and electrum, encrusted in dark red gem stones, and engraved with arcane and unreadable script. From my vantage point I could see Gru’s eyes grow wide in wonder.

*“Its marvelous! Where did you say you found this?”*

Grey rested an elbow on the table as he placed the now empty rock glass down, *“I didn’t. Open it up, it’s the pointy side. There’s one hell of a Scroll in there. Surely your client would consider it worth—a million?”*

Gru pulled the pointed spire to the side revealing the interior of the artifact and extracted a piece of vellum parchment. It was in good condition, I assume, as the Rodian took no extreme precautions in unrolling it aside from donning a pair of spotless white fiber gloves.

*“One million, you say? No wonder, no wonder… This is simply marvelous. Look at the script, the scrawl, the intricacy of the diagrams! It makes reference to many concepts I’m not familiar with but it seems to involve a rite of--”*, Grey cut him off.

*“Enough. The price is one million credits or I walk. You’ve got plenty of competition in town that will pay and pay quick-like, you hear me?”*

Gru blinked a few times, *“Uh, of course. You refer to Corsby and Sons. They will pay but only in signatory bonds. I’m the only broker in town that will pay up front, in credits.”*

Rhiaen sounded amused when her voice came in, *“He’s really getting into character now, isn’t he?”*

*“Quiet, I think Gru’s about to make his play.”*

*“One million credits then. It’s a little more than I had prepared at the store, you understand. We’ll have to walk to my Credit Union, it’s near the shop”*, Gru finished his Caf and waited to see what Conner thought.

Grey took a moment to consider. His eyes wandered over the courtyard and the people going about their business, *“Ok. Lead on. Oh and Mr. Haama?”*

*“Yes, Mr. Grey?”*

*“No freckery. I don’t like getting worked over while doing business, understand me?”*

Gru swallowed, *“Perfectly”*.

I waited for Grey and Haama to exit the Mynock before I stood and grabbed my coat off the seat beside me. Rhiaen met me at the stairwell and together we rushed out the back and down the alley bordering the Café. Over Gru’s inane chatter we discussed the quickest way to get ahead of those two. At a jog we ran parallel to the course Gru would take to lead Conner back to his store from the Mynock Café until we felt like we were a half-kilometer ahead or so. Cutting back to the street where we would find our target passing by I pointed to a place where the street narrowed. A high wall on one side had a metal gate with significant pillars bracketing it. People milled about among merchant stalls and a small, shallow circular pool before the gate. It was perfect: Conner would never see us coming.

“We can’t ambush him here!” Of course she would object.

I shrugged at her and pointed out the people who would conceal us, the physical impediment to Conner’s escape, and the scarcity of exits from this plaza, “If nothing else all these people’s thoughts will help us blend in. Our intent will be hard to discern in a crowd of hostile, disgruntled citizens.”

She stared at me in disbelief, “I don’t even want to think about how you know that will work. I just don’t want any collateral casualties.”

Truth was we were taught all sorts of strategies for subverting the strengths and powers of Jedi and Sith alike in Cipher training. We wouldn’t be much good at our job if we couldn’t sneak up on a Dark Jedi or hide from a Jedi chasing after us, “I won’t kill anybody, if it can be helped. I’m going to snatch that satchel and blend into the crowd. If all goes well he won’t even know its gone and if he does, he won’t know who took it and where it went.”

“And if that doesn’t work?”

I shrugged again, “I’ll improvise. You stand over there, by the pool, and jump in if you think I need help. It should be obvious.”

“And what happens to Gru when Conner finds out he’s been played?”

“I don’t know and I don’t care. You want that scroll? Good, get to the pool and keep your eyes open”, I walked to one of the pillars and watched the crowd pass by, ignoring the icy daggers her beautiful eyes gouged me with.

Over the ear-com she announced, *“I see them, to your right.”*

*“Ok, here I go.”*

I casually left the pillar and began to walk into the crowd. There was an art to blending in and I knew it. Body language had to be neutral, movements had to be organic, and the snatch would have to be fluid. I had a small, sharp, falciform knife in my right palm that I would use to slash the strap of the satchel. I’d grab it, melt into the press of bodies, and disappear before Conner was any they wiser. I saw him ahead; he was taller than Gru though when I got closer I could see the bob of the top of the Rodian’s skull. I moved the opposite direction of them and made sure as I closed Gru, who continued to blabber on inanely about this and that, didn’t see me. I bumped into Conner lightly, like any other person attempting to slip past in the crowd would and my hand slashed and snatched in a single motion.

