

Korroth
Jedi Ranger
Disciples of Baas
House Satele Shan
Clan Odan-Urr
#8488

About 4756 words

X Marks the Spot

“AAAND another one bites the sand! That poor fierfek’d bird couldn’t have...”

The rising roar of the spectators drowned out the loudspeakers. All around the racetrack people shouted their surprise as the second odupiendo of the afternoon disappeared in a cloud of dirt. Korroth got up from his seat to keep an eye on the action. His Zabrak companion was slapping on the heads of some Bith who were standing and waving their arms on the benches in front of them.

“What happened? Hey, sit down! Sit that ass down!” He gave up and pulled on Korroth’s shoulder. “I didn’t see that, who bought it?”

“Didn’t quite see what happened,” the grey-skinned Pau’an had to shout in Bal-Eris’ ear to be heard over the crowd. “One of them got kinda sandwiched between two others, then it practically flew out of the curve.”

“Yeah, but who was it?”

“Star Hawk, I think. Yes, number five, up there on the tote board,” he replied, pointing up at the opposite end of the stadium. Bal-Eris sat back down, apparently reassured.

“That’s what happens at those speeds, you see,” the Zabrak’s voice was only contending with the announcers now, the crowd was quietening down. “The slightest bump at the bend and off they go, like a maglev loose from its rail.”

“So who’s our bet again?” Korroth craned his neck as the four remaining odupiendos raced past below their grandstand, followed by a wave of cheers. Their stumpy necks jerked back and forth

with each long and surprisingly rapid stride. The Pau'an would have thought that they might have used their vestigial wings to help themselves along, but they were tucked in tight against their round bodies.

"... coming up behind, but we have two laps to go yet, and she won't be deterred, that girl," the loudspeakers blared. "Nebulon Nut on the inside, moving up against Wonderful Plumage. Kessel Hop still a good length in the lead, taking the far turn now, Kessel Hop. I think this particular dupie has surprised us all, what with his showing last..."

The Jedi Consular was frowning, though if it was out of worry for their bet or because he just realised he wanted their bird to win he didn't know. It was bad enough that they were spending Clan funds on a racetrack, but now the race itself was going downhill fast.

"Noon Night. There she is, number four," Bal-Eris spoke up. The stands were getting loud again as two of the odupiendos nudged each other for position.

"No White? What peculiar names they get given."

"No no, *Noon Night!*" The Zabrak groaned and fished something out of the pocket of his flight jacket. "Here, the contact I received three days ago, it's right there." He handed Korroth a datapad. The message simply read *Ord Mantell. Noon Night. Bring a beige.*

"... Plumage both coming to the bend—almost beak to beak, Nebulon Nut really testing him now, and Kessel Hop putting in the distance, so far ahead they're not even eating his dust, Noon Night closing to a length behind Nebulon Nut and Wonderful Plumage, still a poor showing so far, Kessel Hop..."

"Noon Night, right." The Jedi was getting hoarse from trying to holler over the crowd's shouted encouragements. "Remind me again why we thought it was a good idea putting credits on her?"

"You have the reason right there, pal," said the Zabrak, pointing at the datapad message. "A tip-off and a trusted source."

"Who is this 'trusted source?'" But Bal-Eris pursed his lips and his eyes grew distant. Ever since the start of the mission the Wing Commander had rebutted Korroth's efforts to learn more of the acquaintance who contacted him, so the Pau'an decided to change the subject for now. "And anyway, what does he mean by 'bring a beige?' What is that?"

"Well, that's beige dye, isn't it." Seeing the blank look from the Pau'an, Bal-Eris elaborated. "Beige dye. Jedi. You!"

"Oh, charming!" Korroth rolled his ink-black eyes. "So I am here for the amusement of your friend. I only hope I can be of service!"

“I’m sure you will be,” Bal-Eris replied with a grin. “My guess is he’ll be using the good-old prisoner ruse. Go in for the bounty, come out with a little bit more. It’s a tried-and-tested method.”

“Sure, tried and tested. That’s how we know it doesn’t work half the time.”

The Zabrak shrugged. “I think my... friend,” Korroth detected a slight grimace as Bal-Eris said that word. “Will be doing most of the work. Anyway, well worth the dividend.”

