

# -SURVIVAL-

A VODO BIASK STORY – 3729

Rust and ruin. That's all this damnable planet was, just the rusted leavings of a long dead world scorched by the harsh sun above. Its resemblance to Antei would have been amusing in other times but with the bleeding wound in his side, Vodo was more inclined to see how it was worse. Like so many other potential acolytes of those days, back when the Brotherhood still only accepted adepts of the Dark Side, Vodo had trekked across the Shadowlands of the Grandmaster's throne world. He'd covered blasted, barren earth, been hunted by beasts and by those who sought to eliminate him as a challenger before they'd even begun their training in earnest. Those predators that hunted the lands of eternal twilight and those Dark Jedi hopefuls had discovered something about him though: he was a survivor.

Nancora wouldn't be his end. It was just another bump in the road on his path to power and supremacy. He'd survived the Mines of Ryl as a child, he'd survived the bounty hunters as an adolescent, and he'd made a lifetime's study of mysteries and warfare amongst the jealous and envious of the Brotherhood. Nancora wasn't even his first, or worst, crash back to terra firma—that honor went to the Reclamation of Antei from the hands of the mad Jedi, Omancor Crask. It had been during his rescue from captivity that his shuttle had taken flak and fallen to the ground. Pulled from the wreckage alive, Vodo had found his lower body mangled and useless.

Vodo glanced down at the cybernetic legs that carried him vigorously despite his pain and growing weariness. He'd replaced the broken legs and useless flesh of his lower body with these gruesome tools. Reverse articulated at the knee, tipped in long and sharp talons, they had survived today's crash with hardly a scratch. The same couldn't be said for the rest of him, perhaps an indication his suspicions of his body's reliability were to be vindicated. Servos in his legs, and where waist met machine, whined almost imperceptibly propelling him forward. A ragged dribble of blood dripped from the fringes of his cloak, the only trace of his passage aside from the deep gouges the falciform talons left in the sandy soil.

Ahead, the spire grew from the ground like a once-proud monument. It was encrusted now in centuries of dusty accretion and riddled with holes, its skeletal structure visible in more than a handful of places, but it was still far and away the highest point in the area. More than though, a large parabolic antenna jutted from its peak. He needed that antenna to be sure his comlink would reach the Taldryan fleet above the world. He needed to warn them.

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The MC80's command suite was a spacious cabin centered around a circular holotable. Gathered around the table were officers and personnel from Naval Intelligence. They worked diligently, communicating to one another in low murmurs and issuing orders to waiting adjuncts at the stations lining the perimeter of the room with sharp, short barks. Vodo Biask entered the room, his cloak billowing behind him, and stopped at the door to evaluate the scene. His gaze swept over everyone and everything with a perceptible weight. Commander Rhy lance waited at the holotable, watching the Twi'lek with the same blank red-eyed gaze he gave everyone, seemingly unaffected.

“Warlord, we have been awaiting your arrival,” Rhy lance gestured to a place beside him which Vodo swept forward and filled with his presence.

Vodo said nothing to the Consul and instead focused his eyes on the display of the battle and ship formations floating above the table's built in holo-emitter, “How may I serve, my Consul?”

There was a quiet animosity between the two men, well known to all Taldryans, but the middle of a battle was not the place for it. Rhy lance pressed a few buttons, issuing an unusual command into the table. “SIS delivered this to me less than an hour ago.”

The display of the Fleet's positions and battle array disappeared to be replaced with a three-dimensional recording of a woman in an elegant dress speaking with two other women, both wearing tight fitting armor, while they affixed cuffs to her wrists. One thing stood out to Vodo immediately, requiring no particular investigation: The woman being shackled had a distinctive tattoo upon her cheek. It was a tattoo Vodo was intimately familiar with, one that pulsed in different colors depending on the mood of its owner. That tattoo had once shone a bright purple, for love of him, but now appeared blue in the projection of the image.

Rhy lance studied him quietly for a moment before speaking, “She is down there.”

“How?” the Warlord's voice was quiet but his voice was hard like steel.

“I uhh—excuse me, my Lords, I believe I know,” a small man standing behind the Consul spoke up.

