

Hubris

By Locke Sonjie
10311

Fiction for: *Station Assault* competition

Chapter 1: Plans

Consul's Office
Temple of Sorrow
Sepros

The first thing Locke noticed was that Sang kept the office much more well-lit than Locke had. Whereas the previous Consul had preferred dim lighting, Sang preferred brighter, warm lights. They provided a stark contrast to the dark, almost black coloring of the floors and walls.

"Did you get these lights from Malik?" Locke asked, gesturing to the new lamps in the ceiling. "They look like something you would find in a greenhouse, rather than an office."

Sang smiled. "They'll have to do for now. I couldn't have those depressing lights you used."

Locke merely chuckled, or forced himself to. It was difficult to express any emotion, deeply immersed in the dark side as he was. He took a seat near the Consul's desk, slowly relaxing his hold on the power. It dissipated a bit, the pain in his back returning, as if it had been numb this whole time. The dark side beckoned, just out of sight. It already seemed like an old friend.

"Why did you call me here?" Locke asked, his voice sounding more normal as he relaxed.

"As you know," Sang began, "pirates were recently driven off Aeotheran."

"Ah," Locke said, "I believe the Summit has found their space station and are planning an assault soon."

"Indeed, and that's the problem," Sang said, smiling slightly.

Locke wasn't sure if he was making a joke. "Problem?" he asked.

Sang took a seat across from Locke, sighing as he sat down. "We lost a lot of soldiers driving them off Aeotheran."

Locke nodded slowly. He was aware of the loss of life. "It seems our new leaders are a little...frivolous with our soldiers' lives," he answered. He never felt bad about speaking frankly to Sang. They had been through a lot.

The Consul nodded. "It was not necessary, and that's why I want you to lead our operation against the pirate base."

"Oh, I don't know," Locke said, injecting a bit of sarcasm in his voice, "I don't think the House leaders will appreciate that..."

"They won't have a choice," Sang said. "I don't want us losing any more troops until we have to. And I know you and I see eye to eye on the value of their lives."

"Right," Locke agreed. At first, he was hesitant to do this, but the more he thought about it, the more he wanted to get back into action. The dark side had given him a gift, he would not squander it.

"I'll do it, but they're likely to have a heavily-defended station. I'll need help."

Sang cocked an eyebrow.

"Oh, don't give me that look. I'm just going to call in a friend."

Location: Redacted
Ship: Unidentified C-ROC Gozanti Cruiser
Somewhere in the Orian System

Eww, more of those lights, Locke thought as he walked along a narrow corridor on the freighter. *Maybe Sang really did get them from Malik.*

Malik's ship didn't have an official name in the Clan's registry. Its location wasn't even officially listed. Locke had only been able to locate it because he had been given the coordinates at a prior date.

Why so secretive, Malik? He wondered.

He didn't ask, however. Locke was here to get the Neti's help, not to question his secrets.

"So, will you do it?" Locke asked.

Malik's Neti body made even Locke feel short. He loomed over the Augur, but somehow, did not seem threatening. Locke thought it might be for more reason than that they had worked together so much in the past. Something about Malik just made others feel at ease.

I don't sense the dark side around him at all, Locke thought. It was strange. In most Sadowans, it was quiet, but there. In Malik, it just...was not.

"I'll help," The Neti said in his strange, rumbling voice. "But how are we going to take command. Are we just going to walk in and say "Hi, we're the Sons of Sadow, this is our operation now"?"

Locke stopped, leaning against a bulkhead, releasing his hold on the dark side slightly. He winced, but it was necessary if he was able to show any emotion. He forced a grin. "Actually, I was thinking you would do that, while I would be in my ship."

"I see," Malik said. "You have a lot of faith in me."

"An Elder, a Son of Sadow, and a known war hero? Mention the Crusade and people start telling stories about you. I don't think you'll have a problem."

"And where will you be?" Malik rumbled.

"I'll be meeting with our enemy. Come on, I'll lay it all out for you."

Chapter 2: The Assault Begins

Hyperspace

Enroute to Kanjar VII

Malik stood on the bridge of the *Pride of Dakhan*, the flagship of House Shar Dakhan. The Strike Cruiser would be arriving near the seventh planet of the Kanjar system in moments.