“Yes, I understand he will procure us a couple of carriers and complementary starfighters. What was it, *Quasar Fire*-class? Where do you think they got them?”

“Your guess is as good as mine.” Bal-Eris turned back to watch the race. “But I’m pretty sure the name of our prize dupie is a clue.”

The Jedi frowned and made as if to reply, but suddenly everybody’s attention turned to the racetrack.

“... favourite in the lead, Noon Night still in fourth place, Wonderful Plumage losing his pitch to Nebulon Nut, there’s definite bumping between the two, but—oh! She’s broken her guard! Nebulon Nut has busted her beak guard! She’s snapping at Wonderful Plumage now, really going for his neck, but he’s still going, trying to pull away.” The spectators were on their feet, the clamour almost drowning out the commentator.

“Nebulon Nut a known feisty character, bit the fingers off a few trainers, but this has never happened *on the track!* Look at them flapping their stumpy little wings, and Noon Night coming right up - and she leaps,” the crowd shrieks. “*Leaps* over the tussling pair straight into second position; handlers moving through the infield now, I can see their long catch poles, and they try—yes, they’ve nabbed Nebulon Nut, Wonderful Plumage pulls free, less the feathers in Nebulon Nut’s beak. This is extraordinary ladies and gentlemen! Wonderful Plumage still in the race, battered but an assured third placing, the handlers dragging Nebulon Nut over the rail, no doubt garnering a few scratches themselves, and Kessel Hop in the lead, Noon Night closing the lengths behind him in second...”

Korroth could see a path clearing through the crowd in the infield, some brown-feathered object thrashing in the grips of the handlers. The Jedi thought he could see a pattern arising, and even though he knew the end result would be to their benefit, he didn’t like it very much at all.

“... coming round the final bend, but watch out for Noon Night, she’s catching up—or is Kessel Hop slowing down? By the Bright Jewel, what is that bird doing? He’s jerking his head back and forth, he’s retching up on the sand, this is unbelievable, Noon Night zips past on the far stretch,” the commentator’s voice and the roar of the spectators went up in pitch. “Kessel Hop gets back

his footing and follows, Wonderful Plumage two lengths behind, Noon Night to the finish line and she's over! Noon Night's the winner, Kessel Hop second and Wonderful Plumage at third."

The crowd in the stands was insane, waving their arms, gesticulating, shouting and booing, throwing drinks at the fence. Some were red in the face, others just dropped their ticket-chips to the ground and crushed them with their heels. The two Odanites had to push through a countercurrent of disappointed punters to get to the bookies at the bottom of the stand. Here the multitudes were dissipating quickly. Noon Night's odds had been by far the worst of the race, so very few people had bet on her for the win. *At least the Clan won't lose its investment*, thought the Jedi, patting the winning ticket in his green sash.

Suddenly Bal-Eris veered off to the right. Korroth gazed in that direction and spotted the crown of horns of another Zabrak, bobbing along through the throng. The Pau'an pushed his way past the crowd, trying to catch up to Bal-Eris. He saw the second Zabrak open his arms to the Wing Commander. His face was covered in black and green tattoos, but they looked faded, and his tunic was ratty and worn.

Bal-Eris went in as if to hug his fellow Iridonian, but instead his right fist shot up and caught the other fellow square in the face. He staggered back, and the Wing Commander jumped on him, throwing him to the ground. By the time the Arcanist had reached the scene, Bal-Eris had the other Zabrak by the lapels and was thumping his head on the floor, while Green-Tattoos held his eyes shut and his hands raised above his head.

"You double-crossing son of a witch!" Bal-Eris was shouting at the top of his lungs. "I'll shake the life out of you, I'll—" The Jedi was on him, grabbing him by the arms and dragging him away.

"Alright, that's enough!" The Jedi was barely hanging on to the flailing Iridonian, he had to brace himself in the Force to keep him still. "Enough!"

"You don't know this guy, he's a two faced womp rat! He'll ditch us as soon as look at us!"

Korroth's voice dropped to a growling murmur. "Look, I don't know what issues you two have, but are you going to jeopardise the mission for a private quarrel? The Flotilla *needs* those ships."

