

Setting the Ground Rules

A Submission to the Competition:
Internal Conflict: CSP Consul Monthly Topic Feb 2019



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30 ABY

Nar Shaddaa

For the majority of the year following the death of Angelo Dante, Reiden Karr's second master in learning the ways of the Force, he had spent it in a self-destructive spiral. Prone to barroom brawls, drinking to excess, and indulging in the more base desires life offered, Reiden cared little for anything else. He simply wanted to escape life, rather than actually live it. He distanced himself from the dealings with the Brotherhood and Scholae Palatinae, feeling that he needed time to process things. Unfortunately, his anger over what had happened ruled him, and he willingly gave himself into that anger – for a time.

Eventually, Reiden began to tire of it all, feeling like he had hit rock bottom. As such, he decided to seize control of his life and bury the rage down deep, letting it fuel him when needed. He returned to the life he knew prior to joining the Brotherhood – bounty hunting and debt collecting, for the most part. During that time, he had met a Sephi-Zeltron woman on Coruscant that he grew close to. She helped ground him and made him want to do better, to be better. Slowly, things began to turn around for him.

Reiden now found himself walking along the streets of Nar Shaddaa, in his old stomping grounds of the section controlled by a local Weequay crime lord named Zukalo. Reiden was in need of some work and, having worked with Zukalo about five years earlier, he was sure the man would be happy to provide him with some opportunities. During his time in the crime lord's employ, Reiden had developed a reputation for himself as being reliable and even surprising his boss with how successful he had been, especially considering his young age of eighteen at the time. People always underestimated him because of that, and Reiden never hesitated to take advantage of that.

The Corellian stopped in front of one of the larger buildings on the street. He glanced up and saw that what had once been a grimy sign had been replaced with a boldly colored and lighted one that read: *Zukalo's Casino*. Reiden couldn't help but smile to himself as he remembered the first time he had seen it. He stepped inside and was greeted to the same smells of cigar smoke and alcohol wafting through the establishment. Much like the sign, it appeared that the interior had undergone a renovation as well. Standing just beyond the entrance was a sitting lounge, filled with comfortable-looking furniture. Past that, a large bar stood in the middle of the wide area, with plenty of room to pass by on either side of it for those not wanting to partake, and its wooden bar top wrapped around it completely – save for occasional gaps in which servers could leave and deliver drinks to patrons not at the bar itself. Both droid and organic bartenders worked the area, keeping busy with the amount of people present. Reiden could only guess that Zukalo had expanded the building at some point, since it had not been this deep when he had last visited. Past the bar area stood a multitude of gambling tables, pazaak and sabacc among the attractions, as well as what appeared to be a dice throwing one that Reiden couldn't remember the name for. There were even some slot machines present.

Reiden made his way to the bar and ordered himself some rum. He placed credits onto the bar top and quickly downed the amber-colored liquor when it was presented to him, thanking the bartender. He cast his gaze around the interior, taking in as many details as he could. The furniture and finishings weren't high end, but they were certainly new and better looking than what had previously been in place. He wasn't certain, but some of the clientele at least seemed to be a bit more well off than he remembered, but there were still plenty of patrons that looked like they could barely afford to rub two credits together. But such was the way of addiction; any money made gets fed into the habit, whether they liked it or not. On the plus side, the alcohol was the same, and Zukalo had always prided himself on offering good drinks, thinking that it was a way to draw in more people. In Reiden's experience, Zukalo wasn't wrong about that.

A stairway off to his left caught Reiden's attention. His gaze traveled upwards, following their path to a lofted area that overlooked the casino floor. He knew from years earlier that Zukalo had a similar perch in the old layout, from which he liked to watch over everything that went on within his establishment. Reiden ordered himself another drink, paid for it, and took it with him as he walked from the bar towards the stairs. In the past, there would have been a guard placed there, but it seemed that perhaps now the lofted space was meant for others to enjoy as well. When Reiden reached the top of the stairs, he was greeted with more furniture, but it was of a nicer quality than what had been used on the main level. Clearly Zukalo's doing, given how much he had loved spending time watching things in the past. Reiden heard familiar voices and laughter carrying over from off to the right.

"And that's how I got my start! It's all true, I swear it!" The voice belonged to the casino owner himself, Zukalo. From what Reiden remembered, he was sure that whatever story was being told was also an exaggerated account of whatever had happened.

"Oh, I'm sure it is. And you'd like us to believe you did it all on your own, is that right?" A gruff voice questioned. It belonged to Zukalo's enforcer, a Lasat named Grex that was a former pit fighter.

"But of course I did!" Zukalo exclaimed. "I'm a very enterprising man, you know."