"Captain, when we arrive, make sure that we coordinate with our fighters and escorts immediately. We'll have to quickly establish a blockade if we want to prevent the enemy from escaping."

The ship's captain nodded. Of course, they had gone over all this before.

"Are you sure this will work?" Jurdan asked from beside Malik. "We could crush them quickly," he said.

"Battlemaster," Malik said, keeping all hints of sarcasm out of his voice, "you don't trust me? If we just attack, we could walk into a trap. Much better for the plan we agreed on to go ahead. And we did agree."

"If this doesn't work quickly, I'm going in anyway," Jurdan said. "They attacked us, landed on our world, killed our people."

"Just wait," Malik said patiently. Humans could be so hasty, especially the Dark Jedi among them.

Abruptly, a countdown timer chimed throughout the bridge. It counted down, verbally, in galactic basic: *three...two...one...mark*.

Hyperspace gave way to starlines, which further resolved into tiny dots. One of those dots quickly became a large, dark ball, and a millisecond later, a grey shape was visible in front of it: Kanjar VII and its moon, where the pirate's base lay.

Exhaling deeply, Malik closed his eyes. He reached out to the fleet, coordinating each pilot and officer together. As he did so, each officer, each pilot, each soldier became an extension of himself, another tendon in a great beast.

Distantly, he heard a report from a bridge officer. "One transport is away. Blockade is forming up in orbit, directly over the enemy base."

Control Center Moon Base Vaknir

"They're here!" Someone said. "I don't think our evac ships can get past them! Commander Trak, what do we do?"

Bulig'nar Trak stood in the middle of the base's small command center. One ancient glowbulb flickered above him, but its illumination still seemed centered on him. He watched the blue hologram that represented the area around the moon. The enemy was forming their blockade more quickly than he thought possible.

A shiver ran through the man. What if he had been wrong? No, it couldn't be. He turned to his advisor, the shadowy man named Cru'ah, who wore his cloak all the way up. He was always like that. Bulig'nar was not sure he could trust the secretive man, but so far, all of his advice had proven useful.

"You said this would work. You assured me I would get my ship."

"Ah, but have you failed yet?" Cru'ah said, speaking in his strange voice. It did not seem human. "No, uh..." Suddenly, Bulig'nar felt more calm, more assured. What did he have to fear? This *would* work.

"Prepare our defenses," he said, finally.

Then the pirate who had spoken before did so again. "Commander, only one ship is approaching. They are requesting clearance to land and...negotiate."

Bulig'nar eyed Cru'ah without turning his head, but he did not ask for advice. Trying to seem confident, he spoke aloud. "They know we have the crystals, but not where they are. They will not attack as long as we have this bargaining chip. Allow this visitor to land, and bring them to me."

VT-49 Decimator *Gemini Alpha* Approach to Moon Base Vaknir

Locke sat back in the power chair as his ship approached the pirate's station. He would need to be persuasive if he was going to bring all of his abilities to bear. The dark side would, unfortunately, have made him seem too cold for the task.

He resented the hover chair, but silently acknowledged its usefulness. If he was fortunate, the pirates would find him less-threatening, and might underestimate him. That would be extremely useful.

The Augur sat inside the ship's cargo bay, near the boarding ramp. The comlink in his ear chimed, and a moment later a droid voice spoke to him.

"Landing now, sir. Ramp descending."

"Thank you, Wrex," Locke said. "Keep the ship ready for departure."

"Oh," the droid began, voice modulator turning to a sarcastic tone. "On the off chance you end up shooting your way out?"

Locke didn't answer, ignoring the droid for now. He felt the ship land and watched as the boarding ramp descended. He guided the power chair out, finding that there was already a small group of pirates approaching the ramp. They were of varying species, and each one wielded a weapon. The way they shuffled their feet made them seem...agitated.

"Check him for weapons!" a Twi'lek ordered, gesturing with the blaster rifle he held.

"I only have my lightsaber," Locke said, making his voice calm. "It's here, on my left..."

He grunted as one of the pirates quickly fished it out of his robes. The pirate looked at it, grinned, and then held onto it.

"I'll need that back when we're done here," Locke said in the same voice. He was calm; completely comfortable with the situation.

Of course, if they tried anything, he would be able to neutralize them in moments.