Bal-Eris delivered one last kick to the other Zabrak's boot, then he stood up straight and calmed down. Korroth only let go of him once Green-Skin had gotten back on his feet; he was cupping his nose and looked rather bewildered. The gaggle of onlookers had already lost interest, theirs wasn't the only fight in the charged atmosphere of the stadium.

"Wow, I thought the winnings would have appeased ya." The green Zabrak sounded very nasal, Korroth doubted that was his normal voice. "Wasn't expecting a peck on the cheek, but stang!"

“What were you expecting from the laserhead you betrayed, sleemo?” Bal-Eris spoke out.

“Betrayed?” The green Zabrak shook his head. “If that’s what you think happened, then you’re damn lucky we *betrayed* you. Why do you think *I* am the one coming to *you* for help? The Falleen treat us like poodoo; we’re always the first ones into the breach, the bait in ambushes, the meatbags they send in to absorb the blaster fire. We’re dropping like bloodflies, and we want out while there are some us left.”

“You expect me to believe that? You’d sell your own crew for—”

“Gentlemen!” The Jedi intervened. “We obviously don’t have the time for you to get re-acquainted. I presume you’re the one who contacted Bal-Eris?”

“Suits me! Oh, yes. Captain Opu Saz,” said the Zabrak, turning his attention to Korroth. “A pleasure, truly.” He extended his hand, but then thought better than to get within grabbing distance of Bal-Eris again. He rubbed his swollen nose, winced, and nodded towards the bookmakers. “Ehm, grabbed your winnings yet? You must have cracked a smile about that, eh? It’s not every day you get a tip-off like that.”

“As a matter of fact, we were just going to collect,” the Jedi replied. With odds at twelve-to-one, the Clan was sure to get a fat bonus from this venture, or at the very least recoup its losses should it fail. “How did you know she—”

“Ah, now!” Opu Saz interrupted him, grinning. “I think we’d better discuss that back on the ship, no?”

The bright streamers of stars, extended to infinity by hyperspace, pushed past the cockpit of the *Gozanti*-class cruiser. Korroth and Opu Saz were sat facing each other; Bal-Eris was probably sulking in the crew quarters of the pirate vessel. The Jedi Consular had his hands on either sides of the Zabrak’s tattooed head, his thumbs pushing down on the swollen nose. It was bent almost thirty degrees to the left, and Korroth was palpating amidst the puffy flesh for the ridge of cartilage.

“So, the Black Sun,” the Pau’an voiced.

“Yes—ouch!” The Zabrak was trying his hardest not to jerk his head back. “They fixed up a sweet race with that Noon Night. Of course, it wasn’t just Noon Night, all the others dupies contributed, if you see what I mean.” He grunted again as the Jedi pressed down with his thumbs.

“So I thought, why not let my old friend Bal-Eris in on the deal? I bet he wouldn’t mind seeing me again if he had a chip full of creds.” He grimaced, though likely not from the Pau’an’s ministrations.

“That only half worked out for you, it turns out,” the Arcanist added. “Lucky for you that’s not the main reason we came to Ord Mantell. From what little Bal-Eris has told me, I understand we’re going to liberate a couple of carriers and fighter squadrons from, uhm... the Black Sun, I suppose.”

“And my crew, don’t forget about that. Yes, we’ll be presenting you as our prize prisoner when we get to Mustafar. I’m sure you can guess at the value of a Jedi on the Hutt market. We have these two *Quasar Fires* which will be departing soon for Nal Hutta, so we know that they’ll be putting you in those slave holds. We’ve rigged the cells to open at the touch of this transmitter; you can have it after we—ow!”

“Fine, fine, please continue.” The Jedi wanted Opu to concentrate on the plan, not on what he was doing to his nose.

“You have to set it off after we leave the planet,” the Zabrak resumed. “But *before* we go into hyperspace, or we’ll just end up at another Black Sun hyperspace beacon. Once you and the slaves are out of the holds, you’ll have to take over the carrier quickly. Get to the bridge and stop them from transmitting any distress signals—my crew’ll be doing the same in the other carrier. With any luck we should be out of orbit and into our own hyperspace lane before they notice anything’s wrong on Mustafar.”