That’s when it started to go south. The strap cut easily and the top of severed cord was in my hand when something clamped down like a vise on my wrist. My eyes met his and in that moment the world froze. I had no telepathic powers and I knew for a fact that his counted for nothing against me but I could read him all the same. He knew what I was, what was happening, and what was going to happen. I saw it then, in slow motion.

The hilt of the lightsaber was pointed at my sternum, though the blade hadn’t yet emerged. My body turned sideways, narrowly missing being impaled as the white blade sprung forth. He attempted to swipe it sideways at my throat but I ducked low and swept my foot through his legs toppling him. He let go of my wrist in his fall. I stretched my left arm out and felt the Q2 slide into my palm and I quickly drew my 22T4 with my right. I pointed the smaller blaster at Conner who lay on his back at my feet and the larger at the crowd which now ringed us. The satchel momentarily forgotten on the ground.

“Everyone stay back, no need for dead heroes today! You stay where you are too Conner, you might walk away from this yourself.”

He spat at me, “You frelling maggot! You’d better shoot me now or I swear to the Seven Hells I’ll find you and gut you!”

Rhiaen stepped from the crowd, her saber hilt grasped in one hand and an ELG-3A Sport Blaster in her other. When Conner saw her he froze and then smiled, “Well, hello little girl. Where’s your other half?”

Rhiaen glared at him, “You shut your mouth.”

“Come to take the Rite back already? I’m surprised. Necren will be pleased, if I know her.”

I looked at Rhiaen for clarification but Conner saw my confusion, “What? She didn’t fill the hired gun in? Let me tell you something about Ms. Ust’essi—”

Conner Grey’s face exploded. Blaster bolts do funny things to skulls. Whatever organic tissue the energy bolt strikes is quickly burnt and charred but the skin stretched over bone is far too thin to dissipate all of the energy and much of it travels through the bone and into the cranial cavity. Most brains are primarily fatty tissue surrounded by a watery substance. When struck by the super energetic plasma of a blaster this water and fat vaporize instantaneously and expands with significant force. Any orifice it can find to escape becomes a relief valve. The funny part is that neither of my blasters had fired the shot.

“What the frell did you do that for!? No killing I thought was our objective”

She stooped down to grab the satchel, ignoring the scrambling crowd which now sought to get away from the scene as fast as possible, “Come on, we have to get out of here.”

Gru stood, eyes wide and white, against a wall at the side of the street. I left him standing there as Rhiaen and I took off. My apartment, rented less than a month prior, was only a kilometer away and took us little time to get there by mid-afternoon. We didn’t say much in that time which suited me just fine as I worked through a number of things going through my head. Rhiaen obviously didn’t want me to hear about someone named Necren who might be giving her orders. A Jedi willing to kill one of her own in the blink of an eye. This Rite of Immortality the Dark Jedi were so set upon.

As we approached the ground level door that opened up to steps that led to the second story apartment my eyes scanned the empty street in both directions. It was typically deserted and quiet. The door was still locked, as I’d left it a few days earlier, but the tiny jam I’d placed in the hinge crease was missing. Someone had come by to snoop. Chances were that they were long gone and hadn’t found anything damning within. All the same I allowed the sleeve slide to slyly place the Q2 Hold Out in my palm again, Rhiaen didn’t noticed, and I unlocked the door. We climbed the stairs and entered the apartment. It was much as I’d left it and empty so the gun slid back up my coat-sleeve.

“We’ll talk, but I need to use the ‘fresher”, Rhiaen dumped her own coat over the back of a chair.

“Through there”, I motioned carelessly toward the door on her left and proceeded to the kitchen when I dumped the satchel. I quickly took the plastic tube out and examined it. It seemed to be the same one Conner had shown to Gru. I opened it, slid the vessel out and gave that a once over. I opened a drawer, rummaged for something and found it. As the door to the ‘fresher opened and Rhiaen slid out I was just screwing the cap to the plastic tube back on.

“I imagine you have some questions?” She said, sitting at the foot of my bed.

The apartment, really more of a studio flat, combined the living and sleeping areas into one compact square space and was divided from the kitchen only by a thin buffet over which I looked at her, “A couple. First, where did that come from? You just shot him.”

Rhiaen did her best to look bashful, “I—he killed my sister. It just happened. I couldn’t help it.”

