

BC Case File 002

It was dark. It was cold. She hurt, her arms ached and itched. The blanket wrapped around her smelled and scratched at her, but the dark room was near freezing, it was too cold to abandon it. She couldn't cry, not anymore, the tears wouldn't come, no matter how hard she tried. Light filtered in through the bottom of the thick, metal door set in the rocks, flickering shadows as He passed nearby. She could hear Him, chanting to himself, laughing and crying in turn. He got louder, sounds came from the door, chains rattling and a latch being pulled as the slab of durasteel swung out. Light poured into the room, letting her see the pallor of her skin, the marks covering her arms, and the syringe in His hand. Her throat rasped as she tried to cry, and he just smiled, smiled and walked forward.

"Just a few more, Lovely, a few more sessions, and you'll be *ready*. The Final Exulattion shall be prepared, and you shall soar higher than ever before!

-X-

Kordath Bleu sat back in his chair, sipping his caf and smiling, a rare sight for such an early hour. It couldn't have been half past 0900, station time, and here he was, bright eyed and cheerful. He'd not left his apartment yet, nor had breakfast, but his alarm had gone off to remind him of the holo call that he *had* to make this morning. The flickering blue and grays of the small transmitter on his desk showed the source of his good mood.

"When are you coming back to Selen, Uncle Bleu? You promised we'd hang out soon!"

"I know, Liri, I know. Soon as tha Boss Lady calls me up there for a report or somethin', I'll make sure ta get a few days off. Spend some time with ya, I promised, didn't I?" Kordath gestured, waving his mug about with a smile.

Liri lowered her head a bit, lifting her eyes and sticking her lower lip out in an attempt to pout. The laughter from her adopted Uncle ruined the whole thing for her, causing her to facade to collapse into a fit of giggles. Kordath sipped his caf to hide the flash of painful memories, the first time he'd met the girl she'd been hunted. Now she was happy, laughing, with a good foster family back on Selen.

"You always say you'll come around, Uncle!"

"And I always do! When I'm on world, anyways, I'm sorry, lass, work is work. Ya know that."

She gave him a somber nod, before she broke into another smile. "I know, you're one of the good guys!"

“Let’s not go too far, luv. I’m alright. Well, I’m okay.”

Liri looked off holo for a moment, her face going pouty again, a look Kord suspected she’d taken the time to practice. She nodded and turned back to the transmitter, “Mama says I gotta go, come see me soon!”

“I will, Liri, I will.”

“Promise?”

“I promise, lass, now get on before yer mum gets mad, eh?” He smiled as she waved at him, and he returned it with his free hand and the tail peeking up over his shoulder, which caused her to giggle.

“Okay! Bye Uncle Bleu!”

The holo image flickered and shut off, and Bleu sat back in his chair with a smile, doing his best to ignore the quiet of his small apartment. He looked around the one room domicile, wondering not for the first time if he shouldn’t buy another light or two, brighten the place up. For someone who’d come from a tight knit, communal race of nomads, Kordath Bleu had done a pretty fair job convincing himself he wasn’t lonely. He had Shadow Gate, he had the Clan, he had friends, though some were less than pleased with him these days.

Wasn’t his fault, the things that had happened to drive him out to Ol’val. He rather enjoyed the shadow port, to be honest, it was a better fit than Estle City had ever been. Or the jackboots in Galeres, for that matter. What lunatics had thought putting him in charge of a spaceship in the first place? They’re the ones who ought to have taken all the blame for the debacle with the Perdition incident. Instead, his best friend hated him and those he’d given himself up for to save the crew of the *Nighthawk* watched him with distrust. Estle City wouldn’t be home again for quite sometime, he knew.

He couldn’t even see his adopted niece, Liri, unless he had a reason to be on Selen. If summoned by the Shadow Lady he had some measure of protection from any ‘misunderstandings’ that might arise, but any trips made of his own accord ran a risk. Kordath was confident in his ability to evade anyone after him personally, his own talents with the Force set alarms off before most threats got near him. But he couldn’t put her at risk as well. A gray, slightly fuzzy hand reached up to touch a spot through his shirt, lightly tracing the scar of an exit wound. He’d taken a slug through his shoulder the last time Liri had been in trouble, he’d barely known her then. The Ryn had promised never to put the preteen Mirialan through something like that ever again.

He went to drink some more of his caf, only to find the mug cold and empty now. Much like his apartment, he couldn't help but notice with a sigh as he closed his eyes.

This is gettin' ridiculous. I gotta get outta tha house, for a while anyways. Need a case, or a mission, or somethin'.

Kordath pattered about the small place for another half hour, taking time to clean his mug and the small caf machine before he pulled his coat on and stepped out the door. As he locked it, pocketing the key, he turned to find Sprout, his Falleen Fade standing on the walkway. The small, green man was staring out over the Plaza, one elbow on the railing, his head upon the hand. It always made Kordath feel a little better to have the midget Fallen around, someone shorter than he himself. As it was, Sprout was leaning on the second of the three levels of rails, which made him look more like a bulky child than a 'full' grown man.

"Got somethin' for me, Little Green?" asked the Ryn, stepping up alongside him and resting a boot on the lowest rail, leaning over the top one with hands clasped.

"That's not my...you know what, forget it. No, Strong sent me around to make sure you woke up in time for your call. I heard you talking through the door, so I didn't want to bother you."

"Appreciate. Shoulda figured Strong would remember me bloody schedule better than meself," muttered Bleu, lighting the first cigarette of the morning and blowing out a stream of smoke. "Not used ta not havin' anythin' to do this early in the morn, fancy a bite? Could use some breakfast. More caf, too."

"I could eat," stated the little green man with a shrug. He followed the smoking Ryn, who took a leisurely pace to allow the midget to keep up more easily. Sprout wondered why he actually appreciated such a gesture now a days, before recalling that Strong would have simply sat him on his shoulder to expedite the travel. It was insulting, even if the massive, jovial Chiss didn't intend for it to be. Sprout pondered a moment, and settled on degrading as the proper term for it, Strong meant no insult. He'd never heard the big blue man say a thing in anger or mean spirit in the short time he'd known him and Bleu.

The two walked along the catwalk like fronts of the apartment buildings that had been installed along the inner surface of the hollowed out asteroid. They took flights of stairs here and there, the occasional lift as well, to get down towards the area of Jerem Plaza, bustling with life. The artificial lights, high above the chamber, were shining bright and bold over the shops, the market stalls, tapcafs, and the criss cross of open lanes that passed for streets in the station. They seemed to wander at random to Sprout, watching Kordath lift his nose every now and then, as if the Ryn was looking for a scent to catch his attention.

Bleu was hungry, and he'd had enough state of mind last night to not drink, much at least. The holo calls with Liri were one of the bright points he had going on at the moment, he wasn't

karking that up by being a hungover mess while talking to her. So he had no idea what he wanted, usually at the point where a hangover turned to hunger it came with cravings for Corellian burgers or Rishi kebabs or the like. Instead he felt his stomach rumbling but it provided no direction. He sniffed the air, appreciating the smells of a dozen different food cultures scattered through the nearby open stalls. The shadow port brought all kinds through, some people settled and brought a bit of home with them.

With a shrug, Kordath closed his eyes and pushed out through the Force, enhancing his sense of smell to see what piqued his interest. Sweet, savory, scents he couldn't identify for the life of him, blood, chemical smells, cooking meat, vegetables, tubers...

Wait, blood and chemicals? I mean, sure, blood, yer gonna smell that while cookin' a bit o' meat, sure. But that should nae be mixed together such as that.

Kordath turned in a slow circle, causing Sprout to stop and watch him with raised eyebrows. The Ryn set off slowly at first, before picking up speed much to the midget's annoyance. Bleu pushed through a small crowd of onlookers who had formed a ring around MalCo security types, FOTW droids standing watch nearby as well. An older Zabrak, face wrinkled with age and horns dull, was crouched over a body with a datapad, punching information in as he poked and prodded at the corpse. An officer wearing MalCo colors stopped Kordath with the end of a shock stick, though he didn't trigger it as the Arconan stopped, hands held up.

"What happened? Bloody hell mate," said the Ryn, craning on his toes to see past the security officer. "That's just a bleedin' kid."

"You got business with this, Ryn?"

"Well, no, I'm just a curious party, ya know? Got me PI license from you lot a few weeks back, thought I'd see what was what."

"Oh, great, somebody fancying themselves a detective. Shove off, there'll be no contract on this one, no percentage in it. How about you just move along," stated the man, his bluntness and manner telling Kordath the conversation was over. The Ryn stepped back a few feet, glancing down towards Sprout.

"What can you see, mate?"

The Falleen had his eyes squinted, getting looks between the legs of security and droids, mumbling to himself. He blinked, realizing that Kordath had asked him a question.

"Ah, female, I think, looks like a Pantoran from the skin tone, though that could be wrong. Depends how long she's been dead, you know? I see track marks on her arms."

“So what, a junkie? Shootin’ up spice cocktails or chems?”

Sprout shook his head, the green man growing a bit pale. “I think the gaping hole in her chest was likely the cause of death. Not familiar enough with Pantoran physiology to tell how old she is from this distance. Would have to get a closer look to tell you anything else.”