Vodo and Rhy lance both turned to see the man, dressed in the uniform of the Secret Intelligence Service, shifting uncomfortably. Seeing he had their attention, he rolled his shoulders uncomfortably and continued, “We detected a shuttle bearing the marks of the Syndicate slipping through the perimeter of Arcona's AO six hours ago. Zasati Tryezsh is well known to SIS, to have been in their company and employ for sometime. Meaning no disrespect, Lord Taldrya.”

The Consul shrugged at the man's interruption, though he narrowed his brow at the officer's strange nervousness before the Warlord, before pulling the holoimage down, "It does not quite matter, in the great scheme of things, though I suspect you will want to find that out for yourself."

Vodo looked over and saw the Chiss holding out a datapad to him. He took it without a word and left, the SIS man following on the Warlord's heels.

"I would like to accompany you, My Lord," the man chirped at the Sith as Vodo strode through the Flagship's lengthy corridors.

Giving him the barest of regard Vodo answered, "And what do you propose you could provide me, Lieutenant, that I am not capable of myself?"

"I'm the one who filmed that Holo, Lord," the man nearly tripped over himself attempting to keep pace with Vodo's lengthy, and swift, gait, "I know who has captured her."

At that Vodo stopped. He turned on the rather short, nervous man, "Tell me, now."

The man shrunk under the Sith's burdensome glare, "Uhh—I mean to say... They are called the Huntresses; they're a sort of, umm, special force of, umm, hunters?"

Vodo sneered and continued down the corridor. The man hastened to catch up, "They're lead by a women we've been compiling a dossier on by the name of Kendra Icasta. She's a real piece of work."

When Vodo said nothing the man shut up but felt that he hadn't been dismissed and continued to tail the imperious Warlord.

The Consul's datapad had specified a Lambda shuttle and a single fighter escort to the surface. Aboard were four armored troopers of Taldryan's Marine contingent. The Lieutenant took a seat against a bulkhead by the ramp while Vodo moved up to the pilot's cabin to have a word with the man. The ramp closed with a hiss as the engines began to spool up and returning to the passenger bay, Vodo seated himself across from the SIS officer.

"What is your name, Lieutenant?" Vodo rested in the seat comfortably, in stark contrast to the man's growing apprehension.

"My name? I, uhh—" he was cut off by a sharp rebuke from the Sith sitting across from him.

"I-Uh is not a name I'm familiar with. What is your name, Lieutenant?"

"Dac, Lord. Dac Orsen," the man's military training cut through his anxiousness and he delivered it without a stutter.

The gravity in the shuttle shifted subtly as they slipped out of the MC80's hangar bay into the vacuum of space, "There's something you aren't telling me, Dac Orsen. What is it?"

Dac's eyes widened, nearly unnoticeably, "What—I mean to say, yes. There are a lot of fine details I could fill you in on..."

Vodo let Dac squirm under his flat stare for a moment before dismissing the man as inconsequential. If he wished to impress his superiors by attaching himself to Vodo's exploits, so be it. Chances were good this man would die and Taldryan would be out one more weak-willed drone. By the time Vodo was done reshaping this Clan, it would be unbreakable like Cortosis and there would be no room for worms like this.

The shuttle banked to maneuver to the planet after a short while but that was followed moments later by an abrupt course change. Over the cabin PA the pilot announced, "We've picked up a tail. We're making evasive maneuvers as our escort wards them off."

Vodo's brow furrowed with frustration. This was a warzone, it was unsurprising a shuttle attempting to make planet-fall would be buzzed by a Collective combat air patrol but time was rather on the short side. Zasati was down there, for some unknowable reason, and he needed to save her. Yet again that woman had gotten herself in over her head and needed him to pull her back up for air. She would never cease to disappoint him though he still held out hope for their Son, the boy he'd taken on as his newest Apprentice. Zakai, thankfully, was safely back on Taris sitting out this war.

"I apologize, Lord Taldrya," the shuttle's pilot said over the PA, "We've lost our escort, we're returning to the Flagship."

Vodo's fist beat once upon the hull of the shuttle filling the enclosed space with the noise of his fist on the metal, "Feirfek!"

Pulling himself alongside the pilot in the command cabin Vodo pressed his will upon both of the crew members flying the shuttle. They worked expertly with a practiced precision but there was an underlying hurriedness to their movement that spoke to the danger they were in.

The Captain looked over his shoulder at the tall Twi'lek, "Two Z-95s, My Lord, destroyed our fighter escort and are now attempting to herd us towards the planet."