That was a crock of poodoo but I said nothing.

She sat herself on the edge of my bed, “Necren is one of my contacts here on Korriban. The VOICE put my sister and I under her command for the duration of our mission.”

That was a lie too. I’d figure it out sooner or later when I gave Director Edo a call, “Okay. We’ll talk more about this later tonight. Right now, let’s talk plans.”

She suppressed a look of surprise but I saw it all the same, “Well, it’s still light out. We could contact my superiors and report that we have the Rite.”

“That seems like a great way to bring a lot of attention down on us. There’s no way to tell who knows where we are, how they know us, and if they’re listening to our communications”, the break-in was very much in my mind.

“Then we hole up here for the night and in the morning we take a walk to the spaceport?”, She stretched her arms over head, accentuating the curve of her torso and the fit of her meager shirt.

I grinned at her, “There’s no reason why it should sound so boring…”

“You have something in mind?”, her smile was the invitation I was looking for.

I left the tube and the satchel in the kitchen and crossed around the buffet to where she still sat on my bed. I took her hand and drew her up into standing. I placed a hand on her hip, the other moved around to the small of her back and brought her in close to me. We kissed. Her surrender could be felt like the breaking of a wave; she was firm at first and then just melted in my hands. Hands grasped at flesh, shirts piled on the ground and fingers fumbled with buttons. I grabbed the back of her legs and lifted. She jumped, curling them around my hips and draped her arms over my shoulders and behind my head so that I supported her entire weight. I carried her, still locked on her lips with my own, to the nearest wall and pressed her back up against it.

I awoke to spears of light shooting through my window’s slated blinds. As I lay there on my back I considered the half-smoked deathstick already in my mouth and smiled, wondering how it’d gotten there. I reached for the lighter on my bedside and found a note there instead. I looked right and saw the rest of the bed was empty and so was the apartment. I sat up and read the letter there.

*Richard,*

*Please don’t hate me for what I’ve done. I won’t offer you any excuses and I don’t ask for your forgiveness, only your understanding. Had we met at another time we might have been able to make something work but right now our goals run contrary to one-another. If you’re smart you’ll leave Dreshdae as soon as you read this. Don’t look for me, or the Rite.*

*~Rhiaen*

That clingy bitch. I’d half-expected something like this but it didn’t take the sting away at all. I sat there in the silence of my apartment for a moment before climbing from the bed and went into the kitchen. I prepared some Caf and rummaged in a bag for my Datapad. If the burglars had found it the other day they hadn’t been able to break past the initial security screen which scanned my face, asked for a thumb print on the screen and three different passwords (one typed and two spoken).

I keyed a Priority Request to Talk under communications and awaited dispatch to get back to me. Priority apparently meant twenty minutes which allowed me time to prepare a light breakfast.

“Cipher 2-Besh, this is SIS Dispatch”, the datapad sat on the counter as I spooned eggs from the pan to my plate.

“I need to speak to Actual, video if you please”.

A few minutes passed before the face of Roth Edo, the head of Secret Intelligence’s Cipher Branch, came up, “2-Besh, good to see you alive. We hadn’t heard from you in several weeks so I’d started playing with the idea of selling your crap and writing an obituary”.

“Bantha poodoo, Edo. Ciphers don’t get obituaries.”

The older man grinned sardonically. His stubble outshone my own reminding me it was time to freshen up, “You wouldn’t be calling in if it wasn’t important so you might as well lay it out for me, Hehd.”

“Yes Sir”, I asked about who Necren was, if the VOICE knew his Jedi girl was working for her, and the status of Conner Grey within the Brotherhood. I told him I’d located the Rite of Supremacy.

“Seven hells, Richard! You’ve been busy. Where to start…”, Roth Edo brought up a dossier for me to inspect while he began to talk about Necren, “Iktotchi, female, somewhere in her forties. She’s one bad Mamah-Jamah. I’m told by my superiors that she was an assassin at large, at the beck and call of the Brotherhood’s ruling council. She’s exceptionally dangerous, even to Dark Jedi of surpassing skill. She is considered a high value target for capture or kill but our Agents are to avoid contact and engagement.”

“And Richard?”, his voice was ice cold, “By avoid I want you to take me to mean you are *forbidden* from seeking contact and engagement with this person. Do you understand me?”

“Perfectly”, the lie came easily, “I’ll need an extraction later this evening at EZ Osk.”