Maybe, he thought. Just because you have the Force doesn't make you invincible. It was a lesson he had needed to learn the hard way.

"We'll see," the Twi'lek said. "Come!"

Locke guided his chair, following the Twi'lek. The other pirates fell in around him. He kept careful note of which held his lightsaber and where it was. He knew that he might need it, soon.

The group was silent as they passed through the moon base. Locke used the time to examine his surroundings. It was like many pirate bases. The wall paint was chipped and faded. The lights flickered. Maintenance panels were askew, or completely missing. Cables and tubes criss-crossed the floor of the corridor and in some places hung from the ceiling. He did have to

admire the defenses. The pirates had E-Web blaster turrets stationed at chokepoints, as well as what seemed to be functioning blast doors. An assault would not be an easy prospect.

Finally, they passed into a much larger chamber. What once might have been a storage bay had been converted into a control center. Computer banks lined one wall, screens showing images in greens or blues. Servers stood in the middle of the room, at a perpendicular angle to the screens. Together they formed two walls of an imaginary triangle, with a large holographic display in the middle. That display currently showed the moon, the world of Kanjar VII, and the Dakhani ships that currently maintained their blockade over it.

One particular pirate stepped forward. He was slightly better-dressed than the others, and held himself with an air of authority.

"I am Bulig'nar Trak, and you are my prisoner," he said. His voice gave off a sense of pride, but Locke could detect an uneasy undertone to it.

He isn't sure about this, the Augur thought.

"I am a diplomatic envoy," Locke answered. "You will find that my allies have you quite surrounded."

"And if they attack, " Bulig'nar retorted quickly, "you will not find the crystals we took. They are well-hidden."

Locke sighed, beginning his standard diplomatic approach. "And what is it you want?" Something tickled his mind, but he didn't quite understand it at first. It distracted him from the pirate leader.

"That is the question, isn't it?" the Bulig'nar replied. Locke only half listened to him. He focused on the others in the room. The three pirates who had led him here, the four guards scattered about, and the hooded one who seemed to be positioning himself behind Locke.

That's odd, the Augur thought.

"Why does one of your men wear a hood?" he asked abruptly, ignoring Bulig'nar's statement.

The room seemed to freeze for a moment, as if everyone was taking one, slow, collective breath. Then, Locke felt a surge in the Force.

The power chair flew forward as a powerful telekinetic blast hit it, and Locke flew with it. He let the dark side flood into him and instinct took over for a moment. He was going to hit the floor.

The Augur slammed into the floor on his chest and rolled onto his back. A voice came from his throat, though it was alien. "Bad idea," it said coldly.

He flung out his hand, palm open toward his lightsaber. The weapon leapt from where it was attached to a pirate's belt and into Locke's hand. He ignited it, blade springing to life between himself and his attacker, sunfire against crimson as the hooded figure's lightsaber came down on Locke's. The figure pushed, letting out a growl.

It took quite a bit of the dark side's power to resist that, even for a moment. Locke raised his free hand, stretching fingers toward his attacker. The hate came to him instantly and he let it flow, unabated. How *dare* this creature attack him? How *dare* he presume to get the best of Sadow?

Lightning leaped from the Augur's fingertips, striking directly into the hooded pirate's chest. The pirate growled more and leaped backward, out of the way of the short burst of lightning. He yanked back his hood, revealing a snarling, anger-filled expression.

More importantly, he revealed the horns that denoted him to be an Iktotchi.

"Cru'ah?" Bulig'nar questioned, surprise in his voice.

"Silence, human!" the Iktotchi snapped while Locke drew himself to his feet. "You!" Cru'ah continued, "you are their *leader!*"

"Not any more," Locke answered, voice as cold as the depths of space. "Now I'm just the man who's going to kill you."

He sprung forward, lightsaber striking toward Cru'ah's chest. The Iktotchi deflected it in a haphazard way, then counterattacked, nearly getting past Locke's defenses. The Augur was surprised. He expected the Iktotchi to fight like a cornered rat, but that awkward, hasty parry did not match his enemy's counter attack at all.

He's using Niman, or some form of it.