The external com cackled for a moment until a voice with the buzz of a mechanical vocoder came over it, "Lambda Shuttle. You are directed to land at these coordinates. You will hand Vodo Biask Taldrya over and be allowed to depart."

*How could they know I'm aboard this vessel,* Vodo's mind raced. His teeth ground against each other as he attempted to come to the right conclusion. The Force, quieter than usual, proffered no aid. Vodo make his decision then.

“Captain, you will attempt to return us to the ship,” Vodo pressed his mind on the man’s, filling him with confidence and obedience, “I will order the pursuit turret manned.”

What ensued was a slow motion game that began in high orbit over Nancora. The shuttle attempted to pull up and out of the planet’s gravity well but would be forced to divert to a lower altitude by the trailing, pursuing fighters. Every evasive maneuver was countered by the expert pilots of the snubfighters and the shuttle was gradually forced to a lower and lower orbit until they were brushing atmosphere. Vodo’s rage was beginning to consume him and he vented it by filling the pilots of his shuttle with the drive to please him. It was perhaps too heavy of a touch as things went wrong in quick order.

The Marine Trooper he’d assigned to the rear gun scored a glancing hit to one of the Z-95 Headhunter’s stabilizer as it made a buzzing pass. The Pilot, filled with motivation to please the Warlord, jerked his control stick to the side to bring the mass of the shuttle to bear on the smaller fighter as it passed. The Lambda Shuttle collided heavily with the fighter, crushing it, but was critically damaged in the process and began to tumble in a barely controlled manner. The brown mass of Nancora below began to grow larger in a manic spiral.

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Vodo gasped with pain, air filling his lungs, and the yellow light of the sun filled his world with a white-hot brilliance that his nervous system was already telling him was his reality. As his eyes adjusted to the bright of the day he found himself surrounded by the wreckage of a ship. Twisted durasteel, wrenched girders, and burning material that gave off an oily black smoke. He put an elbow to the ground beside him and attempted to come to a sit but collapsed without ever lifting his torso from the ground.

There was a searing, agonizing pain in his side. It grew worse with every inhaled breath, every twitch of his abdominal muscles, and every movement that even remotely connected to his abdomen. Even lifting his head to see, while lying on his back, strained the muscles and activated the pain. Vodo explored the wound with his left hand. A long sharp piece of metal had pierced the skin of his stomach just to the left of where his body armor terminated below the ribcage. The part that emerged was only a few centimeters long but he could feel its length buried in his insides quiet deeply and it was among the worst pain he’d ever experienced.

Overhead a starfighter crossed, its silhouette just visible through the water in his eyes, against the burnished sky. It reminded Vodo that he had concerns aside from his wound. He closed his eyes and called forth the Force. It recoiled from him, as it usually did, but he grasped it and wrenched it to his purposes anyways. First, he explored the wound, determining what damage had been done and to what extent. There was internal bleeding and the metal had

damaged the upper tract of his digestive system, or what remained of it, but no major organs had been pierced thankfully. Vodo looked around him and found what he knew he would need next.

A small chemical fire burned nearby, heating a small shard of durasteel that lay beside it. Turning onto his right side with some considerable effort the Warlord clawed his way across the longest two meters of his life until he could grasp the shard. With determined swiftness he pulled the metal in his side free, roaring with agony, and slapped the hot durasteel against the exterior wound. His hand burned as he did so but he held it there, gritting his teeth against the pain, until the blood stopped flowing. Vodo's heart beat mercilessly against his ribcage and, finally able to breathe without stabbing pain, he panted in exhaustion and rolled again onto his back.

He closed his eyes and called forth the Force again. Cowed, the Force came and filled him. It saw to his hurts and knit the least of his gashes together but the ability to heal the wound in his side was beyond his ability, he knew. He applied himself to the task anyhow at least until he was reasonably certain the bleeding within had ceased and he wouldn't die in the short term. The Warlord forced himself to his feet and once mounted atop his fearsome prosthetic legs he looked about the wreckage while cradling an arm against his side. He needed a medpack, he needed something to dull the pain and keep his wits about him but he found nothing-- nothing except the battered remains of the pilots, the troopers, and Dac Orsen.