Roth nodded, pleased, and crossed his hands in front of his mouth, “Good to hear. I think the Proconsul will be satisfied with the work you’ve done. Your extraction will meet you at the farm.”

A quick trip to the ‘fresher saw my emerging beard trimmed down to a hint of a shadow and a quick shower. I pulled on fresh clothes, donned my various weapons and tools, and took one last look at the apartment. I memorized the position of everything and locked the front door behind me, placing the hidden jam in its place. I walked down the street considering my options. Roth’s dossier on Necren had included hints as to where she might be found though I doubted I had enough time to screen each option to find Rhiaen and her.

My job was made simple when a black, unmarked Speedercar pulled up alongside me and two men in black suits climbed out. They were both holding heavy blasters and wore grim faces. The men, human both, approached me with weapons pointed at my chest. The tallest gestured to the wall beside me, “Hands above your head, face against the brick, spread your legs.”

“Hey now, Gents… I don’t want no troub—”

The shorter one used a single hand to spin me around and force me up against the wall. He patted down the contours of my body and found the shoulder-holstered 22T4 which he removed and tossed at the ground. His search of my arms found the slide and my leg the ankle holster. He tossed these to the ground as well before continuing. Within a minute he’d removed the short blade I’d used yesterday to slice the satchel at my belt and the long, straight dagger strapped against my spine under my coat. He unbuckled my accessory belt and declared me bereft of weapons.

“Get in the speeder”, the tall one ordered

“Okay, okay. I’m playing nice. Could you get your friend here to collect my goods?”

The short one pushed me forward harshly toward the car and I put myself into the backseat with the tall one’s gun still pointed my direction. Inside I found two men, a Zabrak in the driver seat and a brown-skinned Bith in the passenger seat who had a hold-out pistol pointed at my face. Tall and Short climbed in to the back of the rather spacious speeder, one beside me and the other in the backwards facing seat against the driver’s position. Tall tossed some electro-cuffs at me and indicated I should put them on myself, and once I had, he ensured they were properly taught.

“So now we’re all familiar, who would like to introduce themselves first?”, I was answered by a cabin full of mutes, “Nice to meet you all. Shall we grab a drink now that we’re all friends?”

The ride passed in silence until we arrived around the back of a Dance Bar. I was taken from the vehicle and led in through the back entrance. This led to the Kitchen which was busy with cooks and assistants preparing various foods for the day. The staff pretended not to notice us, a man in electro-cuffs escorted at each arm by a suited goon holding a blaster, and went about their own business. Through the Kitchen we entered a corridor that led to a stairwell that went up and down. We went up, past a goon standing guard at the door. This led to a lavishly appointed private room. The far wall was semi-circular, entirely made of glass and looked out on a mostly empty dance floor in the bar proper.

The room had its own drink bar in the corner and the rest of room was divided among couches and standing tables. There were people in the private room already. Rhiaen was held by the arm by another suited goon, her face looking like it had seen the blunt side of a fist a handful of times since we’d parted. Seated in the couch were several individuals, among which was a woman in dark colored robes. She was Iktotchi.

“You must be Mr. Hehd”, the woman was well spoken and didn’t have the touch of an accent most of her kind carried even with practice.

I shrugged. Refusing to take the situation too seriously I let her see some of my cards, “You must Necren.”

The Dark Jedi laughed lowly and locked her eyes on me, “You’re a wily one, Cipher. That smile won’t last long, though.”

So she knew what I was. I figured it was time play my hand, “I see you have the lovely Rhiaen here as well so I must assume you weren’t too pleased with the gift she delivered this morning.”

Necren stood and walked up to me and grabbed my jaw in her hand. The goons holding my arms released me and took several steps backward, “None too pleased all.”

The plastic tube rose from beside where she had been seated, I hadn’t seen it lying there, and it floated gracefully to her outstretched hand. Grasping it she opened the screw-top and gingerly extracted the vessel within. The electrum finish and silver inlay was noticeably tarnished and burned, significantly worse for the wear than it had been yesterday or the last 5000 years. I never broke eye contact with Necren as she opened the scroll container, inverted it, and let ashes and what looked like small pieces of burnt vellum pour all over my boots and the carpet. The look on Rhiaen’s face wasn’t nearly as satisfying as I had hoped it would have been. A large bruise was forming over her eye and a drop of blood slowly peeling down her cheek from her temple.

