

Finders, Keepers

"It's got to be here somewhere," Aul muttered to himself as he tossed pieces of shrapnel and other junk over his shoulder. He was deep in the pile of one of the downed transports which had carried a haul of artifacts out of the Red Fury base. Piles of debris surrounded him, occasionally revealing pieces of the ship's crew.

"Aul, check in," came the electronic hum of Darkblade's voice through the comlink.

"I'm fine, I haven't found it yet. The vial is small, so it may take some time, but I know that it's here. I feel it," Aul replied with a frustrated and exhausted tone. "Have you tracked down Blade yet?"

"Not yet, this fox is a tough one, and it's starting to get too cold for my liking. Just keep your wits about you, we've lost enough men today to these backstabbers. Darkblade, out," came the final reply as the connection cut out.

Aul let out a deep grunt, and sat heavily on a pile of debris. He looked about at the terrible mess that lay before him. How could he possibly find a vial no bigger than a handheld comlink in this huge waste?

The scientist closed his eyes and thought back to his time in graduate school on Coruscant. He had seen a similar vial before, during a visit to a high containment lab. It was behind nearly two meters of clear durasteel. Back then, he remembered being struck by an odd and overwhelming sense of power as he gazed upon the vial, though none of his classmates sensed it.

The item was fairly unassuming, a small, clear duraglass vial filled with lyophilized virus. What was special was that this particular virus, Aorth-6, was isolated directly from Emperor Palpatine's blood after an attempted assassination by one of his generals, Gentis. Though Palpatine was able to sustain himself by a deep connection to the Dark Side of the Force, all others infected without artificial lung support were effectively melted from the inside out.

Though he would need to confirm it with empirical tests, Aul hypothesized that the viral shedding from Palpatine himself was enhanced by his tapping into the Dark Side and contained a power unlike any other biological weapon. Only a handful of vials were produced, in order to develop the virus into a biological weapon. They were quickly destroyed when a series of accidental exposures occurred, leaving only the vial in the University of Coruscant high containment lab for safe keeping. Or so it was thought.

While in the Red Fury base Aul was immediately struck by the familiar feeling of the vial. His training as an Arcanist connected him to familiar Force imprints by means of his dowsing talents. He made a mental note to get a hold of that vial when the time to obtain the artifacts

arose, but his plans were foiled by the dastardly betrayal of Scholae Palatinae. Now was his only chance.

His thoughts were interrupted by a metallic crashing as a pile of debris was perturbed. Aul looked up to see Lexiconus Qor digging through a mound about ten meters away. Aul watched as the Quarren's eyes widened and his hand emerged from the trash with a small, glinting vial containing a delicate white powder.

"That belongs to *me*, Fish-brains," Aul called out to the Palatinaen.

"Doesn't seem so," the Quarren shot back and scurried off into the frigid, Mygeetan dusk.

Aul gathered the ambient Force around him into his muscles and bolted off after the thief. He easily caught up to his target, whose attention had been taken by the vial instead of navigating his escape. Aul slid gracefully across the well-packed snow, colliding with the Quarren's feet and causing him to collapse onto his back, the vial clutched tightly in his hands.

"That was *incredibly* dangerous," Qor spat at the human.

"Not as dangerous as I'm going to be in a second," Celsus threatened. He reached down and grabbed the hilt of his lightsaber, igniting the light blue blade with a *snap-hiss*.

"Do you know who I am?" Lexiconus said as he puffed his chest and carefully activated his lanvarok.

"Yeah, but right now you're the thief who stole my specimen," Aul replied and lunged at the Quarren, his lightsaber held high and ready to strike. With a single, smooth motion Lexiconus brought the lanvarok up and shot a poisoned disk at Aul, who narrowly dodged it. The disk tore through the human's upper body armor, leaving a deep gash in his arm. Bolstering himself against the pain of the wound, Aul launched himself in the air and came down hard on Qor, knocking him off his feet again with a strike from the pommel of his hilt.

The Quarren looked up at Aul in awe for a moment. "You should be dead right now, I don't understand," Qor said in disbelief. "The poison on that disk has never failed to bring down an opponent."

Aul, standing above the downed Qor, laughed and pointed his blade at his target's throat. "Though I've yet to take the easy way out and poison my opponents," Aul paused for effect, "I built my resistance to nearly all poisons to avoid lab accidents. Which is basically what you are to me right now. You have little choice, Qor. Hand me the vial and I let you live, or keep it and I'll take you in to answer some questions for my Summit, and *then* I'll get the vial."

“Fine! Take it,” the Palatinaen gave in and placed the vial in Aul’s outstretched, gloved hand. He scooted back a few meters, before carefully getting up to his feet and running off into the snow dunes building in the Mygeetan night.

Aul paid no attention to the Quarren’s escape. He got what we wanted and knew Qor had little recourse to take it back under the current conditions. He turned the prize in his fingers carefully and looked at the delicate, deadly powder held therein. The potential for destruction was astronomical and the secrets the specimen held would be enough to build ten successful careers. He placed the vial in his belt pouch and carefully closed the clasp.

Standing there, with the snow falling down silently upon him, Aul thought back what just happened. The realization of how careless his actions were dawned heavily upon him. He knelt down to the ground and vomited deeply in uncontrolled panic. As the moment passed, he wiped his mouth, grabbed his comlink and connected to Darkblade.

“I’ve got it. The situation got a little fishy, but I’m ready for transport pickup. Aul, out.”