"So you're saying that nobody has *ever* helped you get to where you are today?" Reiden called out as he walked over, a grin on his face. He noted the small group of patrons seemingly enthralled with the story that were seated around Zukalo against one wall. Grex, ever the good bodyguard and enforcer, was standing at the man's side, opting to lean against the wall instead of sit down. There was a door beside him, which Reiden guessed housed a more private space for the owner of the casino.

"No, no. Of course not! I would never imply such a thi—" Zukalo cut himself short as his head turned to address the new voice. His eyes lit up at the sight of Reiden. "Wait a minute...I know you, don't I? It has been a few years, but I never forget a face, I assure you. Reiden, my boy, is that you?"

"It's good to see you again, Zukalo," Reiden said, his grin growing wider. "And I see that the money I collected for you has been put to such good use. The place looks better than ever."

"Of course! Thank you once again for helping me with that pesky man. What was his name? Champa? Cha-cha?"

"Chaka," Reiden said, recalling the name of the blue-skinned Twi'lek gang leader. "Yeah, that was a tough assignment for me at the time."

"Well you made quick work of his men, as Grex told me!"

"I had a little help from him, actually. I'd have had trouble making it out of there if it weren't for the big fuzball," Reiden said with a smirk as he looked from Zukalo to the Lasat.

"Watch it, runt," Grex said with a growl. "You may be older now, but I can still take you on."

"I've gained more experience since then, Fuzzy. But I'm not here to fight," Reiden said as he took a seat in a comfortable chair. He sipped from his glass, savoring the taste of the rum. "I'm looking for some work, actually."

"Well why didn't you say so sooner?" Zukalo exclaimed, a glint in his eyes as he rubbed his hands together. He turned to his guests. "Please, excuse us, won't you? We have some business to discuss. Go, have some drinks and go visit some of the tables. Enjoy yourselves!"

Those gathered in the lounge made various statements of understanding and thanked Zukalo for his time, taking their leave as they chattering away amongst themselves. The Weequay watched them go before nodding to Grex, who pressed a palm to a panel beside the door. There was a soft *beep* that sounded before the door slid open. Zukalo motioned for Reiden to enter.

"Please, join me in the office where we can discuss things further. I think I may have something for you."

They all stepped inside. Zukalo took his seat behind a desk while Reiden sat in one of the chairs in front of it. Off to the left was a long window overlooking the gambling tables below on the main level. Grex took his place there, leaning once again as he gazed down on everything.

"What do you have for me?" Reiden asked of the casino owner.

It turned out that what Reiden thought would be another outing to collect payment from someone Zukalo had loaned money was something else entirely. The client, a Rodian named Yono, was past due on his payments, and it wasn't that first time it had happened. Zukalo explained that there had been many extensions and occasions when payments were either late or not paid at all. He wanted an example to be made of this man so that anyone else that had borrowed money from the casino owner knew that such things would not be tolerated. Reiden thought back to the conversation as he walked along the street, heading to the address he was given:

"Listen, I don't like this any more than you do, but debts must be paid. I do not mind being lenient when I can, but this is not the first time and it has gone on long enough. At this point, I'm not making my money back and this fool has the nerve to keep asking to borrow more! Believe me when I tell you that I don't take this lightly, but he needs to be killed, and his family, too, if you must. The message needs to be made clear: all debts must be paid."

Reiden had worked with Zukalo before and knew that the man was not unreasonable. But he was running a business, part of which was making loans to people. He understood the position of both parties. It was unfortunate, but sometimes loans couldn't be paid back. He wasn't sure how he would handle it, if he was being honest with himself. He had a job to do, that much was true, but he couldn't help but flash back to when he was a young teen and his own parents had been killed. It wasn't right in front of him, but he had seen it happen. That kind of event leaves a mark on a person and changes them in ways unimaginable.

The Corellian paused before a small home – more of a shack, really – and checked the scrap of paper with the address written on it, confirming that this was Yono's home. He walked forward and knocked on the door. There was the sound of shuffling footsteps as someone made their way to the door, and a moment later it swung open. A Rodian with yellow-green skin stood there.

"Y-Yes? What do you want?" the man asked, glancing around nervously.

"Are you Yono?" Reiden inquired plainly.

"That's right. Who are you?"

"I work for Zukalo. You're late on your payment and he wants his money."

"I'm sorry...I-I-I don't have it. Please, could you ask him to give me just a little more time? Thank you," the Rodian spoke quickly, trying to close the door. Reiden stopped him and pushed his way inside, closing the door behind him.