“That sounds, uhm... exciting.” Korroth adjusted the position of his hands to get a better grip. “But won’t the Black Sun recognise Bal-Eris as soon as we get off the ship? We can’t have them getting suspicious.”

“*That’s* the flaw you spot in the plan?” Opu gave a brief chuckle, immediately regretting it and grimacing with pain. “Well, you don’t need to worry. I doubt those snake-faces could tell one Zabrak from the other. Besides, Bal left us not long before we... joined the Black Sun. Don’t you know what he was doing before New Tython—ouch, hey!”

“Sorry,” the Jedi steadied his hands. “No, he only told me he was in a pirate gang, but their captain abandoned him, left him stranded, and then he joined us.”

“Hmph, figures. But that’s not quite how it happened. We were a pretty big outfit when he first came to us. The scourge of the Kalamith worlds, they called us. And he was one of our ace pilots. But then the Falleen put their lizard eyes on us; we were competition, and they would

either assimilate us or eliminate us. They drove us out of business, and New Tython was our last chance before the death blow.”

“You’d found some deal that would give you the upper hand, is it?”

“Not exactly. It’s what I told the crew, but actually I had planned for us all to remain on New Tython. I knew the Black Sun had no influence there, and I also knew we wouldn’t really stand a chance against them. New Tython was a place to lay low and recoup; plus, I had already heard rumours of a Jedi enclave; they’d have kept the planet safe, no?”

Korroth did not respond. He looked away and started rummaging through a medkit.

“Anyway, botched that one up as well, and we had to flee from the planetary militia, and then it was a choice of serving the Black Sun or being destroyed. At least I made sure Bal would stay. The only reason *we’ve* survived so far is because we’ve swallowed our pride, become meek and subservient.”

“You’ll get no argument from me there.” The Odanite returned his hands to Opu’s face. “I could as much imagine a meek Bal-Eris as I could imagine a Hutt ballerina.”

“Right, and—”

“Hold on, let’s get this over with now.” The Pau’an found the crooked cartilage with his fingers again. “I want you to keep absolutely still. I’m going to apply pressure...” He positioned his thumbs to gain maximum leverage on the strip of nasal cartilage. “Now.” A wet crunch, a pop and an unconstrained scream.

The planet Mustafar was a ball of black rock and red-glowing crevices. The pirates’ vessel had no trouble alighting on the landing pad of the Black Sun base, Captain Saz and his Zabrak crew were expected. Korroth descended first, manacles on his wrists and Bal-Eris’ blaster nozzle in the small of his back. He could feel the heat on his cheeks, radiating from the lava river below.

“Ah, Opu!” A dock official greeted them. He was a Falleen, green scales, cranial ridges, blue tunic and a posse of guards in tow. “I hear you’ve got a trophy for us.” Once he got close enough, he peered into the Zabrak’s face and gave out a deep chortle. “Resisted arrest, did he?” And he gave a hefty slap on the Pau’an’s shoulder.

“Well worth the price, sir,” the Captain replied, raising a hand to his bandaged nose.

“Certainly more than I ever expected from you lot, to capture a Jedi. Do you have his lightstick?”

Opu Saz handed the cylinder over, after which the Falleen gestured to the masked guards. They performed a brisk pat-down on the captive Jedi.

“I’ll take over from here, he’s for the slave carriers,” the official stated. “Don’t worry Opu, the boss is pretty happy with you right now. Maybe he won’t send you to the spice mines after all, eh?” The guards pushed Korroth in line behind the chuckling Falleen.

From here to the slave cells of the carrier the Jedi Consular had little to worry about; apart from trying not to swallow the transmitter hidden in his cheek, things were out of his hands at this early stage. He could only assume that Bal-Eris, Captain Saz and his crew were boarding the opposite *Quasar Fire* and preparing for the coming fight.

The slave holds were full of Twi’leks, Talz, Humans, Zeltrons and Mon Calamari. It looked like they might outnumber the crew, but right now they were unarmed, imprisoned and scared. Korroth suspected they knew something about the escape plan. He spotted a Twi’lek woman reassuring a group of fellow slaves; she looked like she might know these people better than he did, so he pulled her aside. He couldn’t talk to all the slaves himself, for fear of alerting the guards outside.