“Ah.” Kordath felt his mouth go dry. For lack of something to do with his hands, he shook out another cigarette and lit it, watching one of his hands tremble. Something was bothering him, he wouldn’t be dealing with alcohol tremors yet, it hadn’t been that long since he’d last had a drink.

“I get one of those, pal?” came a tired voice, drawing the pair’s attention to the middle aged Zabrak who’d been inspecting the corpse. Kordath handed him the pack without a word, studying the man’s attire. A white coat over sensible clothing, the datapad had been stowed somewhere and a bag was slung over his shoulder. “You’re right, track marks of a junky, but she’s not an overdose.”

Sprout nodded. It was one of the multitude of reasons Kordath kept the Falleen around. The little guy was an excellent marksman at range, useless in a proper fight though. But he’d been the child of medical types, his father a surgeon, mother a doctor. Useful to have around somebody who’d had more training than just ‘slap the bandaid on, twist the tourniquet, hope the limb doesn’t fall off’.

Kordath stuck a hand out towards the Zabrak, who slowly shook it. “Kordath Bleu, uhh, security said they wasn’t lookin’ in ta tha killin’ at all. What gives, Doc....?”

“Presken, I’m, well, the closest thing to a medical examiner the Trimuative has on hand. I look over the bodies and and the morgue, such as it is,” the man said. Kord nodded, bodies usually got shot out an airlock after a time, or incinerated. Burying people wasn’t really an option on Ol’val. “She’s a homeless girl, couldn’t be more than twelve, thirteen years of age. Pantoran, probably a stowaway. You okay, you look sick.”

“Dead kids aren’t something he likes hearing about, Doctor Presken,” said the Falleen, quietly.

“Nobody does, nobody does. Still, this, like the last two, likely won’t be investigated at all.” Presken sounded exhausted to the pair of Arconans.

Kordath blinked, sucking in air and dropping his cigarette to the deck. He ground it out, his face emotionless, “Two before?”

Presken nodded, “Three now, in two months. Same MO each time, track marks, signs of malnourishment and hypothermic conditions. Chest cut open and the heart itself removed. First body to be in a place this public though.”

“Nobody saw a bleedin’ thing either, did they?”

“Of course not,” replied the Doctor with a snort. “They’re getting bolder, whoever is doing this. If they’re trying to get a reaction out of the Trimuative they’re going to have to kill someone that one of the factions cares about. A citizen, somebody who produces income for them, not some kid who was probably a stowaway on a ship a few months ago and ended up here. Runaways and vagabonds, Ol’val has her share of them. They end up down in the Minefield, no one really knows where, Security would clean them out if they could figure it out.”

“Don’t I know it,” muttered the Ryn, watching droids wrap the body up and carry the girl off.

“Well, thanks for the cigarette, I just needed a minute to vent. Hate seeing the young ones get picked off like this, but what can we do? Security doesn’t care about the homeless kids. They won’t go as far as saying whoever is doing this is doing the station a favor, but I’m certain a few of them are thinking it.” Presken shook his head sadly. “Makes you lose faith in people, this place, after a while.”

Sprout nodded at the Doctor as he left, looking up at Kordath in turn, who was staring at the spot where the girl had been laid out before the Plaza. “Kord?”

The Ryn turned on his heel, heading down the lane with purpose, Sprout struggling to keep up.

“Need a bloody drink,” muttered Bleu, face still a mask. His tail twitched and lashed behind him, a sign of his irritation.

-x-

“With the blood comes power, with the power comes dreams! With dreams comes happiness and wonderment and joy!”

He swirled the vial, the red fluid within having lightened slightly from oxidation. Still it bubbled and spun in the glass, before he added it to the pair already placed in a rack. Three down, only a few more and he’d have enough! Enough to mix his final cocktail, his magnus opus of bliss. He giggled to himself and spun, slapping his hands together in excitement as he looked at the heavy, chained door.

“Soon? Soon. Oh yes, soon soon soon. Almost ready, not quite yet.” He paused as a timer went off, a quiet noise from a small chrono unit on the table holding the vials. His touch was light as he shut it off, his smile widening further as he sat upon his small stool. He lifted one of the syringes from the table, inspecting the needle and plunger, licking his lips as he turned on a small burner. Humming, he mixed the various spices and liquid he’d concocted; he was proud of it, it was powerful stuff. Enough to hook most of the Mine rats on their first try, enough that

they'd come looking for more on their own after a while, caution to the wind. Just for one more fix.

He giggled again as the mixture began to smoke, using the syringe to draw it into injector's reservoir. She wasn't ready yet. Not yet.

But she would be. Soon.

-X-

Sprout was surprised the doors had opened when Kordath had walked up to them, it wasn't even 10 am by Ol'val time. The sign above the door proclaimed it the Ruby's Perch, the Falleen knew enough about some of Bleu's fellows to know it was a front. The Ryn didn't break stride when he walked in, stepping up to the bar and standing patiently as the Kaleesh bartender, an embroidered shirt proclaiming him to be 'Ruva', lined glasses up on a shelf. He turned, having caught motion in one of the mirrors behind lining the wall behind the bar.

"Kordath?"

"Skar. I need a pint."

"Who?"

"Bloody 'ell, there's nobody else in here, alright, *Ruva*," growled the Ryn. "A pint. Mayhap a whiskey as well. Looks like I'm spendin' tha day doin' this, lest somethin' comes up from her Purpleness."

"You know she doesn't like it when you call her that, Kord," spoke Rrogan, shaking his masked head. He placed the glass of amber colored beer before Bleu, who pulled half the pint before stopping to breath.

"Kark her. Kark this bloody station. They just found a kid's body in the bleedin' street, but since she ain't 'important', they're not gonna look in ta it. Sleemo security bastards."

"Aren't you fronting as a Private Investigator, Kord? Why not just look into it yourself?"

Kordath glared at his teammate from across the bar. His face darkened further as Sprout piped up with an "I was going to ask the same thing."

"We a bleedin' charity, now, Sprout? Can't be runnin' about doin' this sort o' thing without a paycheck. Get a reputation fer takin' on charity cases and we'll have no shortage of sob stories at the door, beggin' us to do pro bono work!"

He took another drink, slamming the pint glass down, "Another."

"Master Bleu," started Sprout, trying to layer on some respect to calm the Ryn down.

"Another. Pint. And if ya ain't got nothin' else useful ta say, Little Green, ya can kark off fer now. Take the bloody day off."

"Kord..."

"I said leave," spoke the Ryn, his voice low and steady as he watched Skar pour him another drink.

Sprout shuffled off, staring at his feet. He had to find Strong, he had never seen Kordath start this early before, nor with this sort of attitude.

-X-

"...talked to the Medical Examiner and he came straight here. He hasn't had anything to eat yet, and he's in there drinking. I'm worried."

An imposingly cut figure walked along with the Falleen, towering at an impressive excess of seven feet and an obscene amount of muscle. He was nodding, his black mustache bristling as he nodded along with his midget companion's concerns. The Chiss had to bend slightly at the waist to enter the bar, as he straightened he cast a shadow across the lounge. From the bar came a loud sigh, Kordath having spotted the pair in the mirror.

"Really? Ya went and got 'mom', did ya, Green? Can a man nae drink it away in peace?"

Strong settled into a stool next to the Ryn, which creaked with alarm as he lowered his bulk upon it. Skar looked between the massive Chiss and the quickly inebriating Rollmaster before he turned back to cleaning glasses.

"Well? What have ya got ta say, Strong?"

The big man sat in silence, looking at Kordath with his red, glowing eyes via the mirror. Bleu glared back at the reflection in stubbornness. He ashed his cigarette and refused to break eye contact, taking a drink from his pint and smacking his lips.

"I already told Sprout, we go off doin' a case for no pay, we'll get people buggin' us every bleedin' day. 'Oh Mister Bleu, can ya find me lost wife? I can nae pay ya, could it be out of the goodness of yer heart?' Bollocks."

Strong blinked a few times, turning his head slightly, but said nothing, still watching the Ryn.

"I know it's karked up!" shouted Kordath, throwing both hands up in the air. "They're runaways and the like, I know how hard that is even without some guy usin' ya for ritual bloody killin's."

Sprout look from the Chiss to the Ryn, wondering what Strong was playing at. Kordath slammed his glass down, empty once more and snapping his fingers at Rrogon. The Kaleesh glanced at the big Fade and chose to ignore Bleu, who glowered at them.

"Ya think I dinnae want ta do somethin', Strong? That Pantoran girl was barely older than Liri, just a bloody kid."

Kordath rested his head in his hands, pulling at his own hair and shaking in his seat. A large, gentle hand settled on his shoulder, patting him a few times.

"...hate you, hate you both. All of ya, ya know that? I'd make a horrible Sith, eh?"

"Indeed, Master Bleu. Now, perhaps we should find you some food and caf before we begin?"

"Aye, food. Caf. Gotta go....ask questions...yeah..." mumbled the Ryn, stumbling towards the door. Strong placed a firm hand upon his shoulder once more, guiding him as Sprout trailed along behind, confusion evident on his face.

"How did you do that?" he whispered loudly up towards Strong, who chose to ignore the attempt at secrecy.