Vodo was about to depart the ruins of the shuttle when something caught his eye. Normally he would have glanced over it, observant and studious though he was, but the Force whispered to him and directed his attention to the small handheld holoprojector that lay beneath Dac where it had fallen from his pocket. Vodo didn't so much limp as he walked over to it, his cybernetic legs were rather miraculously undamaged, but with his injury he lolled a bit to take the pain off his weak side. The projector floated into his outstretched hand and activated at his touch.

The pale blue figure of a woman in tight fitting armor appeared there, looking at him, "Mr. Orsen, you will have received confirmation by now that we do in fact have both your Husband and child. You have also received our instructions on what you must do: lure Vodo Biask to the planet and into our hands and we will release both hostages unharmed. Your failure, for any reason, will result in their... well, demise."

Stunned, Vodo stood and stared at the holoprojector for a moment. Treason within Taldryan? It was unthinkable. How had this rather mundane case of extortion gone unnoticed within the Secret Intelligence Service? Overhead, the rumble of an ion engine signaled another pass by the fighter but still Vodo didn't move. He gazed down at the form of Orsen, lying mangled and dead, for a long moment before lashing out with his foot at the dead man's head. When the rumble turned into a whine that began to rise in pitch Vodo looked up to see the Headhunter coming lower and aiming at him as though it were going to begin a strafing run.

Rage and frustration boiled over within him. He unconsciously reached for the lightsaber at this hip, was unsurprised to find it there despite the rough crash, and ignited its brilliant white blade. Taking aim, carefully ignoring the still aching wound in his side, Vodo hurled the weapon like an ancient javelin at the rapidly approaching craft. The hilt of the lightsaber, a meter long unlike most mundane weapons used by Jedi and Sith, flew straight and true guided by Vodo's command of the Force. The Pilot likely couldn't see the small object approaching him until it was too late. The saber's tip collided with the leading edge of the snubfighter's stabilizer wing, tumbled at it passed through the fighter's plating, and damaged the wing sufficiently enough that the wind tore the rest free. The fighter lost control and tumbled unceremoniously into the ground where it exploded in a ball of fire a kilometer or so away.

Vodo didn't watch the spectacle. He panted heavily, an arm outstretched to the sky. Full of his anger he commanded the Force to do his bidding. Timidly at first and then with some vigor the lightsaber stopped tumbling in the sky and began flying back to his waiting hand. It flew pommel first, true as an arrow, the red spherical jewel there leading its way until he caught it. Arresting its momentum wrenched his good shoulder a bit which stressed his weak side and eliciting another gasp of pain. This day was not going well. Gathering his wits, Vodo filed the pain away, and brought up his wrist comlink. He fiddled with the controls for a moment but was unable to get the screen to resolve a connection though his diagnostic tools said they were clearly receiving. The Collective was jamming the Brotherhood's frequencies he surmised. Vodo looked around at the ruined world. He would need something more powerful, something with some prominence to get a signal out to let the fleet know he'd survived.

There was nothing visible from where he was, so trusting in the Force and his destiny, he picked a direction and set out. Vodo knew he needed to get clear of the wreck; the Collective's agents would be zeroing in on its location as given by the now deceased Headhunter pilot who had no doubt reported his survival. They had wanted him enough to turn a member of the Clan's intelligence service to their ends, and draw him out into the open, so it stood to reason they would continue to hunt him. This posed a problem for the lone, injured, Sith. The Collective, who controlled the planet, could mobilize anything from a squad to a regiment to find him. That seemed unlikely, the more he thought about it, though. The enemy was preparing for the Brotherhood's ground assault at any moment and couldn't afford to dispatch an entire formation of men, or droids, or whatever to find and capture him.

Following a hunch, Vodo took out the dead man's holoprojector and activated it. The woman in the tight fitting armor appeared once more though he turned the volume off. Something about her, or rather her outfit, triggered a faint memory in his pain-addled mind. What was it about her, or her armor... Then it came to him. It was the same armor, same style anyhow, as the two women from the Intelligence video that had started this whole ordeal. It had been supplied by Dac Orsen at the behest of this woman and at least two others who dressed remarkably similar to her. They were connected then and they had felt confident enough to try and ensnare him. Vodo was still puzzled why they desired him though. In terms of this conflict

he was of little consequence: Vodo commanded no military assets, he wasn't in charge of a Clan or a House, and he wasn't on or in the employ of the Dark Council. This war had found him in between jobs, so to speak, as he plotted Commander Rhy lance's eventual fall and his own ascension to the seat of Consul of Taldryan once more. Why would agents of the Collective want him?