“Do you know what is going to happen?” He asked her in a quiet voice.

“Yes, but who will get us out? Who will help us escape?” Outwardly the cerulean-skinned Twi’lek seemed calmer than the others, but the Jedi could sense the apprehension in her.

“The cell will open when the time is right, but we will have to fight our way to the bridge once we’re out. Do you think your people can do it?”

“We will fight,” replied the Twi’lek, drawing herself a bit straighter. Korroth felt she had feared the uncertainty more than anything else. “We know what they’ll do to us if we get to Nal Hutta. We will fight.”

Just then they felt the lurch of acceleration, dampened by the ship’s inertial compensators. The Arcanist counted at least thirty minutes from the moment of take-off, waiting to get as far as possible from Mustafar but still before the carrier could perform its hyperspace jump. He spat out the thumbnail-sized transmitter and approached the cell door.

“I will open it now,” he murmured to the slaves. “Stay behind me until you can get some weapons.”

He pressed the transmitter's button and for a split-second he thought it wouldn't work; the whole plan was ridiculous, he was following a stranger he didn't trust into certain failure and he should have seen it from the start. But then the door slid up and he released his breath.

The Pau'an walked out of the cell and paused to assess his surroundings. Two Human guards immediately spotted him. They sprang towards him from opposite sides, unclipping their shock batons, and Korroth stood waiting for them to reach him, arms by his sides and knees slightly bent.

"You," the one on the left shouted. "Get back in the cell!" He lunged for the Jedi. Korroth stepped back, seizing his wrist and pulling him forward with his own momentum. The Human crashed into the other oncoming guard, stunning them both in the tangle of batons and sending them sprawling to the floor.

"Quickly," Korroth gestured for the people in the cell to file out. "There's some stun batons there and in that guard station."

The slave pens had been set up in the carrier's modified hangar bays. Looking up the Odanite saw nine X-wing starfighters hanging from their struts, and this was only one of four hangars, on one of two carriers.

As the freed slaves spread out, they overwhelmed the remaining guards and opened the cells of adjacent pens. With at least forty able-bodied humanoids ready to storm the ship, the cerulean-skinned Twi'lek and the Odanite organised them on either side of the only door that connected the hangars to the long corridor that led to the bridge. The Black Sun pirates had undoubtedly heard of the commotion, and sure enough a handful of blaster-armed mercenaries leaped out of the door.

Before they could even fire a shot, the freed slaves were on them, clobbering them to the floor and taking their blasters. More mercenaries appeared in the corridor and started shooting; the slaves were forced to take cover behind the door.

They could not afford to engage in a protracted exchange of blaster fire. With the cover of a salvo of laser bolts from the slaves, Korroth moved into the corridor and took cover behind a protruding bulkhead. He extended his hand towards one of the soldiers on the far side, then pulled at his blaster through the Force. The Falleen didn't let go of the weapon, and thus he fell across the corridor, in front of his comrades' line of fire.

Using this brief interdiction, the Jedi sprang forward with Force-augmented speed and leaped into the midst of the soldiers. One of them slung the butt of his rifle towards his head, but the Pau'an ducked, took the mercenary's elbow and continued his swinging motion to throw him to the floor. Another Falleen came in with a knife low at his abdomen. Korroth twisted back out of

the way and allowed him to collide with his comrade. By this point the slaves had reached his position and quickly stunned the rest of the mercenaries. The remaining Black Sun forces on the bridge saw the multitude of undaunted slaves surging towards them and though wiser than to resist. They were bound up and bundled into their own slave pens.

The first thing the Jedi did on gaining control of the bridge was to contact the twin carrier. If the Zabrak hadn't succeeded in their part of the plan, the Black Sun would only too easily take this one back as well.

"... to Korroth, respond!" The Odanite breathed a sigh of relief at hearing Bal-Eris' voice.

"Korroth here," he replied into the comms. "We have the ship. What is your situation?"

"The bridge is ours, but we're still clearing out pockets of resistance," and faint blaster shots did indeed ring out over the comm link. "Korroth, do you have Opu Saz with you?"