The Chiss smiled widely as he pulled Bleu sideways so the Ryn wouldn't smash his chitinous nose into a street lamp pole. **"Mister Bleu has a good heart, despite his best attempts to conceal it. He would not allow innocents to come to harm if he is capable of stopping it."**

"What, you appealed to his sense of honor?" asked Sprout, sarcasm heavy in his tone. "You didn't even say anything to him."

"I was confident our Master could come to the proper, honorable decision on his own. He simply needed to find the path. In this case, giving him something to shout his protests against besides a bottle or his own reflection," the scion of the Garmis line smiled down at the Falleen. He took a moment to gather the back of Kordath's coat in one big hand and lifted his stumbling feet over a pair of running, laughing children chasing a ball. **"Voicing his concerns aloud allowed him to hear how hollow they really were."**

"Amazing," muttered the midget. "Hey, Nerf burger place up here? Some grease and meat usually gets him set, not the healthiest option, but it'll get him sorted."

“NERF BURGERS!” shouted the drunken Ryn in agreement, who made a vain effort to dart towards the restaurant. His feet went forward but his torso stayed behind, still in the firm grasp of Strong. This caused Bleu to lose his footing entirely, and the Chiss carried him through the front door of the burger place. “Double...I want a double...with cheese, and the crispy stuff, purple bacon, yeah...fried onions. We should totally get chips too, yeaaaaah.”

Sprout sighed as Strong set their drunk master in a corner booth seat, leaving the midget to make sure he didn't wander off. “But, but I wanna put the orders in,” mumbled Bleu.

“No, every time you get drunk and try to order food for me, I end up with mulch. I don't know why you always think I'm a plant!”

“But, yer name be Sprout, ya need yer minerals and such, not like yer gettin' any sun here on Ol...Ol...Ol'val,” stated Kordath, eyes closed as he leaned back in the booth. “How ya gonna get all big and tough, like Stres...Stres...Strong?”

“I am not a plant!” wailed the Falleen. “Yes, I am green, no I am not a shrubbery!”

“A double for Kordath, this I know. Sprout! What would you have my tiny friend?” boomed the Chiss from across the restaurant, much to the regret of the clientele

“Get me a number three! None of those red things! No, no, Kord, sit down, he'll bring the food to us.”

“But I'm hungry noooow,” whined the Ryn.

“None of the red vegetables? They're rich in vitamins, though, young Sprout, you need them to grow!”

“I'm twenty five years old! I'm not getting any taller, Strong!” Sprout had turned his back to yell at the Chiss, only to hear Kordath try to get up once more. He rounded on his so called Master and kicked him forcibly in the shin. Bleu yelped in surprise and pain before he fell back into the booth. “Stay!”

“What tha kark!?”

“Master Bleu, please stay in your seat until the food arrives!” bellowed Strong, squeezing his bulk into the booth, forcing Kordath to scoot over. Sprout clamored into the opposite side of the corner, effectively trapping Bleu. **“Where shall we begin the investigation, hmm?”**

Kordath glared between one Fade and the other, rubbing his shin below the table. A moment of clarity caused him to stop, as he realized how this looked to the other two. “Well, we, uh, gotta find tha...thing.”

“What thing?”

“The thing. With the people, and the stuff.”

“Master, perhaps you should drink some of your caf before explaining.”

The Ryn muttered as he sipped at the incredibly hot liquid, the flavor burned out the taste of ale from his mouth. He blinked, glared at Sprout again in suspicion.

“Oi, you got a...whatsit called, one of those...if I catch ya...”

“No, I do not have a pot of gold. I don’t even know where you keep getting that from.”

Kordath shrugged as he took a swig of caf, which caused his eyes to go wide as he had a severe reminder that it was not the ale he’d been drinking prior. He fought the urge to spit the scalding liquid out all over the table, his eyes began to water as he tried to not embarrass himself further before his Fades.

Strong and Sprout watched their boss, one with concern, the other with a near sadistic sense of glee. The gray skinned Ryn’s face was darkening and tears ran down towards his bushy mustaches. A service droid distracted the pair as it rolled up, laden with plates of succulent smelling foods. As the plates were laid out, Strong looked to his side to check on Bleu, only to find him inexplicably gone. The big Chiss began to grow alarmed before the Ryn popped out from under the table, crawling his way back up into his seat. He watched Bleu wipe his mouth with the back of a fuzzy hand, the Arconan the picture of innocence.

“Water...water?”

“Of course, Sir,” spoke the droid as it spun back towards the kitchen after it placed the plates around the table. Kordath stared at his dish, the nerf patties dripping grease down the side of the bread. He licked his lips and turned the plate slowly, taking in every angle of the magnificent looking burger before him. With hands trembling, he reached for his sober up breakfast.

“Why do you think they say ‘one hundred percent Nerf’ on the sign, but not ‘one hundred percent Nerf *meat*’, you think?”

Kord paused, burger halfway to his open mouth, to turn and stare at Sprout. “Huh?”

“Well it’s, you know, not everything in a Nerf is meat. There’s organs, bones, the brains, all that other stuff.”

“Uh-huh,” Bleu blinked a few times, not noticing the grease dripping down onto his pants.

“What keeps them from grounding up bone and mixing it in with the meat? It’d still be ‘one hundred percent Nerf’ afterall.”

Kordath shook his head once, twice, and moved to take a bite of the burger, trying to ignore the Falleen.

“I mean, hey, they could even toss the Nerf rectum and intestines into the grinder, why waste it? Mass produced Nerf ‘meat’, I’m guessing they do everything they can to keep costs down.” Sprout watched with glee as the Ryn’s face took on a pallor, and chose to ignore Strong’s expression of disappointment to the other side. He instead winked at the Chiss as Kord’s jaw tightened and the man’s throat contracted. “I suppose if Nerf asshole is cooked properly it’ll taste just fine, so hey, who are we to judge?”

Sprout’s look of sadistic joy was ruined as Kordath tried to push him out of his way in the booth, the Falleen and Ryn getting tangled by lack of coordination or cooperation. When Bleu lost his fight with the gut full of fluids and the mental images conjured by Sprout, they both suffered. Little Green cried out in disgust while Kord tried to curl up on himself, unable to stem the flow. Off to the side the serving droid placed a water next to Bleu’s plate, and nearby customers gagged and scrambled away from the corner booth. The droid rattled off only to return a moment later, towels in hand and a mop.

“Would the gentleman prefer a new table?” it buzzed at them.

“Nah, brought it on himself,” spoke the Ryn as he wiped his mouth clean and picked up his water. “Enjoy that bit o’ fun, Sprout?”

“Hate you. Hate you so much.” The Falleen took one of the towels provided, he extracted himself from the booth with a squelch. He glared at Bleu, who’d picked his Nerf burger up and began to munch away with zeal. The Ryn looked haggard after his forcible expulsion of the stomach, yet he seemed far more sober and together than he had just minutes prior.

Kordath nodded towards his smaller Fade’s plate, a tired grin on his face. “Gonna eat that?”

-X-

Colors. She could hear the colors, she could smell the sounds, she could feel the currents of life and the Universe itself. Her eyes were dry. She couldn’t remember the last time she’d blinked. She didn’t want to miss anything, to close her eyes would mean the loss of so many sensations. Her mouth was hanging open, she could feel lines of drool down the sides of her chin. He’d come in with the needle sometime ago, had found a fresh, unsullied vein and jabbed it in. She’d barely winced, the pain was a known quantity at this point.

But the colors. The sounds. Everything was intense, saturating, *real* compared to the rest of life. She hadn't moved since He'd put the needle to vein, the blanket had fallen away as she sat and stared into the kaleidoscope of sensations. Her skin prickled, she was warm for the first time in days, sweat beaded across her forehead. She couldn't even remember why she'd been so scared, why she was worried while locked in the small, dark room.

If she wasn't here, she'd not be able to experience such rapture.

-X-

Kordath Bleu shook a cigarette from his pack, and drew deeply as he lit it. Head back, he blew smoke up towards the artificial lighting of Jerem Plaza and rolled his shoulders in an attempt to loosen the tension he felt. Strong stood patiently off to his side awaiting his Master. They'd sent Sprout home for the time being, to change and sit in the corner of a shower crying. Bleu had shrugged off the burger joint incident, having tried to explain to the Falleen that 'these things happen' and 'you were the one to bring Nerf arsehole into tha equation.' It was the little fellow's own fault, honestly.

"Doc Presken told us the kiddies end up down in tha Minefield, guess we'll start there. See if we can't track 'em down to their little hidey hole, eh?"

"A veritable labyrinth of twisting tunnels and darkened, abandoned chambers, Master Bleu. How do we intend to even find these children? I would assume they are quite adept at hiding themselves."

The Ryn had shrugged as he began to walk, certain the Chiss would follow. "Just start askin' questions down there, somebody'll know somethin'. We'll poke about a bit and see what turns up."

Strong nodded as he slowed his own pace to match Kordath's, the shorter man's attempt to keep a good speed was admirable but lacking. They passed quickly enough from the Plaza and into the Besadii distract with it's bright lights. Usually this was an area Kord kept his head up and on a swivel, whether for threats or what he callously referred to as the 'scenery' the Fade had never been certain. The Arconan seemed to possess a sixth sense when it came to danger, yet still felt the need to rush into it.