They traded blows again. Locke struck toward the Iktotchi's shoulder, but he deflected it, and then attempted an arcing swing that began awkwardly but led into a smooth motion. Locke side-stepped, spinning lightsaber in hand and pushing the sunfire blade down on his opponent's, narrowly sending it away from his body. Cru'ah was not bad, but Locke never entertained the possibility of losing.

Suddenly, his opponent gestured with his free hand. Locke expected an attack via the Force, quickly flickering his eyes toward where Cru'ah gestured. Instead, he saw Bulig'nar.

"Our reinforcements! Now!" Cru'ah ordered.

Reinforcements? Locke wondered. He pushed the attack, not knowing what was coming.

Chapter 3: Unwelcome Surprises

An alarm blared on the *Pride of Dakhan's* bridge. Malik recognized it instantly: unidentified contacts had just dropped out of hyperspace.

He did not need the crew's reports to tell him what was happening. He was the crew, and they were extensions of his will. He saw through their eyes, felt their thoughts.

Three ships had arrived: two frigates, one cruiser. Malik opened his eyes, looking out the bridge view window as the ships approached. He saw the familiar, unique shape of two Nebulon-B frigates, and a third ship between them. The dagger-shaped hull was slimmer than the most well-known star destroyers, but it was a common hull-type. The Neti received its identification through his battle mind with the fleet: a Vindicator-class cruiser.

It was a fairly powerful squadron; perhaps a fair match for the Dakhani ships. However, the enemy forces did not have battle meditation.

"Who are they?" Jurdan asked, voicing the question that had been on Malik's mind as well. "The pirates brought their fleet?"

"Not pirates," Malik said, receiving information from the crew. The ships were too clean, too new, and their markings...

"Dominion," he said.

"Who?" Jurdan asked.

"An enemy we've dealt with before. I'm sure you'll be briefed. They are a strong foe, but we have the advantage." They could not match his battle meditation. He guided the CNS fleet in, and at the same time, his mind reached across the void, connecting with the minds of those who opposed them. He filled them with dread, demoralizing them. "You have no chance," he mumbled, but the thought ebbed into the minds of the Dominion personnel.

Then, his thoughts were rebuffed and turned on him. They seemed to push back, almost as if...

The Neti smiled. So, he had a counterpart among the enemy. Well, he doubted that they had the experience of thousands of years, as he had, nor the same solidarity with the Force.

If they want a fight, I'll give them one.

Gathering all of his might, Malik *pushed*.

"Our fleet is holding," Bulig'nar reported.

Cru'ah smiled. Locke leaped on his distraction, striking forward, first toward his shoulder, then his weapon-hand, then his leg. Each attack was deflected in a dizzying mix of precise and seemingly desperate parries.

The main issue, Locke decided, was that he couldn't tell if Cru'ah was losing, or if this was just his style. Locke needed to end the Iktotchi, to finish the duel. The pirates had not gotten involved, but Locke needed to know what was going on with their forces.

A fleet? He thought. *What is their game?* It was no matter. Malik was an Elder, and had a powerful battle mind. His battle meditation was among the best Locke had experienced, and he trusted the Neti with not only his own life, but with those of the entire Warhost. Malik could handle the battle in space. Locke just needed to focus on what was in front of him: an Iktotchi Dark Jedi - a member of the First Caste of the Dominion.

It shouldn't have been a surprise. After their defeat at Agua'tah, the Dominion had retreated and gone quiet. There had not been another direct fleet engagement from them. Instead, they and Sadow had merely fought smaller, isolated engagements. A transport ambushed here; a stockpile destroyed there. This piracy operation, however - one that had extended into the Orian System itself - that was bold.

Cru'ah counter attacked. Locke kept his own weapon close to his body, purposely deflecting the Iktotchi's attacks at the last possible moment, using the minimum amount of energy possible. He wasn't about to let this Iktotchi wear him down, or expose a hole in his defenses. Cru'ah gave a knowing smile, as if he knew what Locke was thinking.

The Iktotchi stepped back, gesturing with his free hand. Locke felt the attack as it occurred; a pirate's blaster ripped from his belt and sent hurtling toward the Augur. Locke sidestepped and cut it in half with his lightsaber, then turned toward Cru'ah just in time to block his next attack. Their weapons cackled together, locked with one another. Annoyance flickered across Locke's thoughts, then he forced himself to smile.