“Would you care to explain why you lit a torch and dropped it into a priceless Sith Artifact?” The sweetness in Necren’s voice was turning acidic with each passing moment.

“Seemed the prudent thing to do; all things considered. Between your men and Ashen’s what chance did I have to get it out of town?”

“Indeed. Well, fortunately for you getting out of town is no longer a concern. Take him downstairs, Jasper is waiting for them both.”

She returned to her seat and watched as Rhiaen and I were both escorted out the door and down the steps. We continued down the steps past the corridor into a basement level that grew noticeably colder with each step. A steel door greeted us at the bottom and opened into a refrigerated room where carcasses of various animals hung from the ceiling on hooks secured to a rail-system. A man stood in the center of the room beside two empty hooks and a rolling cart. We were led toward him were I got a better look at the assortment of tools upon the cart; there were medical implements, blades, wrenches, pliers, and gruesome tools of all sorts carefully laid out as though prepared for a surgeon’s hands. The man, presumably Jasper, indicated the hooks with his head as he methodically polished a small single-bladed knife that ended in a fearsome reverse hook.

One of the men that escorted me gave me a push when my pace slowed to examine the tools sending me tumbling forward into Jasper. My hands caught my momentum against his stomach and though he pushed me off quickly he failed to notice when my fingers rifled through his vest pockets deftly. The goons draped our electro-cuffs over the hooks and winched them high enough that we were left hanging with only the balls of our feet on the ground. Wordlessly Jasper dismissed the men and waited until they’d left to begin.

From behind the cart he pulled a butcher’s smock and donned it. With it tied and secured behind his back he took his time rolling up his sleeves meticulously. Finally prepared he looked at us directly for the first time. It was queer how he stared at first at me, then at Rhiaen, as though we were no different than the frozen carcasses hanging around the room. He considered the implements at his side and selected a scalpel with care and approached us. He stopped, standing between us before selecting Rhiaen to start.

“No! You frelling bastard! I’m first”, I screamed at him and attempted to kick at him but he was out of reach.

Rhiaen said nothing, though she was clearly fearful, as Jasper slid up alongside her and slid his left arm around the small of her back. With the scalpel under her shirt he tore it open and parted the cloth exposing her toned abdomen. He made quick work of her supporting under-garment in a similar manner and uncovered her ample bosoms. With the Jedi silently whimpering in his arms Jasper watched me as I struggled and tried to loose myself from the hook. All my efforts earned me were jolts from the shock cuffs. It was time to shift gears. From between my fingers I eased the pin I’d snatched from Jasper’s pocket and started to worry at the lock as the sadist turned his attention back to Rhiaen.

Jasper traced several lines across her skin with a finger before he settled on a course of action. Lightly he took the blade of scalpel and laid it atop the curve of her breast and drew a long, slow line with it. To her credit she didn’t make a noise and looked as though she were doing her best to retreat into some Jedi meditation or something. The quiet man repeated the maneuver across the top of her other breast and decided he was done with his first course. He left her side as a stream of blood poured symmetrically down the line of her chest and sternum. Jasper placed the scalpel back on the cart delicately. His long thin fingers flitted over several instruments as he watched my reaction to each one. Each time he looked at me I palmed the small pin and stopped my attempts to escape.

His hand hovered for a moment over the small knife he’d polishing a few minutes before but he chose instead a roll of binding tape. He ripped a long piece off and looked at me curiously. When he moved, it was with surprising swiftness. He dove low and grabbed both my legs with one motion and wound the length of tape around my ankles with another. Satisfied with his work he stood up and used his free hand to move his long blonde hair back into place over his forehead. He put the roll of tape back and selected some surgical scissors he used to slice my shirt up the front similarly to how he’d done Rhiaen’s. Then he picked up a pair of forceps and a curious U*-*shaped blade.

He glided up to me, and even though I struggled to kick him with both legs it hurt too much to put all my weight on the electro-cuffs that also shocked me if they perceived I was struggling too much. Jasper trailed a finger over my chest, tracing lines of varying intricacy over my pectoral muscles and down my midline to my belt. With delicacy he gripped my left nipple with his forceps, squeezing it firmly, and pulled it back to stretch it out. He then hooked the blade around the backside and suddenly I understood. Jasper looked in my eyes as he pulled the blade across and severed the nipple from my chest effortlessly.