'Ya learn more when ya get face ta face with the sleemos tryin' ta off ya, Strong. Let 'em talk, monologue and tha like, let 'em tell ya how you mucked up their plans. Most of the time ya never meant to, happy coincidence, but once ya figure out what ya did kark up for 'em, well. Then it's just a matter of figurin' out how ta stop tha rest.'

That had been the explanation the Ryn had given his Fade when the Chiss had finally asked. Why did the Force user, who always seemed to be getting into trouble, always know *where* the

trouble would be? It amazed the Son of the Garmis family that his Master hadn't been killed prior to Strong entering his service. Still, on this day at the least, he seemed focused on what was ahead. The Ryn ignored the bright lights, the people who stumbled from the casinos having drunk too much. The women of questionable virtue who flaunted themselves through sheets of glass. Instead he strode through with purpose, headed for an entrance to the Minefield.

Guards from the Trimuative lounged around the entrance in obvious boredom, waving through workers as they moved back and forth. They glanced at Kordath in disdain and at Strong with surprise, but waved them on just the same.

“Should they not have stopped us, Master Bleu? They didn't so much as ask for identification!”

“Besadii send folk down here all tha time, Strong, ta work off debts to the casinos. Debt to tha casinos is tha same as a debt to tha Port when ya get down to it. Course once they get down there, they gotta 'rent' equipment for the minin' work so they're stuck even longer. Because Hutts are a bunch of bastards. Guards are here ta make sure nobody's makin' off with the gear or causin' a scene.”

The Ryn shrugged and moved down into the tunnel entrance, seeming to breath easier as the space around him tightened. Strong walked with confidence, though he was forced to slump as the rocky ceiling encroached upon the top of his head. As the pair moved gradually down the incline towards the primary mines of Ol'val, the lighting became more economic. Every few meters a fixture could be seen, a yellow glow pulsing from them, casting shadows across the rough walls. The Chiss had not spent much time down in the mines since coming to the shadow port, it was a harsh contrast to the prefab structures and stalls of the Plaza, or the ostentatious displays of the entertainment district.

It was more akin to the Docks or the Ducts, hewn from rock and cobbled together to be more functional than presentable. Smaller tunnels ran off from the one they traversed, leading into darkness after a time or lost in right angles with single, flickering lights. Workers of various species wandered through, pushing repuslor sleds and carrying baskets filled with rocks. Some walked with ease, equipment slung over a shoulder and a tired yet satisfied look on their face. Others wore clothes not fit for the work, looking exhausted and worn thin, a dead eye in their look. The debtors, Strong realized.

He saw Kord reach up and run his hands along certain parts of the wall, dragging his fingers across markings painted on the rock. The tags were different as they went along, different colors and patterns.

“Gang markers,” said Kordath, quietly, glancing up at his Fade. “Territory, as it were. Helps them find tha to their own little hidey holes down here. Supposed ta warn off the other gangs from goin' in ta where they ain't welcome.”

“Some of them look different, but similar.”

“Misdirection. Some of ‘em are flipped, but if ya don’t know which one is real, ya don’t know which one ta follow. Could be that ya find a mark at a three way intersection, yeah? Ya walk up, ya see it on the wall goin’ off ta tha right, but it might actually mean keep goin’ straight. Gotta know tha code. Homeless use ‘em too, so does ship hoppers and tha like, similar but different enough ta help keep people out. Don’t know tha code? Might lead ya right back ta where ya started, might take ya ta a security station, maybe a rival gang’s territory. Tricky things, gotta take some time ta learn ‘em one of these days.” Kord muttered the last bit to himself before looking lost in thought.

To Strong, it seemed they were just walking without any real purpose. They’d not deviated from the main path and hadn’t stopped to ask anyone anything. He watched Bleu cock his head side to side every now and then, as if listening to something the Chiss couldn’t hear. He’d spent enough time with the strange, small man to know that this was him picking up details, either from his physical senses or from the Force. Patience would be rewarded in time, he was confident in Kordath’s ability and drive, especially in this situation. The Arconan had tried, when they were first paired together by the Consul, to portray himself as carefree and capable of ignoring the problems of others.

He’d learned in time that the Ryn, a victim much of his own life, had little tolerance for those who preyed on the weak. It made him a poor fit for many in Arcona, which was one of the reasons they’d ended up on Ol’val. Vagrancy and a commonality with those who were trod upon by the elite had lead to a surprisingly emphatic user of the Force, while still not subscribing to the stiff ideals that their allies in Odan Urr held to. The Ryn’s past indiscretions, and present for that matter, did lead to some exasperation to the noble born Chiss still. His propensity for theft had diminished little since his learning of the Force, but he still hadn’t gained the maliciousness that was so common in his fellow Arconans.

Even within his musings, the Fade caught sight of oncoming trouble almost as quickly as his charge did. A group of miscreants, to Strong’s eye anyways, dressed in dirty and patched clothes were swaggering their way up the tunnel. They had a look of contempt for those they passed, the workers and debtors alike. The debtors tried to stay away from them, the workers glared at them with equal dislike.

“Perfect,” he heard his Master quietly say. Kordath cut across the tunnel towards the gangers despite Strong speeding his pace to put himself between the Ryn and the group. The small man was quicker when he had to be.

“You lot, a word? Don’t give me that look, I ain’t Security, you see a jackboots and a shock baton?”

“What we got here, a walking, talking womprat?” said the one in the lead, laughing at his own joke as he looked over the Ryn. He looked back at his two fellows, who jeered and made a few rude gestures at the Arconan. “You lucky we in the main hall ya fuzzy little midget, me and my boys would shank ya and roll you for whatever you got. Not much, I’m guessing, hah!”

“Do you intend to rob my Master?”

The ganger turned with a sneer on his face and found himself facing the muscular midsection of Strong, who had somehow found the time to carefully remove his buttoned shirt. His face tracked up, and up, to find a dark mustache and glowing red eyes glaring down at him.

“Uhh,” the thug managed to get out before his throat tightened too much to speak again.

“Right, thanks,” said Kord with a grin towards his Fade. “Now, if yer done posturin’ and makin’ arses of yerselves, got a question. Tryin’ ta find the hideaway for disenfranchised youth.”

“Huh? The what?”

Kord sighed and pinched the bridge of his beak-like nose. “Tha kids, homeless, tha ones with no where else ta go. I know you lot use ‘em fer stuff, eh? Runnin’ stuff past tha guards, hells, most of you was probably among their number back when you was wee lil shites.”

Strong was surprised by how the thugs suddenly straightened up and their emotions fled their faces. “Dunno what you’re talking about, friend. You and your big buddy here can kark right off.”

The trio turned and began to amble away, the leader straightening his ragged coat as they did. When they reached the nearest tunnel entrance, they broke out into a run, dashing through and disappearing into the dark.

“Thought that might happen, protect yer own,” said Kord with a sigh. “Gotta find somebody who’ll talk, find somebody who--oh, well hello there.”

With a sudden grin on his face, the Ryn went to inspect one of the gang markings nearby. Strong followed perplexed.

“Did you wish for me to go and retrieve those young men for you, Sir?”

“Nah, nah,” waved off the Arconan, running his other hand over the markings. A jagged symbol set above three crimson tear drops. He had his eyes closed, his face set in concentration, brow furrowed. “Right, can work with this. Comeon.”

They set off down a poorly lit side passage, Kordath pausing every once in awhile to inspect another set of markings with the crimson tears.

“Crimson Hounds, newer gang, but they’ve been establishin’ pretty quick. We got a, ehh, friend runnin’ with ‘em. Don’t blow her cover, yeah?”

“An undercover Gatekeeper? Lady K’tana does like to keep a close eye on the criminals aboard Ol’val, I find this unsurprising.”

He heard his Master snort, a choked off laugh, “She ever hear’s ya callin’ her ‘Lady’, Strong, dinnae care how big ya are. I’ll have ta find me a new big, blue, tough guy ta follow me around.”

-X-

Kordath focused again, the effects of fatigue starting to creep in as he used the Force to read the gang marking. His talents at psychometry were growing, though he doubted he’d ever be as good as the Kiffar running Qel-Droma these days. Still, it was a neat trick and had begun proving it’s usefulness almost as soon as he’d picked it up. The path was convoluted and he was certain they’d been lead in nearly a full circle at one point before coming upon an open chamber. Tracks lead in and out through the much larger entryway, signs of old mining equipment, and the lighting here was even worse than in the tunnels. Makeshift shelters were set up at random and an old overseer trailer sat at a higher point further in. A dark shadow could be seen up there, though Kordath couldn’t make much out, likely the one who ran the Hounds lived up there.

Instead, the Force appeared to be with him as he spotted a pair of young ladies not far from the entryway. One with green hair and a tomboy get up, though she certainly wasn’t trying to hide her more womanly qualities. The other brought a grin to his face, the long, unbound white hair and tan skin telling him who she was at a glance. The purple and black outfit was, to say the least, flattering as well. He felt his tail swish back and forth in amusement as he caught her eye, just a moment of subtle widening on her part signaled she recognized him. Her friend turned after the white haired woman prodded her, nodding towards the comical pair of Fade and Arconan.