His lurching gait carried him up and over a sandy hill. Bits of dark metal, long rusted from years and perhaps centuries of exposure to the elements, stuck out haphazardly from the ground in all directions. The red-brown soil and sand often blended so well with the junk that he didn't know he was treading upon something until he heard the scrape of his metal, taloned feet upon it. Vodo kept his eyes up, scanning the landscape searching for the thing that would help him communicate with the Fleet but also for anything, or anyone, looking for him. As he looked, he continued to think. The woman knew his name so it could be surmised they knew who he was and what he was capable of. The Collective eschewed Force Users and these people felt they had what it took to capture one that hadn't had a ten centimeter long piece of metal in their stomach. Vodo needed to be on his game. He renewed healing the wound with the Force as he walked. It was slow going, and wouldn't knit everything back together like it should, that would take days in a Bacta tank, but everything would help at this point.

Vodo settled on a number. There would be four or five of them hunting him. It didn't take an army to hunt a single Force User. A team of professionals could do the work just fine. What was it Orsen had called them? Hunters? A special force of anti-Force Users. The woman in the holo, and the ones he'd seen earlier, wore their armor comfortably. It fit like finely tailored clothes and their body language suggested no encumbrance so they were practiced with their wear. They would come at him from two directions, seeking to corral him into a dead end. The team in front would cause him to change his course while those following behind would do what the Z-95s had done to the shuttle in orbit: constantly prod him into the direction they'd chosen for their ultimate ambush. None of that mattered as he had no idea where he was, where he was headed, or what lay over the next rise in the land.

He was the spider, not the fly trapped in the web. Vodo wasn't accustomed to being hunted and he didn't like it. It was his schemes that others moved in, it was his machinations that caused all the little puppets to dance. He didn't perform for others' amusement. The hunters would find he made for poor prey. He was a survivor.

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With the hood of his cloak pulled up and over his face Vodo walked slowly, drawing ragged breathes where he was able. The servos of his cybernetic legs whined almost



imperceptibly with each step, a lonesome companion to the gentle whistle of the warm wind that pervaded the entire world it seemed. What a miserable place this world was. Vodo had seen numerous so-called 'dead worlds' in his travels but that title seemed to refer more to the planet's habitation and less to the state of its ecology. Few worlds were so thoroughly ruined as Nancora; Tatooine was a verdant and thriving world in comparison with native populations of beasts and sentients. Nancora had suffered some catastrophic collapse not only of its civilization, which had left the world littered in its refuse and detritus, but also of its flora and fauna. The rusty sand was ubiquitous.

As he walked through the barren world, avoiding the glare of the harsh sun in the sky under his Armorweave cloak, Vodo would pass by long abandoned ruins half or mostly filled with the sand. The wind picked the damnable stuff up and deposited it everywhere so that even in the lee a fine layer of sand pervaded everything. He learned as he walked, and stumbled, to pick a path where he could see junk metal poking above the sand as the clear patches were often hiding pits of easily disturbed silt that could swallow him up in part or wholly. It was slow going and all the while he longed for a sip of water. Some cool, clean water-- what he would give for something to wet his mouth. It didn't help that the gash he cradled constantly reopened from his exertions and seeped small droplets of blood that rolled down the inside of his cloak to drop to the ground. It wouldn't be hard for even a novice tracker to find him.

Cresting a rise in the landscape, Vodo saw at last what he was looking for. Several kilometers away he could see a tall spire rising out of the brown earth surrounded by mounds and half-covered ruins. Atop it, perching precariously, he thought he could see a newer parabolic antenna. It looked to his keen eyes like the remains of a settlement of some considerable size that had been for years now fighting the encroachment of the sands. Before him, between where he stood on a considerable hill, there lay a series of canyons and a flat plane of sand and dirt beside one another. His lekku tickled, a sensation that washed from their base at this skull and traced along the skin of the sensitive appendages to the tips, a familiar whisper from the Force warning him of danger.