"Telekinesis?" He growled. "I'll show you Telekinesis!"

Locke knew he'd have to move quickly to break the 'saber lock. He sidestepped again, letting Cru'ah's blade slide down his own. Then, when it was safely beyond his body, he spun his weapon away from Cru'ah's. The Iktotchi likely expected a strike to his shoulder - and the standard forms would dictate Locke did such.

He was anything but standard.

The Augur stretched out his free hand, catching another blaster in it. He let the dark side guide his motions. The blaster came up and fired in the time it would have taken him to attack with his lightsaber. While Cru'ah expected to block a lightsaber blade, he received a blaster bolt. It caught him in the stomach, causing him to pause momentarily.

"So shortsighted," Locke said. "This is why the Dominion will fall."

It might have been a simple matter to decapitate the Iktotchi, but Locke waited. He would fall for no tricks. He held his lightsaber ready in one hand, discarding the blaster with the other. It was useless in his offhand - it had only worked in this situation because he hadn't needed to aim.

Cru'ah's hands covered his blaster wound. "But..."

"It's not enough to simply understand how to use the Force," Locke said. "But to use it in combination with other abilities. You are not a warrior. You are a child playing with tools you do not understand."

Watching the Iktotchi carefully, Locke stepped forward. He aimed a quick slice toward Cru'ah's shoulder. His enemy stumbled backward, unable to defend, grunting as he hit a row of computer consoles.

"It isn't over," he growled.

"For you, it is," Locke's cold voice answered.

Gathering the Force, Locke surged forward. In one lightning-fast motion, he removed Cru'ah's head. Slowing, he turned back to the pirates, to Bulig'nar specifically. "Are you ready to negotiate now?"

The pirate merely nodded. The others said nothing.

"Good," Locke said, "Then-"

Suddenly, one of the pirates sprinted from the room. Cursing, Locke gave chase.

It was like a dance - or at least, the way humans danced. Malik wielded the Sadowan forces like one gigantic beast. He would push somewhere, and the Dominion's battle mind would defend, or push somewhere else. He would bolster his own allies' courage, then attack the will of the enemy. At the same time, his opponent would defend, then strike at his own forces. It might be a broad strike, or target the beings on a specific ship. It was a complicated duel - as complex as any with a lightsaber. In his mind's eye, Malik saw it as if two massive beings fought each other, surrounded by the void of space.

His was winning, but it was a battle of attrition. The Dominion were putting up quite a fight, but they could not match Malik's abilities. Whereas they likely had an Iktotchi skilled in battle meditation and a different individual as a competent commander, Malik had studied both tactics *and* the Force. He could make decisions on the fly, without the need to coordinate with the ship's crew. He was something the galaxy had rarely seen. What would the legends such as Ackbar done with this ability? What would the Jedi of the Old Republic have managed if they could lead their forces in this manner, instead of merely being elite warriors?

The galaxy might have been a very different place.

He knew that he had the Dominion fleet. Soon, they would be trapped. Then he would deliver the final blow. One last surge would crack their forces like frostbitten roots...

Wait, he thought, new information coming to his senses. He only distantly heard the bridge officer report near him; Malik already knew of the information he was reporting.

"Multiple transports leaving the moon surface! They're breaking for the Dominion's line!"

So, they would split his attention? Then he would just play another card.

"A-Wings," he said quietly, just enough for the crew to hear. "From the *Stalwart*." The carrier waited in reserve a short micro jump away. It always paid to have reinforcements, and Malik had the considerable clout to requisition the ship from its other duties.

The order given, it was mere moments before twelve arrowhead-shaped fighters appeared off the *Pride's* bow. "Transports," Malik said. The crew understood, and in his mind's eye he saw the twelve new fighters shoot out after the escaping transports. With their agility, they would be on them faster than if he had just redirected the X-Wings of *Searing Blade* squadron. Besides, those fighters were needed for the main battle.

"If we had just attacked..." Jurdan said. "They wouldn't be getting away!"

"Or they would be," Malik answered, "and many of our soldiers would be dead. Patience. It will be over soon."