“Ello there, ladies,” began Kord, making a little mock bow and throwing a wink at the one in purple. “Name’s Bleu, private investigator type. Not here for tha security folks or nothin’, just came ta ask some questions. Maybe you lovely lasses can help me out? Tha big fella is Strong. Yeah, both that and his name. And how are *you* doin’, luv?”

He directed the last comment to the tanned woman, who gave him a little glare that did nothing to diminish his smirk. The green haired one looked him over briefly, the golden tattoos on her face marking her a Kiffar, before turning to smile broadly at Strong. “Hey there, big guy. I’m Diy.”

“Ah, uhm, hello, madame, please to make your acquaintance,” stuttered out the Chiss, which caused Kordath to give him a sideways look. He’d never seen the Fade stumble over words or look flustered. Strong extended a hand, palm upwards to Diy, who gave it a downwards slap and another smirk at his confusion.

“They do build ‘em big. where you’re from, huh?” she asked, biting her lip and circling him. Kord watched in amusement, seeing his bodyguard’s ears darken in color.

‘My gods, she got him blushin’. I like this girl already, no wonder she’s hangin’ bout with her.’

Turning from the antics that were flustering his friend, he grinned at the woman before him. “And what’s yer name, luv?”

“Jeane,” she hissed at him, arms crossed and head cocked a bit to one side. “Can I help you, Ryn?”

“Oooh, almost like tha way ya say that, lovely. Makes a bloke want to ask ya ta dinner, but I am sorta on tha clock here. See, I know you lot, all the various gangs down here, truck with the homeless kids. Maybe ya use ‘em to move stuff around, maybe ya use ‘em as eyes and ears, whatever. Know a lot of them kids end up wearin’ colors after a while, findin’ family where they can, I’m not judgin’, not comin’ down ta cause a problem.”

“Then why are you here, Mister Bleu?”

“*Mister* Bleu, lass ya sendin’ tingles down me spine, do you nae see?” he gestured at his tail, twitching lively behind him as he grinned at her. “See, somebody is offin’ the little ones, three so far that we know about. Security ain’t doin’ a bloody thing, ‘course, they couldn’t care less.”

“And you do?” she asked, her amber eyes boring into him. She was doing a fair job of acting aloof, but he’d seen the way her face tightened around the eyes when he mentioned the murders. He felt he should lay off a little, but at this point her friend, Diy, was watching the two of them with the same kind of grin he’d had on his face when she was bothering Strong.

“I’m a private investigator, luv,” he stated, straightening his coat in a self important manner. “I got a, what’s ya call it, benefactor who, ehh, cares about tha lives of kids who got nowhere ta go. Trouble is, can’t find where they get together at, dunno where ta start askin’ questions, pick up the trailer of the bastard doin’ it. Ya get met?”

She looked uncomfortable, her gaze flickering between the obnoxiously smug looking Ryn and her friend. “Look, I don’t like people killing kids, especially the ones around here. But nobody is going to tell you where they are, sorry, pal.”

“Right, I get it, gotta protect yer own,” mumbled Kord, giving her a long, direct look. He saw her cheeks color just a touch, though she kept her composure. He nodded, and glanced over at Strong, “Alright, mate. Guess we ought ta meet back up with Sprout before he gets lonely. Told him ta meet us back at Ruby’s Perch in a few hours, anyways.”

He tossed Jeane a little wink as he spoke and another half bow before turning to leave. A hand snagged his coat as he started to walk away and he glanced over to see the Kiffar grinning.

“She likes chocolate covered fruit, and she’s watching that tail of yours as you walk away,” she whispered, still grinning. She let go of his sleeve and the Ryn heard the sound of flesh hitting cloth, and a grunt of surprise from Strong. “See ya around, Big Fella.”

“Ah, uhh, yes, lovely meeting you, Miss Diy. Miss Jeane.”

“Did ya wanna stay a while, thought you was doin’ quite well there,” asked the Arconan, grinning up at his Fade. The Chiss shook his head, lips tight, and ears still burning. “Right, back ta tha Plaza we go. We’ll go huntin’ tonight, after dinner.”

-X-

Tonight! Oh what a glorious night it would be! She was still in the throes of drugged out joy and wonder in her little room, but He was preparing already. Tonight, months of work and years of planning, theory, research, all of it would come to fruition. Finally, he would obtain what he’d worked for, finally he would get it, after so much effort.

By morning, the Final Exultation would be prepared. By morning, he would obtain the power he’d been hunting for so long.

It would be glorious.

-X-

Strong and Sprout stood side by side at the Perch, the Falleen standing on a chair, both concentrating fiercely. The midget was up by almost a hundred points, but Strong was determined to catch up. Sadly, the big Chiss had a tendency to throw his darts with so much force that the board either wouldn’t register the hit or they’d rebound off at dangerous angles. The evening crowd had learned to give the pair room after a ricochet had embedded a dart into the side of a poor Bith’s head. Strong was paying for the man’s drinks and Sprout had given him a band aid.

Off in the corner, Korrdath Bleu was sipping an amber ale, a bowl bar snacks sitting on the table before him as well. He yawned, using a finger to draw patterns with the water ring left by the

condensation of his glass. A shadow passed over his table as someone slipped into the seat across from him, bringing a wry grin to his face.

“Ello, ‘Jeane’, how we doin’? See ya changed, neat outfit you was rockin’ earlier, hides one of yer lovely features, though.” He spoke with a grin, eyes flicking over the comfortable clothes she was sporting now. “Seems yer still feelin’ a bit shy about that, it’s alright, I get it.”

“I cannot believe you did that earlier, you could have gotten my cover blown,” hissed the Half-Ryn, Zujenia.

Kord sat back and shrugged before waving at the bar, leaning forward afterwards to rest both elbows on the table. “Trackin’ somebody killin’ kids, sorry. Woulda stayed away otherwise. ‘Sides,” he smirked at her, “barely seen ya since I pulled ya off New Tython. Atyiru took one look at ya and snatched ya up. Good to see you’re doin’ okay, uhh, healthy, and, uhh, all that.”

“The kids are the only reason I’m not angry, just annoyed. As for Master Atyiru, well...wait, what is this?” she stopped in confusion as several plates were placed on the table. A pink drink in a slender glass, already beading up with sweat to show how cold it was, was set before her.

“Well,” started Kord, leaning forward a little more and beckoning her to do the same. She did, she wasn’t sure why other than he was speaking more lowly and was harder to hear. “If any of yer mates from the Hounds tailed ya here, whether cause tha bossman said to or yer mate Diy, sweet lass, was worried for ya. Figured if it looked like ya was meetin’ that dashin’, roguish PI from earlier for a dinner and drinks it’d be less suspicious, eh?”

“Dashing?” she replied with a short laugh. “Okay, sure. A...date, then.”

The two Gatekeepers sat in silence for a moment, picking at the food in front of them. Zujenia sipped at the chilled beverage that had been given to her, grimacing.

“No good? Get ya a beer, if ya like, somethin’ lighter? Did nae know what ya’d like.” Kord realized he sounded genuinely concerned about her comfort; he felt it made him sound almost needy, and grimaced. “I mean, ah, if you want somethin’ else, it’s fine.”

“Not huge on wine, umm, something light, yes. Oh,” she stopped as a server stepped up, responding to Bleu’s wave. “Yes, could I get something else, please? Just something lighter, uhm, smoother taste? Thanks.”

Kord pushed a bit of the food before him, some vegetable product he didn’t really recognize, around on the plate. “Sorry. Not grand as first dates go, heh.”

“It’s fine, besides, this doesn’t count. It’s just cover.”

“Oi, does that mean I can take ya out on a proper one later? Call this one a trial run?” he asked, grinning over his glass.

He had a mouthful of ale when she replied, “Why not, could be fun.” He nearly choked in his efforts not to spray her.

“R-really. Uhh, okay. Yeah. Some place better than Skar’s little joint, hah. You like, uh, like ta dance? Few clubs in the entertainment district and tha like...”

She gave him a smile, amused at the sudden onset of nervousness that had taken over the ‘dashing and roguish’ PI. He’d brimmed with confidence when he’d walked into the gang’s hideout earlier in the day, even as he acted as if he didn’t know her. Now suddenly he had all the composure of a teenager.

“I can dance, and it’s not a terrible effort, this dinner. The food is good--and here comes my drink! Thank you!”

The server gave a little bow, taking their plates and the wine, leaving Kordath a fresh glass of ale while he was at it.

“So, eh, hate to break up the awkwardness and the like that I’m sufferin’ from, but do ya got anythin’ for me?” He paused, catching the look she gave him and rising redness in her features. “The kids,” he followed up with quickly, “anythin’ ‘bout tha kids!”

Zuj took a drink from the light beer she’d been given, feeling the crispness help to wet her dry mouth. “Ah. I thought you, well, nevermind. I’ve got a datacard in my pocket, it’s got a rough map to where most of the homeless kids stay.”

“Sure we can find a good time ta pass that off later, yeah. I do nae feel anyone watchin’, don’t mean they ain’t about, though. Ah, here comes tha dessert,” he said, grinning suddenly.