Vodo looked around and saw behind him on a rise he'd passed over an hour ago two silhouettes. They stood rather still, wanting to be seen he imagined. That would be the pursuit party. Vodo turned back to the landscape before him and reevaluated it. The flat plain would be easiest and the quickest way to the ruins of the town with the spire, but there was no cover and he would be easily spotted. On the other-hand, the canyons seemed to span the same distance, right up to the perimeter of the ruins, and could be traversed even if it took longer. He would be more easily concealed but that was where Vodo would have bet the *Karufu Knight*, his lavish Upsilon-class shuttle, the hunters would lay their ambush. He studied the plain once more and soon saw another two silhouettes. That would be the flanking team in position to push him into choosing the canyons. His course was set then. He needed to make it to that spire and its antenna, there was no alternative at this point.

The walls of rock bore little difference to the sand he'd come to hate so thoroughly that day. They had the same ruddy color and the same lifeless presence. The rim of the canyon he walked in was high above him, topped in craggy collections of loose rock and soil. Occasionally the wind above, whipping through the narrow space with a haunting howl, would dislodge some silt or a few rocks that would then cascade down. The floor of the canyon, which had no doubt once been a torrent of a river, was now a frustrating collection of fallen boulders and scree that Vodo was forced to navigate with care. It slowed his progress considerably as he looked for where he would lay in wait and launch his counter-ambush.

He found it where three canyons came together in a junction. It was open above and large compared to what he'd seen so far. As a result the sandy bottom here was largely clear of debris. There were four approaches to the space; one of the tributary canyons he'd walked in from, two more of similar size, and the larger fourth that had likely been the outlet where the water of the first three had exited in a rush. This area would have been a tempest of rushing water back when Nancora was still alive but was now just one more space where the ghosts of this world howled ghoulishly, carried by the warm wind. Vodo chose a small overhang the water had gouged out of a wall over centuries of erosion and enshrouded himself in the Force.

Weariness was beginning to sink its claws into him with vigor. His left arm quivered slightly, some combination of the pain of his wound and the fatigue of holding it against it gingerly all day. The illusion he wove to cover himself wore on him as well. The concentration it took to keep it convincing became more and more difficult the weaker he became but Vodo locked his will on this one task. He would be a rod of durasteel for as long as it took. He had no doubt the Hunters would find this place; he hadn't attempted to cover his tracks.

Sure enough, they came. Two stalked into the space from the canyon Vodo had used, bow-like weapons in their hands. They moved with predatory grace in their tight-fitting armor, hoods up and masks on. Above two more paced the rim of the canyon walls looking down the 20 or so meters into the conflux. These too had bows in hand and they scanned the space with their eyes. Four hunters then, or rather Huntresses as they were all women with remarkably similar builds and equipment loadouts. Vodo watched them from behind his illusion, evaluating the four women who thought themselves worthy to hunt him. They were trained, he could see it in the way they carried themselves and their equipment, how they confidently and carefully placed their steps to disturb the ground as little as they moved.

One stooped to examine the ground where Vodo's feet had trod. Vodo gently waved his hand across the sand nearer to him obscuring the tracks closer to his position with the lightest of touches. The nearest Huntress hadn't been looking his direction but she stopped and tensed nonetheless and for moment Vodo feared he'd given himself away. She cocked her ear as if to listen to something faint but she shook it off and continued to examine the dirt. Vodo allowed himself to breath once more. Needing to take the weight off his injured side Vodo shifted ever so slightly. A servo in his leg whined only barely but again the Huntress froze and her head

whipped around to scan the racks near where Vodo crouched in hiding behind his illusion. She couldn't possibly have heard that, Vodo told himself incredulously.

"He's here somewhere," she announced with no particular emphasis.

The other women, spread out across the space and above it, didn't seem to have any trouble hearing her and responded by focusing their search on uncovering his hiding place. They had preternatural hearing, probably some sort of implant knowing the Guild's propensity for upgrading their agents' abilities. Their strength would become his. Droid servants detached themselves from the womens' back where they'd remained dormant till now and began to flutter about scanning. This presented a bit of a problem; his illusion could fool some of the strongest willed Force Users but a simple thermal scan would reveal him plain as day.

Vodo flicked a finger at a boulder perched atop the canyon rim across from him. The sound of it becoming dislodged and falling drew everyone's attention. He used their distraction to focus on one of the Huntresses above on the rim of the canyon. Through gritted teeth, a wild look in his eyes, Vodo pulled on her. The woman screamed as she was pulled off her balance unexpectedly and fell through the air to land with a dull thud at the bottom. Using the distraction this created, Vodo dropped his illusion as he hurled himself through the air. He ignited his lightsaber and brought it down, two handed, on the head of the Huntress nearest to him, the one who'd heard him moving. The white blade bisected her to the hip.