Chapter 4: Conclusions

Wrex did not get bored, not truly. His droid circuits spared him from that. But, he did occasionally run a program designed to simulate boredom, just to imagine what it was like. It filled him with a distinct desire to *do* something - *anything*. So he played pazaak with the *Alpha's* droid brain. Being a rudimentary mind, it was a little like playing with a bantha. The ship barely understood it's moves, and it was pathetically predictable.

Wrex quickly tired of that. The pirate droid flipped through external visual sensors - he supposed living beings might call those cameras - and watched the hangar. He simulated an audible sigh, though no one was around to hear it. Nothing, nothing, and - *oh*.

Pirates were running into the hangar. They hadn't done that before. They seemed to ignore the *Alpha* and go straight for their own ships, but Wrex still heightened his threat detectors and ran subroutines related to the situation. Were they a threat? Should he do something?

Locke would probably scold him if he didn't, but he also might if he did. The human didn't like droids very much. Wrex wasn't offended; he didn't like many other droids, either. His sarcasm circuits - or, at least, the ones he had reprogrammed for that - found it amusing, actually.

Back to the task at hand, he ran hundreds of possible outcomes in seconds. A human might use logic and reasoning, or go with their "gut". Wrex was a droid - he had no gut. Instead, he had to choose an option based on predefined parameters.

He chose to take off. When Locke needed extraction, he could return to the hangar quickly, but he would also be safely out of range of angry pirates. Indeed, as he spun up the subspace drives and warmed the repulsor coils, a pirate did try to scramble onto the ship - but the boarding ramp hit him in the face as it came up at the same time as the ship ascended.

Moments later, the *Gemini Alpha* and - more importantly, Wrex - were out of harm's way.

Locke charged after the pirate who fled. He was not sure why, but something in the Force told him it was necessary. The way this single pirate had fled was just *odd*. With Force-enhanced muscles, he quickly caught up to the man. Locke turned a corner, blaster in hand, and fired quickly.

The blast grazed the pirate's arm, but he didn't stop. Instead, he turned aside, revealing an automated E-Web blaster. It would have been easy for Locke to handle, except he noticed the pirate *shimmer*, his form changing into something decidedly less-human.

A Clawdite.

So Cru'ah had not been working alone. Growling with frustration, Locke ducked behind a bulkhead as the E-Web opened fire. He didn't have time for this. He needed to catch that Clawdite. Locke pulled a grenade off his belt and hurled it down the hallway with a Force-assisted throw. Accuracy didn't matter in the narrow hallway.

As the explosion boomed down the corridor, Locke stepped into it and hurried through the smoke, chasing after his quarry. He hoped the pirate - no, the Clawdite - was going for the hangar, and went that way himself.

He arrived to find two transports already taking off, quickly blasting away. One remained - and his personal ship was nowhere in sight. If those bastards had taken it...

One thing at a time.

He fired his blaster immediately as the Clawdite ascended the last transport's ramp. His first shot harmlessly impacted the ship, but the second flew directly toward the Clawdite. The creature merely raised a hand, palm up to the bolt - and it evaporated.

Locke felt a distinct twinge in the Force as the Clawdite absorbed the bolt's power.

He's Force Sensitive! Locke thought, surprised.

That grey, Clawdite face just grinned at Locke, before the boarding ramp raised and the transport began to take off. Locke's anger flared - the Clawdite was getting away. Lightning shot from the fingertips of his free hand, hitting the vessel's side as it turned toward the hangar exit. It didn't slow down at all. Then, as he heard the whine of engines powering up, he dived to the ground to avoid being struck by the engine wash.

A moment later, the ship was gone. Locke stood up, looking across the empty hangar, breathing deeply. He fished out his comlink.

"Locke to *Pride of Dakhan*," he paused briefly as a click indicated they were receiving. "Pirates surrendered, but some are attempting to escape. I'd guess that's where your crystals are."

"Likely," a voice said. "We're on it. Do you require extraction?"

"Uh," Locke started, glancing up as he heard a ship approaching. It was *his* ship. "Negative."

He cut the channel and approached the ship as it descended.

"On that last ship," the human ordered, rushing onto the *Alpha's* bridge and settling into the second pilot's chair. "I want them disabled."

"That's good," Wrex said, "since the only cannons we *do* have are the ionic kind anyway." He imagined himself rolling his eyes. Of course, his photoreceptors could not actually do this, so the expression was lost on Locke.