The server placed a bowl of chopped fruits and berries in the middle of the table, much to the confusion of the Half-Ryn. This was followed by a small heating plate and another bowl set atop it, filled with melted chocolate. Her amber eyes widened before flashing up to look at Kordath.

“Guess I gotta tell yer friend Diy thanks for that wee tip.”

“So that’s what she told you before she slapped Strong on the rear.”

“Aye, and he was pretty quiet all tha way back after that, was refreshin’, she really did a number on him. Used ta seein’ womenfolk drool over the big guy, most is too intimidated ta try anythin’ though.”

The woman smiled as she used a fork to skewer a red berry and dipped it in the chocolate. "She's shameless, it's one of her many fun points," she said before popping the candy coated treat into her mouth. She withdrew the fork slowly, savoring the taste as she cleaned it with her lips. Kord realized he was staring and cleared his throat, taking a swig of his ale and following suit with his own utensil.

He felt his own ears darkening and his tail flicked about erratically under the table. When he felt it brush against a pant leg he went stock still, catching Zujenia's arched eyebrow from across the table. "Sorry, ya know how it is, bloody things got a mind of their own, heh."

"Right," she said, preparing another piece of fruit, slowly rolling it through the chocolate and watching the strange little man across from her. "What are you going to do, if you find the person killing the homeless kids? Take him to security?"

"Security don't give a frak," he muttered, eating a piece of fruit without the chocolate, crunching away at it.

"K'tana then? You said there was a benefactor, somebody paying for the job. You are a *private* investigator after all, you do this sort of thing for credits." She ate another candied berry, her eyes closing as she enjoyed the sweetness.

Kord shifted in his seat, looking sheepish. "Sorta lied about that bit. Trimuative don't care, homeless kids ain't makin' 'em money, why should they give a womprat's arse? I, uhh, had, well Strong sorta, I mean," he trailed off stammering for a minute before shutting up. He punched the table lightly and straightened in his seat, letting out a shuddering breath. "Been there, ya know? Didn't get ta tell ya much about meself when we left New Tython, was too busy helpin' ya learn how ta connect with tha Force and the like. Ran away from me own Clan, the Ryn one, when I was barely twelve. Hopped a lot of ships, worked, stole, slept in alleyways and under speeders and everywhere else."

He shrugged, again looking embarrassed as he looked at the young woman across from him, her long white hair unbound and her amber eyes staring at him. The Ryn felt warm, uncomfortable. "So I knows where these kids is comin' from, sorta, I guess ya could say. Don't sit well with me that somebody is huntin' 'em, fer sport or whatever else it may be, eh? Near as I can tell, from what the medical examiner bloke told me, somebody is hookin' kids with drugs, then killin' 'em and cuttin' out their bleedin' hearts."

"Can't just sit back and watch that sorta thing happen, not while Ol'val is meant ta be me home, yeah?"

"Yeah," she whispered in reply, setting her fork down.

“Sorry, did nae mean ta put ya off yer appetite. Anyways, it’s, uhh, gettin’ a wee bit late as is, the lads,” he nodded towards his two Fades, who were on a fresh round of darts, “are gonna go huntin’ tonight. Find this sleemo before he can hurt anybody else, we hope.”

“Saving orphans and homeless children out of the goodness of your own heart, Kordath Bleu? That’s how you get a reputation, Port Ol’val isn’t that big,” she teased him, smiling shyly. He sighed and placed his head upon one hand, propping it up as he drank it in. Her laugh brought him out of it, blinking, realizing he was making a bloody fool of himself.

With little in the way of grace, he stood from his seat, rounding the table to offer her a hand up from her own chair. She took it lightly with a slight smirk on her face, but he could see a flush on her cheeks as well.

“Walk ya out? Do nae know where yer stayin’, otherwise I’d...”

“What, offer to walk me home? Trust me, Bleu, I’m more than capable of watching out for myself. Still... that’s sweet,” she leaned in, pressing a datacard into the palm of his other hand. She paused, before brushing his cheek with her lips and pulling back with a smile. “We’ll have to, uh, sort out when you’re taking me dancing, though.”

He tried to hold on to the hand as she pulled away, giving her a grin as he let her go. “Course, Miss ‘Jeane’, I’ll see ya when I see ya.”

Bleu watched her the whole way to the door, feeling foolish and apprehensive, until she glanced just over her shoulder. He could see a small smile on her face as amber eyes flickered sideways to meet his gray ones, and he felt the tension run out of him. She left with a final wave to the obviously besotted Ryn, scurrying out the door in her own embarrassment. He turned to Strong and Sprout with a goofy grin on his face.

“Oh great, the boss has fallen, hasn’t he?”

“She is a lovely girl, Master Bleu!”

“Shove it, tha both of ya. We got a homeless camp ta go check on, see if we can’t find the scumbag responsible.” Despite his attempt to reprimand the pair, he couldn’t put any vitriol into his words, still grinning dumbly.

As days went, this one had started well, turned to shite, and then pulled a one eighty back to awesome for the Ryn. He wondered if the rest of the night would be as much of a rollercoaster.

-X-

“...says left this way, down a few more meters and we should find it.”

“Right, let’s try and keep tha noise down, then. Do nae want to startle the kiddies, we ain’t here ta harm nobody, afterall. We ask around, see if anybody’s missin’, go from there.”

Strong nodded, mouth tight, as they followed Little Green. The midget’s green face was lit by the datapad he held before him, the map displayed upon it. They’d been walking for the better part of an hour, down twisted tunnels, many of which had been marked with warning sides that suggested certain death. Kord wasn’t sure he’d have been able to find his way even with the Force at his disposal. They rounded the last corner marked on the map and came upon a crude set of blast doors that appeared to have been forced open at some point. It was dark around them and just beyond, though Kordath thought he could glimpse a bit of light, shifting as if through a curtain.

“Clever lil one’s, put up a sheet or tha like ta make people think there’s nothin’ ahead,” he murmured to his companions. “Keep yer heads about ya, chances are they already know we’re here.”

He pushed ahead, senses alert and back straight, his tail even felt rigid as it trailed behind him. At his back, Sprout tucked his datapad away and looked around in silent awe. Strong likewise gave a grunt of admiration. The chamber was expansive and impressive, a mined out area that would have held a good portion of Jerem Plaza with comfort. Kordath whistled through his fluted nose, suddenly realizing that the asteroid port had a lot more room to expand than he’d ever thought possible. Above them was darkness, no light source in the open room cast enough light to reach whatever passed for a ceiling. Only the lack of stars above them suggested the chamber wasn’t open to the void.

One of the benefits of living in an enclosed environment, with no weather, was that roofs weren’t really an issue. As it was, there were jury rigged partitions scattered about, areas that people had staked a claim as their own. Bedrolls, sheets, sleeping bags, pillows, piles of clothes, whatever people could use as bedding was laid out inside of the makeshift hovels. Small amounts of personal possessions could be seen here and there, which lead Bleu to believe this camp was more organized than Security thought it was. This became more apparent as a few roughly clothed members of the camp seemed to converge on the trio. A quick look over suggested they were more suited to working in the mines, though the Ryn realized that many of them may.

It was the various weapons that drew the eye more, staves and a clubs being prevalent. They looked prepared for violence and to defend the camp which was their home, but he did not sense any real threat. These were people who were kicked down into the dirt on a regular basis, derided and distrusted. They seemed more worried that the Arconan and his Fades had come to cause trouble, but they had no wish to start it. More than a few were eyeing Strong with worry, his bulk alone was intimidating enough, the way he carried himself even more so. Sprout

had already backed up behind the bigger Fade, which drew a sigh from Kordath. There were reasons he referred to Strong as his only bodyguard despite having two Fades.

Kordath stepped forward, hands raised to attempt to defuse some of the tension. "Oi, 'ello there. Me mates and I are here in peace, yeah? Just wanna talk ta some folks, uhh," he looked around the camp again, noting the organization and how quickly the guards had come. "Maybe talk ta whoever is in charge? Take us ta yer leader, and all that?"

Glances were exchanged by several of the guards, before a woman stepped through the perimeter they'd made. A red skinned, lavender eyed Twi'lek woman of an age Kordath couldn't tell, the Ryloth natives aged gracefully if their lives weren't cut short. She carried herself with confidence and poise, her step was light and her build lithe. A former dancer, if he had to guess.

"Who are you? What is it you've come for? If you're here to harm any of our people, I assure you, they will never find the bodies."

Kord gave a little bow to the woman, more genuine than the ones he'd shown to Zujenia and her ganger friend. "Name's Bleu, Kordath Bleu. I'm a private investigator here on the station, I am, miss. Lookin' into something that, well, frankly security is being a bunch of karkin' bastards about. Got a few bodies in the morgue that was all homeless folk when they was alive. Fresh one as of today, a wee lass."

"Security cares not for our troubles, why do you?"

"Lady, look at me. Ya think I do nae know what it's like ta live under a bridge fer a spell? Or hide out in tha back of a cargo hauler, huddled up in blankets, hoping I won't freeze before tha next landin'? Call it altruism, if ya like, call it rememberin' me roots. Call it me not likin' the idea of kids, all three so far have been younglin's, bein' offed for sport or whatever this bloody bastard has been doin' it for." He shrugged, giving the Twi'lek a steady look.