I roared in fury and pain. I’d never felt anything so awful; no training could prepare you for what amounted to the flaying of a million nerve endings. I nearly dropped my improvised pick in my writhing agony but managed to keep it in hand through sheer determination. Jasper liked what he saw, and apparently had a penchant for symmetry, because he grabbed my other nipple in his forceps and severed it as well. A stream of blood ran down my chest and mingled with the draped cloth of my shirt and coat to either side.

He placed his tools back on the cart and cracked his neck while deciding his next move. My vision was a little blurry from the pain but my mind was clear. I resumed my work on the cuffs, redoubling my efforts. I didn’t even bother to stop when the sadist turned around with the wicked knife in his hand. He had eyes for Rhiaen only and sashayed over to her. He ran the flat of the blade over her blue skin, drawing it over her cheek and neck and savored the fearful quiver in her jaw as she tried to move her head away from the weapon. My heart skipped a beat when I felt the click in my left wrist. I was certain everyone in the room had heard it but after a heartbeat I knew that it had only been in my head. Jasper led the knife, flat against her skin still, across the length of one of her Lekku. I saw his fingers flourish as he twirled the knife in his palm and inverted its direction to plunge it into one of the vulnerable head tails. I acted swiftly, popping the remaining lead in my cuff with the pin, dropped to the floor, and launched into a lunge. With my feet still bound the leap was clumsy and I only managed to crash into his midsection but it was enough to knock the slight man to the floor before he could harm the Jedi.

The knife flashed before my eyes and drew red lines across my head and forearms before I was able bat the weapon from his hands. I managed to pin him below me, able to spread my knees enough to bracket his hips, and savaged his face and neck with my hand and the electro-cuff still attached to my right arm. Though his mouth was open no sound came out aside from a rush of empty air as though his ability to make noise had been taken away. I poured my pain and anger into one horrendous left cross that connected with his temple, the blood from my wounds splattering across his smock. From the way his head snapped right and his whole body went limp beneath me I knew that he was done. Panting, I pushed myself to my feet and stared at the body there. I used the knife to sever the tape and looked at Rhiaen.

“Are you alright?”

She nodded though she still said nothing. I lifted her off the hook and found the pin on the ground and used to remove both of our restraints (a much easier practice when I could see the devices). I took the remnants of her shirt and ripped a length off one side and laid it across the deep cuts Jasper had inflicted upon her and zipped her coat up over the improvised bandage.

“We need to get out of here before Necren discovers what’s happened”, Rhiaen gasped suddenly, seemingly emerging from her shock.

I took a deep breath, “Ok give me a second.”

Rifling through Jaspers belongings and the small bag he’d hidden at the foot of his cart I found a Model 434 Heavy Blaster Pistol, called a Death Hammer in some sectors, and a Model 57. I grabbed both immediately and handed one to her, “Let’s go.”

We approached the door silently, and listened for a guard on the other side. I looked at Rhiaen for confirmation and she shook her head. I opened it, thankful that it was nearly noiseless on its hinges, and together we ascended to the ground floor corridor. There we paused. I knew that a guard stood at the top of the next flight and would see us as soon as we stepped out. I turned to Rhiaen and grabbed her lightly by her shoulders.

“There’s something I’ve got to do—”

Her eyes got wide and she whispered harshly, “No! You’ll die! Necren is too strong! Please, let’s just leave here together and forget this war; we’ll run away somewhere!”

It was my turn to shake my head, “You need to get out of here as fast as you can. Take the black car out back to my apartment.”

“I won’t let you do this alone—”

I shook her lightly, “Will you listen for one frecking moment? Take the speeder to my apartment. Check under the mattress. Take the speeder to the Standing Stone Moisture Farm on the eastside. SIS will pick you up there. Got it?”  
  
 The tears threatened to pour from her eyes but she wiped them away before they could, “There’s no other way this is going to happen, is there?”

I shook my head again and she nodded, “Ok then. Do me one favor then. Tell her that Nalia sent you.”

With that she turned and walked out into the corridor. I slipped in behind her, facing up the stairwell to see the goon still there. He had just seen Rhiaen walking away and was starting to draw a weapon but instead a red bolt of energy burnt a hole into his suit just below his heart and he collapsed in a pile. I took the stairs at a sprint, barely stopping to grab the man’s weapon as I passed him, and crashed through the door into the private room with both plasters leveled at the couch. I felt regret: I wouldn’t be there to see Rhiaen’s lovely face as she found the real Rite of Immortality under my mattress.