"Not going to scold me for leaving the hangar?" he asked, voice modulated to sound surprised.

Locke's voice seemed to soften as the human settled into his seat. It was strange how their voices could change so quickly, but Wrex had noticed that Locke's did not follow usual patterns.

"No," he said. "It was a wise choice."

Strangely, Wrex's circuits indicated he should feel pride in that.

Perhaps he did.

The *Lancer*-class pursuit craft *screamed* out of the moon's scant atmosphere, quickly surpassing the other evacuation ships. After all, it was not purchased from wherever this rabble had acquired their ships. It served the *Blades of Midnight*, more specifically, the *Shadowdancers*. Whereas the Blades were a specific organization within the Dominion, the Shadowdancers were something far more secretive. Even the First Caste did not know of them.

All the better, Talo'ta thought. He cursed the cultural name the Iktotchi caste had given him when he had joined the Blades, but it was useful. It meant that they trusted him, as Cru'ah had proved.

The Iktotchi's blundering had resulted in this mission's failure, but it was not all without loss. As Talo'ta's ship dived and weaved among the A-Wings - using the other freighters as cover to make good its escape, Talo'ta smiled. He watched the surreal blue of hyperspace appear out the main view screen.

The small cache of crystals he had escaped with would serve the Shadowdancers, and the Dominion would blame an Iktotchi for the mission's failure.

All was well.

"A-Wings?" Jurdan asked. "But if the crystals are on those transports...!"

"They'll be destroyed," Malik said quietly. "Consul's orders. We can mine more, but the pirates cannot be allowed to escape. Besides, it's already over."

Indeed, it was. One freighter had escaped out of all that had attempted to do so, and that one had been of a completely different class than the others. In the meantime, assault ships had landed at the pirate base, and the pirates had surrendered without a fight.

The Dominion fleet had begun retreating as soon as the lone transport had escaped. They had fought well, but the Warhost had given them a beating, destroying the Vindicator, disabling one of the frigates, and heavily damaging the third before it had escaped.

Through the crew, Malik detected Locke's transport approaching the Strike Cruiser. He knew the human would want Malik there when he reported back to their Consul.

"The mission is over," Malik said. "I leave you to manage the cleanup, Aedile." With that, Malik let his connection to the fleet go, his extended senses evaporating. Once again, he was just himself. He stepped to the back of the bridge and cleared his throat - although, from him it sounded like a low rumble.

As the crew looked at him, Malik bowed as a human might. "You all did well today. I will make sure our Consul knows it." He could feel their pride swell in the Force. It made the statement worth it. He found it interesting how such a small statement could so positively influence a group of humans.

Once, Malik had considered the lives of humans irrelevant. Over a period of time that they could likely not even comprehend, his views had changed. Each soldier was of value, and positive reinforcement meant good soldiers.

It was the least he could do for his Warhost, especially with so many Sith and Dark Jedi around.

After

Observation Deck

Venator - Class Star Destroyer *Harbinger*

Orian Space

The three were alone in the room, watching stars sparkle outside, one of the ship's squadrons on patrol nearby. In the distance, appearing like a small bright sliver in the dark of space, was one of the Warhost's *Raider* corvettes, providing escort for the larger capital ship.

"So," Sang said, "a Clawdite, with Force powers? I thought only the Iktotchi members of the Dominion were Force Sensitive."

Malik turned from the view window and looked at the others. "The reports said there was a chance the others would be. Perhaps they have the same likelihood as others of their species. Did you notice anything else, Locke?"

The Augur sat in a comfortable chair some distance back from the window, looking out at the stars and their forces beyond. He could stand, but he wanted to be himself around his friends - not the cold, emotionless void that the dark side made him.

He thought back to that encounter. The Clawdite had turned, smiled, blocked the bolt. Then his ship had escaped far too quickly for Locke's own to follow. Still, he focused on that one look he had shared with the Clawdite. At that moment, Locke had felt like he had been outplayed - even though they had accomplished their objectives.

"Just the way he smiled at me," Locke said softly. "He seemed so...confident. Why do I feel like we didn't win? We destroyed the crystals, and stopped the pirates, but..."

"The Dominion," Malik said. "They were involved from the start."

"Something tells me," Sang added, "that we will be seeing more of them soon."

End