The pain in his side flared like a fire stoked back to life, like a blazing inferno. He embraced the pain, used it to fuel his rage, and roared his challenge beastially to the remaining two women. The one above drew a bead on Vodo with her bow and loosed a bolt of what appeared to be plasmic energy, much like a blaster's. Taking a chance Vodo whipped his blade around and batted the bolt away. The purple beam buried itself into the ground, discharging in a puff of sand and smoke, beside the two halves of the Huntress at his feet. Whatever these weapons were, Vodo could deflect them and that encouraged him. He pounded on his wound with his fist, lusting in the agony, allowing himself to be incensed with it.

The droids swarmed towards him, racing in with their glowing red view-sensors focused on him. The Warlord reached out with his off-hand after batting away another bolt from the huntress above, and attempted to grab hold of the nearest droid with the Force. The machine reacted quickly the invisible hand that attempted to throw it into the ground, increasing power to its repulsors, and swerved back into flight. He didn't have time to try again as the other Huntress down in the canyon with him had dropped her bow and had equipped a short, club like weapon. The protruding apparatus at its head suggested a stun weapon to him.

Vodo circled her, deflecting the occasional bolt from the one still on the rim above, eyeing the approaching swarm of three droids warily. He casually noted the fourth flying higher up above but was reasonably impressed when the woman above leap into the air, caught onto its body, and used it to slow her descent as it fought to remain airborne. Now faced with two

huntresses before him, and the air full of floating droids, Vodo bared his sharp yellow teeth menacingly.

“You can’t take me,” he growled the nearer of the women, his yellow-red eyes boring into her. “Your fear betrays you.”

She glanced at her teammate, nervousness playing in her eyes, “We should wait--”

The other huntress snapped back at her with anger in her voice, “He’s manipulating your mind, Lannah.”

The two women stood off from him, four meters away, but the droids continued to fly in at him deliberately from different heights and angles. Vodo paced slowly so that his back was to a rock wall to prevent becoming surrounded. He grasped again at a droid that came too close and slammed it into a protruding rock pinnacle whereupon it screeched mechanically and tumbled to the ground lifelessly. The two women leapt into action followed closely by the remaining droids. Vodo coughed, the iron tang of blood coating his mouth, but he launched himself to meet their attack.

His first swing removed a manipulator arm from a droid. He spun the weapon in his hand and swung it backhandedly to take the head off the Huntress to his left. The woman reacted with phenomenal speed, diving under his slash, and lashed out with her baton which connected with his left shoulder. An arc of blue energy danced across his armor and skin explosively sending the Warlord off balance. He regained his footing in time to hack at another droid that had come too close and severed a third of its mass from the rest. Another droid took advantage of Vodo’s over-commitment to the attack and it too shocked him, though it seemed to slightly incapacitate itself in the attempt.

Vodo staggered away from the attack, clutching at his side, panting in pain and exertion. He was on his last legs and he knew he looked like it. The Huntresses moved in concert, advancing on him with predatory caution. He swatted at another droid, danced back from a probing jab from the woman on the right, and caught yet another Droid with his saber. Vodo planted his rear-most foot, bellowed ferociously, and lunged forward to skewer one of the women on his weapon. A crack pierced the air and Vodo’s shoulder blossomed with fire and hurt. The impact of the slug staggered him and he lost his footing, falling face-first to the ground. He struggled to make it to his feet but alternating jabs of the stun batons in the hands of the women stole his strength and he fell back to the ground.

The ground crunched slowly as someone approached, kicking his lightsaber out of his hand. He tried to call it to his hand again but lost concentration when another jab of electrical energy played across his nervous system. Through foggy vision Vodo could discern the presence of a third person who had squatted near his head. She sat there on her haunches, elbows on knees, examining him curiously.

“I would say I expected you to put up a better fight but I see your crash wasn’t an easy one, Vodo Biask,” she prodded his gash with her own baton but withheld the stun blast, taking professional delight in his groan of agony.

The woman stood, “Do it”.

Twin jolts of stun baton hit him at once and that was the final straw; Vodo fell into unconscious delirium. The world returned in a spin a short time later. His head lolled from one side to another as he attempted to hold it up straight. The woman who’d arrived last saw him rousing and broke from her huddle with the other Huntresses and approached him.