"Eka Slito," she spoke, stepping closer, eyeing the strange trio. "I know who you're talking about, all three of them. They were young, but old enough to start getting into trouble that they shouldn't have. I'll tell you what I can, but I'm not sure what use it'll be to you."

"All information is useful, luv, all of it. What'd they have in common? How old was they? Anythin' weird happen ta them, anythin' that happened ta all of 'em?" Kordath shrugged as he spoke, feeling as if he were grasping at straws. It was with annoyance that he realized just how worn out he felt at this point, it'd been one helluva long day. "Sorry, been runnin' this down all day. Findin' you lot wasn't easy, lady. Ya got me admiration right now."

She crossed her arms, looking the Ryn over again. "My people's safety is my first concern, Mister Bleu, so I'm happy that it was this difficult for you. As for the girls who've gone missing, and they were all female, all between ten and fifteen years old. All of them were good kids and

all of them got into something near the end. I'm not sure what it is, but we found syringes in their stuff after they went away."

"Makes sense, latest one had track marks up and down her arms," spoke Sprout, nodding.

"I'm not sure where they were getting it from, we're pretty good about stopping that sort of thing before it can get out of hand around here. We have enough problems with people having to steal to survive, I don't need junkies as well as thieves. Wait, you said one of them was found today? Who?"

"What da ya mean, who? Probably tha last one ta go missin' on ya."

"Two of them up and disappeared this time, I wasn't sure if it was drugs again or if they'd ran off together to hop on ship. Ondi was always going on about wanting to see sunlight again, feel grass, all that nonsense. Was hoping she took Krespa with her, those two always seemed very close, if you catch my meaning."

"Ain't nothin' in tha world worse than bein' alone," murmured Kord. "It was, ah, a Pantoran girl."

"Ondi, then. Blast it. That means Krespa is still out there, I hope...well, I hope she's alive." Eka looked crestfallen, her face a mixture of pain and anger. The kind of look a parent has when they learn there's nothing they can do to protect one of their children. "Damn it all to hell."

Kord swayed on his feet a moment before he felt Strong's steadying hand on his shoulder. He blinked past the spots that had suddenly swam into his vision and shook his head. "This Krespa, ya still got any of her things? I, eh, may be able ta find her if I can get a look at 'em."

"You intend to track a child by looking at her blanket?" asked the Twi'lek, vehemently.

"Somethin' like that," he stated bluntly, "Look, I could take tha time ta explain, or I can try and find her, yeah?"

Eka Silto glared at him before she nodded and gestured for them to follow her. She lead them further into the camp, past the shoddy looking partitions and tents. Here, they found housing that had been built from cast off metal sheeting and tarps, more substantial and permanent looking. He idly wondered how long they'd been set up in this cavern, but knew better than to ask. A sheet of plastic was pushed aside to let them in, though Strong barely fit through the makeshift doorway. The homeless matron turned and gestured at a small collection of items which rested atop a folded up blanket.

"This is all of what she had. The syringes are empty, not even a drop in them. I still don't know what the kids have been getting into." The disappointment in her voice did little to cover the tired tone, this had obviously weighed heavily on the woman.

Ignoring how tired he felt, Kord knelt before the small pile, separating items out. A pillow, pair of syringes, some kind of stuffed animal possessing no less than eight legs. He stared at the assortment, pondering where to begin. A hand hovered over the octoplushie, his eyes closed as he drank in memory and sensation from the Force.

Joy, security, huddled against its many legged form while in the dark, the cold. Dried tears, whispered secrets, and one sided conversations. Soaked in nightmares and dreams alike.

He shivered, not sure what he'd expected from a stuffed animal, all the dread and joy of childhood shouldn't have surprised him. He moved past a few knick knacks and sentimental items, his hand coming to rest upon the syringes as if drawn to them.

Color. Light. Sound. Senses overwhelmed. Music? Rhythmless noise, not music, no. The colors, so many colors. Heat, why was everything so hot? It was so bright, the colors, the sound, all of it, so bright. So hot. Blood pumping like mad, warm, alive. Full, full of life. Yet empty, hollow, hungry. More. More colors, more light, more sound, more heat, more LIFE. Just some more, a little bit more, a bit, another taste, yes, yes yes.

-X-

He drew blood from her with his needle, filling the reservoir of the syringe with a delighted look upon his face. She was cold again, trying to wrap the blanket back around herself. She felt empty, tired, hungry and scared. He'd been waiting when she came to her senses, when the colors had faded. When the heat had receded, and the glorious harmonies she'd been hearing within her own being had quieted. Now she was cold and empty, scared of what He might have planned for her. He was so happy, and that worried her, it terrified her. He'd been happy when he took Ondi away as well.

She missed her friend, she missed the camp, she missed Eka and her overbearing mothering. She wanted to go back to the camp, the closest thing to a home she'd had in years. She wanted this to end, but most of all she wanted to get away from Him.

-X-

Kordath felt as if he was surfacing from an ocean of misery. He gasped and sat up, going from dead sleep to panicked wakefulness in moments. He looked around the unfamiliar surroundings, the metal sheet walls and drab colored tarp ceilings. A familiar sight filled his vision, the concerned looking Falleen was waving a light at his eyes much to his annoyance.

"Bleu? Are you with us? Pupils are responsive," stated the medic, shutting off the light and shoving a bottle of water into the Ryn's hands. Kordath didn't think about it, didn't comment, just drained it in one go and fell back on to the blanket.

“What tha bloody hell happened?” he asked the ceiling, groaning.

“You had some kind of fit while staring at the syringes. Started going all twitchy, then you fell over.”

“I went all ‘twitchy’? What kind of medical term is that, Sprout?”

“The kind where I’m not sure what to do when you have a Force induced seizure around a bunch of homeless people. What happened?”

Kord stared at nothing for a few moments, trying his best to piece together the vision. “I experienced what she did, I think. Felt what tha drug did. Euphoria, but it hooked her, hard. Whoever gave her this wouldn’t have a whole lotta trouble gettin’ her ta leave camp ta find more.”

He groaned and pushed himself up off the blanket, slowly he rose to his feet and stretched. “So what’d I lose? Ten minutes or so?”

Sprout stared at him briefly before directing his gaze at the floor and shuffled his feet.

“Sprout...”

“Do not be angry with him, Master Bleu, please!” came the passionate cry of Strong, who pushed his way into the shelter. **“It was I that told him to let you rest. You were barely able to keep your feet before your episode, you required sleep!”**

“Strong, how long,” he growled, rubbing at his eyes. “Bloody teenage girl out there and you two let me sleep. She could be bleedin’ dead!”

“You were useless, Bleu, you needed rest, there was no way you could track her in the state you were in. As to how long, umm, about four hours.” Sprout cringed as Kordath stomped past him, his tail nearly swatting the Falleen in the face. The Ryn scooped up Krespa’s abandoned stuffed animal and held it before him.

“Comeon,” he growled again before walking out of the shelter. Eka was speaking with several of her people outside, and spotted him.

“Are you okay? I thought for certain you’d had a stroke in there or something.”

“I’m fine,” he cut her short, his anger was wearing his control thing. “I have what I need to find her, and I promise you I *will* find her. Strong! Sprout! We’re leavin’, now!”

“But how...”

“You just have a place fer her when I get her back, lemme worry about tha how.”

Bleu heard one of her guards ask about why the Ryn was carrying a stuffed animal, but he ignored them. He didn't wait to see if his Fades followed, simply walking out of the camp and into the tunnels again. There he paused, holding the stuffed monstrosity before him, allowing the Force to flow through both it and him. To his eye a vague, cloudy trail formed, floating through the tunnels into the unknown. He didn't know many others in Arcona who could use the Force for dowsing, but damned if he couldn't. While Strong and Sprout couldn't see it, they'd heard his explanations in the past and trusted him as he began to follow the trail.

Twisted tunnels seemed to lead on forever, doubling back upon themselves, going in circles and turning around so much that the Arconan worried he'd allowed himself to be turned about. Faith was rewarded though as the trail strengthened and formed itself more firmly before him. He was getting close, he was certain of it. Even as he tracked it, he reached out with his senses, letting his mind expand to take in what was near. He felt emotions, scattered and few, the touch of sentience here and there. As he followed the path before him, two pinpoints of incredibly strong emotion grew closer and closer, filling his awareness.

One was exuberant, joyous and full of glee. If a mental signature could caper in delight, it would have been. But there was a sickness to it, Kordath doubted the sanity that went along with the being projecting these sensations. It made his stomach turn and almost frightened the Ryn.

The other...fear. Loneliness. A touch of anger. Quite a bit of fatigue. They felt like a victim. They *were* a victim. Suffering, so much confusion and pain, he found it hard to breath as he focused on the presence. And he felt a deep concern for the health of the holder of these emotions.

Finally, the path came to an end, a reinforced door standing between him and the two beyond. He ran his hands over it, looking for a keypad, some kind of electronic lock, anything he could manipulate. There was a handle, but the thing wouldn't budge. Locked from the inside, then. He took a deep breath and ran a hand through his hair, before he reached back and unsheathed one of his Sith daggers.