"What? No, I thought he was on your ship."

"Well, he isn't." More blaster fire. "Look, I can't hang about; you have to search for him, he could be anywhere."

"Confirmed," but the link had already cut out. Seconds later one of the slaves on the bridge called out. A squadron of starfighters had appeared on the scanners, heading up from Mustafar, and just at that moment an X-wing departed the hangar of the *Quasar Fire*.

"Hail that fighter," the Jedi ordered one of the slaves. A channel opened. "Captain Saz, is that you?"

"Yes it is," the nasal voice of the Zabrak replied.

"What do you think you're doing, Captain? Get back on the carrier so we can make the jump to hyperspace."

"No can do, Jedi. Those fighters coming from the planet are Black Sun B-wings. They'll reach you well before you can recalculate the jump to your Flotilla. They'll disable your hyperdrive and then you'll be floating purrgil for the cruisers leaving the surface."

"And what do you hope to achieve on your single X-wing? Reverse your course and we can hold them off with the carriers' laser turrets."

"Sorry, Korroth. That won't do," the Captain replied. From the tone of his voice the Odanite suspected he had already made up his mind. "I will not chance my crew falling into the hands of the Black Sun again. I can distract them long enough for you to make the jump. I'm pretty good

in this thing, you know? Who do you think taught Bal-Eris?" But he didn't give the Jedi a chance to reply, as the link cut off.

"Korroth," Bal-Eris' voice cut through the Jedi's bewilderment. "Are you seeing the scanners? That womp rat is deserting us. He's warned the Black Sun, now we won't even make it into hyperspace."

"No, that's not—" the Pau'an attempted to interject.

"I'm setting my aft turbolasers to target that traitor, I suggest you do the same."

"No, Wing Commander, do not fire! The Captain is trying to buy us time!"

"The pfassk he is! I'm not going to fall for his tricks again," Bal-Eris yelled through the intercom. Korroth had sensed this before, on Ord Mantell; the Wing Commander *feared* trusting Opu Saz. He thought he would not be able to deal being "betrayed" a second time, and all those years mulling it over had only embittered him further.

"Bal," Korroth's voice was quiet and firm. "I know it takes courage, but you must overcome your fear. You must have faith in Opu Saz this once, you know he has always been your friend." The Zabrak did not respond.

"The X-wing and the fighter squadron are almost within range of each other," one of the slaves called out. "And the other carrier is targeting their cannon... towards the X-wing. What shall we do?"

"Continue to calculate for the jump," Korroth replied, going over to the scanner. He saw the B-wings break formation around Opu Saz, a blue dot on the screen. One Black Sun pirate blinked out of existence. The X-wing lined up another one and destroyed it. The fighters were in disarray, and the Captain was picking them off one by one. Then two of the B-wings came round to tail the X-wing, the Captain attempted to evade, but in a matter of seconds the blue dot disappeared.

"The sister carrier has gone into hyperspace," the freed slave stated. "Shall we follow?"

"Yes."

It took some days of convoluted hyperspace coursing to ensure that no-one was following the two carriers. During that time, the Jedi went on-board both ships to ensure the wounded were

receiving proper care, but he did not get a chance to speak with Bal-Eris. Nor did he wish to; the Zabrak had to process the events on Mustafar in his own time.

When the two ships finally reached the Flotilla, the two Odanites opened comm channels to announce their arrival.

“Admiral Fiarr’ges,” Bal-Eris spoke first. “This is the *Quasar Fire*-class cruisers *Black Day* and *Lost Sky*. Requesting permission to approach and join the fleet.”

“Permission granted,” the Bothan Admiral replied. “This is indeed a great prize. I understand you also have six squadrons of T-70 X-Wings in your hangars?”

“Yes sir, that is correct.”

“Well, Wing Commander, Ranger, these acquisitions are of immeasurable value. The entire Flotilla is grateful for the work you have done.”

Bal-Eris looked at Korroth, and the Pau’an nodded. “It wasn’t entirely our work sir,” the Zabrak spoke. “Without the sacrifice of our ally we would not have been successful. I would like to recommend full military honours for Captain Opu Saz.”