“Welcome back, Mr. Biask,” the woman stopped several paces from where he now sat, wrapped in durasteel chain.

Vodo was vaguely aware through the pain and dizziness that his hands were bound. He looked down, blinking several times trying to focus his eyes, and saw he was cuffed around the wrists and saw his prosthetic legs were similarly bound. Looking back up at the woman recognition flickered across his awareness. The cybernetic eye, the prosthetic hand, the voluptuous figure...

“Kendra Icasta,” his mouth fumbled over the words, weak from exhaustion.

“Good, you’ve still got your wits about you,” She smiled warmly at him with only a hint of wry humor as she held up the small remote in her hand, “I imagine you know what this is but let’s not let there be any misunderstandings.”

Kendra pressed one of the two buttons on the small remote. Vodo was again seized by a strong jolt of electricity. It froze his arm muscles in place and caused him to lose all concentration making it impossible to summon the force. Kendra watched him until she was satisfied he’d come back to his senses.

“You have Zasati. Where is she?” Vodo managed once he found the words to speak.

The Huntress leader looked as though she were about to say something glib when a noise from above distracted her. The mass of a ship pulled up and over the lip of the canyon and hovered there. Vodo blinked at the brilliance of the ship’s landing lights and the rush of wind-whipped sand. The shuttle was too large to safely land in the clearing but hatches on both sides slid open and out poured a length of rope from each. Technocratic agents slid down from the ship and landed with a thud on the sandy bottom of the clearing, weapon’s hot.

Kendra waved the ranking agent over and presented her trophy to him with no little amount of smugness. The man clapped her on the shoulder before leveling his weapon at the Warlord and firing a blue bolt of energy at him, again knocking him unconscious.

Vodo came around again, feeling weak and sick, inside the shuttle. He lay flat against a frame, strapped hand and foot, unable to move. His head was restrained as well but he was afforded enough of a view to see the length of the shuttle's passenger space.

The Huntresses sat and spoke amiably to the agents, relative newcomers, while Kendra sat staring at him. Her eyes studied him with an intensity Vodo was unaccustomed to. Seeing he was awake, again, she wiggled the remote in front of her as a reminder to him. Though she said nothing her face said, "behave". Soon enough the shuttle was landing and the frame was rolled out. It hovered above the ground so that he faced up and could see little more than the sky before they entered a nearby building.

He was finally deposited in a large room and the frame left in the center in an upright position so that his feet were near the ground. The corners of the squarish room were shrouded in deep shadow while he, in the center of the room, was restrained under a single bright light. Kendra Icasta filtered in behind him until she was before him, rather close, and flicked him on the forehead. Vodo struggled to keep his chin up he was so weak. The wound in his side was a dull ache compared to the still tender bullet hole in his shoulder. He wasn't dripping blood from either so he guessed he'd been at least partially bandaged at some point but nothing had been done to dull his pain.

"You said I *had* Zasati Tryezsh?" Kendra walked until she stood just at the edge of the lit area, "I think you've got it all wrong..."

The woman looked over her shoulder at someone standing in the shadows. After a moment Kendra nodded in affirmation to something Vodo could not hear and out stepped another woman in an elegant dress. She was thin and graceful, still too young to be called matronly, but the weight of hard years could be seen in her eyes. Her left hand was cybernetic and the tattoo upon her face, mirroring the look she wore, shone a light sky blue of contempt.

Vodo stood there, strapped to the frame still, wordless and agape for a moment before he found the word, "Zas-- Zasati?"

"As you can see, we took him alive," Kendra said matter-of-factly to the woman.

Zasati tapped a few commands on her wrist-comlink and nodded to Kendra, "I've transferred the funds to the accounts you specified. I included a little extra, a bonus, to cover the loss of your teammates."

Kendra's smile widened in appreciation, "In that case, is there anything you'd like us to do to him? Specifically?"

The way she emphasized the last word sent a chill down Vodo's spine. Zasati on the other-hand merely started walking towards the exit, sparing the Sith not a second glance. "I couldn't care less."

“What about Zakai!?” Vodo shouted after her.

That stopped Zasati at the door, “I imagine he’s safe aboard the Matron right now, enjoying the company of my Partner.”

With that, she was gone.