“Strong,” he growled, “they're inside. I need this door down. Sprout, she's in there, she needs help. She very much needs your help.”

Sprout nodded and Strong gently pushed Bleu aside to grip the door. Kord watched as the Chiss tugged on the handle once, twice, then nodded to himself. Tail lashing in irritation, the Ryn held his tongue. Strong was capable, he just needed to show patience and confidence in his man. Massive blue hands were placed against either side of the doorway, fingers working into what little space they could find. With effort, his muscles bunching and bulging, the Chiss somehow forced his grip into the frame, the metal warping around his touch.

Kordath fidgeted, bouncing on his heels as the door was torn away. He could hear yelling from inside as well as pulsing music that was obnoxiously loud. Finally, the barrier was fully pulled away, Strong tossing it to the side as if it were nothing before he began to step through. Kord reached over with his free hand, placing it against the Fade's arm and shook his head. At first the Chiss thought to protest, that it was his duty to face danger in place of his Master. Then he looked at the Arconan's face and stepped aside. With silent steps, pointless with the noise coming from within really, Bleu went through the door.

What greeted him was not what he had...expected. What was at this point, he mused. A Human, statistically speaking that wasn't a surprise. Him being completely devoid of clothing was. The paint, Kordath hoped it was paint, made strange patterns across his emaciated form. He looked like a junkie, maybe in his early thirties, the abuse he'd inflicted upon his own body made him appear closer to fifty. The man was dancing, cavorting about the room and shaking a pair of over sized, multi colored rattles. Between this and the horrible, electronic, and poppy music playing over the small stereo which sat among a chemistry set, Kordath was put in a state of shock.

Another door caught his eye, this one had chains across it on the outside as well as a locking bar. He could feel the girl on the other side, Krespa, she was not in a good state. He glanced back at Strong and pointed at the door, not bothering to try and shout over the music. His own face set in determination, Bleu looked at the table the man was capering about, seeing several vials of what looked like blood set in holders. Stacks of flimsiplast and datapads were near them, the scratchings on them filled with chemical notations. If the man was developing a new drug, he'd certainly been trying it on himself as well as his kidnapped victims.

"Tonight! We carve out her heart, we drain the last of it! The mix will be ready! AHAAAAHA! Yes! Finally! The Final Exulation is upon me! None shall ever doubt my power ever again!"

Kordath advanced, dagger in hand and a grim look upon his visage, he didn't pause when the Human turned and looked at him with drug glazed eyes. The blade sunk into the man's midsection, twisting up past the rib cage and slicing through several important bits, before skipping off a rib. He withdrew it with a tearing motion, unconcerned with the blood that was covering his arm now, and stabbed once more. And again, and again. The man fell to the ground, hands pushing futilely against the wounds in his stomach and chest, a look of confusion and pain warring with drug filled bliss.

"Final...Exul...exula.."

When he finally quit moving, Kordath shuddered and released a breath he'd not realized he was holding. He stared down at the body for a few moments before he looked up to see that Strong had dismantled the other door. Sprout rushed past him and into the darkened room beyond. Bleu blinked once, twice, then turned and shut off the horrible music, allowing him to hear the

sobbing of a girl. He pushed about the dead man's notes, coming across the words 'Final Exultation' over and over again. With a shrug, he piled it all up and pulled his lighter from his pocket and lit it aflame. He could think of no good reason for anyone to ever find this madman's work.

As he watched the flames burn up the pile, he tried to tell himself that the three girls who'd already died were avenged. He told himself he'd saved one of them, at the least. With a suddenness that surprised even himself, he shouted and used his still bloody dagger to swipe the chemistry equipment from the table. The blood vials shattered on the rocky floor as well as the beakers and various other glass implements. He threw the radio out the door, hearing it hit the wall of the tunnel outside. Only after he buried the dagger nearly to the hilt into the table and found himself lifted from the ground by Strong who had wrapped one arm around his upper body did he start to calm. He kicked the table from his elevated position once and let out a long breath, before nodding. Strong placed him gently back on his feet and patted him on the shoulder.

“Young Sprout says our wayward female friend will be fine, though she's dehydrated and very tired. Rest, water, and warmth are what she needs most. Shall we take her back to the camp?”

Kordath nodded, still trying to keep his breathing under control. “Does Sprout...does he have any idea what kind of withdrawals she'll be goin' through?”

“I asked as well. I'm afraid he has no idea. Lady Silto will surely keep a close eye on her and Sprout has asked that he be allowed to stay in the camp when we return to aide in the young lady's recovery.”

“Aye, I'm fine with that. This is a win, right, Strong? It should feel like a bloody win, but it doesn't. I don't like this,” he whispered, shoulders sagging.

Strong gently guided the Ryn into the small room that held Sprout and Krespa, she was sagged against the Falleen who was stroking her hair and whispering encouragement to her. He could sense she was more at ease, though no less tired, she did seem somewhat happier.

“Does this look not like a victory to you, Master Bleu? She is safe. A threat to innocent children upon Ol'val has been eliminated. It saddens me as well that we were unable to help those before her, but no others will suffer their fate. We take our 'wins' where we are able.”

“Yeah, victory. Woo. Let's get her home.”

Strong nodded, and gathered Krespa up in a blanket, cradling the girl with ease as Sprout fussed over her. The four left the body behind, Kordath pushing the pile of burning documents and datapads atop it.

-X-

Kordath Bleu leaned back in the shuttle seat, slowing his breathing as he prepared himself for a meditative trance. He hated flying, especially through space, at least when he could see things. A cargo hold was fine, devoid of any kind of view to the outside, he could handle that. Instead he'd gained the kind of reputation with the Arconan shuttle pilots that involved them handing him a bucket when he came aboard. At least the charter shuttle from Ol'val to Selen had the wee sliding bits you could cover the windows with, though he'd be hard pressed to convince the rest of the passengers to do it. Still, he could close his own and try to meditate his way through the trip, he was getting better at it.

On the last trip he hadn't thrown up until he was almost through customs. That poor officer and his shoes.

He blinked, opening his eyes as he felt someone settle into the seat next to his. Generally he was left alone on these little flights, people avoided Ryn on the whole. Slowly he turned his head, and took in the shy smile, the white hair, the amber eyes.

"Wha..."

"My Master summoned me, looks like I have some training in Estle City to do," she said in a low voice as other passengers found their seats. "I didn't expect to see you on here, umm, do you mind if I sit here?"

"Not at all, appreciate some lovely company fer once. I mean, uhh, yeah, go fer it. Ahem." The Ryn felt the mental battle of voices in his head, one wondering why he was being a stuttering idiot, the other screaming at him to be cool. "Any idea what Blinky's got planned for ya?"

Dark, yellow eyes peered at him in quiet amusement, "You do know your speech changes from time to time, right? Is it on purpose?"

"Sometimes. Guessin' that's a no on the trainin' plans."

"Do you ever know what she wants when she summons you? She must have, you don't leave Ol'val otherwise."

Kord cocked a bushy eyebrow at her, "Now, how do you know that, luv?"

He had the satisfaction of watching her tanned complexion turn nearly red. "She...told...me?" the weak smile gave the lie away even if the Force hadn't, but it had the subtext of 'please don't push me on this'. It was so bloody cute he couldn't bring himself to.

"Right, well, usually you'd be right, heh. Not been summoned, just, umm, after the thing with the homeless kids, I thought I'd go see somebody. She's been badgerin' me ta come round for a while, can't keep tellin' that smilin' face no, ya know?"

The Ryn waited a few moments, plucking at an imagined bit of something on his pants before giving Zujenia a concerned look. She was being far too quiet now. "What'd I do?"

"Hmm? Nothing."

Kord fidgeted again, her tone didn't say 'nothing to him, "No, really, c'mon, what'd I do ta make ya mad?"

"You called it a date, you said you wanted to take me dancing, now you're running back to Selen to see some girl. It's okay, I mean I'm not sure I expected anything to come of the other night, but you could have just told me."

"Huh?" asked Bleu, brain working overtime to decipher what he'd done. "Wait, who? What?"

"You're going to Selen to see a woman, you just said that, Atyiru didn't summon you but somebody did. Best of luck, I hope you have fun," she said, her tone neutral. Finally it clicked for the Ryn as he replayed the past minute of conversation.

"Oh. Oh! You think I meant, no! No, no, nothin' like that, Zuj, nothin' like that!" he turned in his seat to face her, twisting in the crash harness. "I did call it a date the other night, I did, yeah. Meant it too, would love ta spend more time with ya, yer fun to hang about with, yer fun ta talk to as well. Ain't hard on tha eyes, neither," he said with a grin, hoping to get her to at least smile. Instead she turned and stared at him. "Right, wrong order, maybe. Ya see, tha one who's been askin' me ta come round, her name, well her name is Liri. She ain't a girlfriend or nothin' like that."

"Okay, she's important to you, though?"

"Well, yeah."

"Why?"

"Bit of a story."

"We've got a bit of a flight ahead of us."

Kordath raised a finger as if to make a point, to say he mediated through space flights. To say he'd be poor company, what with being able to see space through the viewports in the cabin. Instead, he focused on those amber eyes looking at him with expectancy and lowered his hand with a little shrug.

“Right, okay, happened ‘bout a year ago...”