"Listen, I don't like this any more than you do, but he really needs his money back. He runs a business, after all." Reiden paused a moment, not sure how much to reveal to the man. "I was sent here to make an example of you..."

Realization flashed in Yono's eyes, his mouth agape in shock and fear. "P-Please, no! I have a family!"

"I'm here for them, too."

"No! Anything but that, I beg you!"

"Do you have any money to spare at all?" Reiden asked, genuinely wanting to help the man. "Maybe we could work something out. I'll still have to do something, though, otherwise Zukalo will just send someone else...someone less understanding than me."

The commotion had drawn the attention of the man's wife, who came out of another room and into the common area in which they stood, a small child of maybe three years in her arms.

"What's going on out here?" she demanded, a look of concern on her face.

"Nothing, Stahma. Go back to bed, please," Yono replied.

"Who is this man, why is he in our home?"

"Your husband is late on repaying his debts. We're just trying to work something out, that's all. It's nothing to worry about," Reiden tried to assure her, hoping she would leave.

"Yono! Just pay the man already. We've been saving up to leave this place, but it won't be worth anything if you die!"

"Y-You're right, dear," Yono said, turning from his wife to Reiden. "Please, it'll be just a moment."

Reiden watched closely with a hand on the blaster at his thigh as the man went to a closet and pulled the door open, reaching for a case on a shelf. "Slowly now. We don't want anything unfortunate to happen," he warned.

Yono nodded, remaining silent as he set the case down on a table. He opened the case, fumbling for something inside. Reiden tensed, instinctively drawing his blaster. Yono let out a little yelp and quickly turned the case to face Reiden, revealing a small pile of credits.

"I-It's not everything I owe, but it's all we have saved up..." Yono admitted, head hanging.

"That's fine. I'll be sure to explain that to Zukalo. Maybe I can work out a deal with him, set up some new payment plan or something."

“Please, it would be great if you could!”

“I’ll still have to do something to make sure that a message is sent to anyone else that has borrowed money. You understand, don’t you?”

“O-Of course! Just please, don’t hurt my family.”

“Your family is safe, I assure you,” Reiden said with a nod. His eyes closed for a moment in relief.

That was when Yono made his move. From the large sleeve of his shirt, the Rodian drew a blaster and pointed it at Reiden. The Force screamed out in warning, and Reiden listened to it. His eyes snapped open and he dove to the side. A moment later, a bolt erupted from the end of Yono’s blaster, searing past where Reiden had just been standing. The Corellian rolled to his feet, his own blaster in hand.

“Karabast! That was a close one.” He leveled his blaster at Yono, “You didn’t need to do that. Zukalo wanted you dead, and possibly your family as well. But I was willing to let you live, all of you.”

“Yeah, right. Like I’d believe a sleemo that works for the likes of that man.”

“He’s not perfect, but he’s reasonable. You’re lucky he sent me instead of someone else.”

“I don’t care! I’m going to get my family off of this dump and give them a better life. I’ve been trying to turn my life around, for them!”

The blaster trembled in Yono’s grip, likely a combination of anger and even some fear. Reiden ducked behind a cabinet just in time as the Rodian squeezed off another couple bolts. He stayed out of sight, his own blaster trained at the only way the Rodian could approach. After a few moments, Yono stepped forward. Reiden silently cursed the turn of events, but he didn’t hesitate. He aimed his blaster at Yono’s chest and pulled the trigger, firing off two shots from a distance of only a couple feet away. He watched as the light faded from Yono’s eyes as the other man slumped to the floor.

Reiden slowly stood and pried the blaster from the man’s hands, sticking it in his waistband and stepping out into the main living area. Yono’s wife was wailing and their kid was crying. She had sunk to her knees, clutching her child tight. He looked from them to Yono and shook his head slowly. He holstered his blaster and walked to the table, examining the credits. He pocketed a small portion of them and left the rest.

“Your name is Stahma, right?” he asked the woman softly.

“Y-Yes, it is. What more do you want from me?” the woman choked out between sobs.

“I want you and your kid to have the life that your husband wanted for you. Take the rest of these credits and take the first shuttle available offworld.”

She looked at him, confusion and grief etching her features. “What do you mean?”

“I mean I’m letting you live. I never wanted to kill anyone. Zukalo thought that killing all of you would send a stronger message to anyone else getting behind on payments or simply not paying. But if there’s one thing I just won’t do, it’s killing a child. And I can’t kill both parents and leave a child alone in the world. I’m going to leave now. Don’t try to fight me; don’t try to get revenge on Zukalo. Just take your money and leave this planet. Start over somewhere else.” Reiden turned away and opened the door, heading out into the cool night air.

“I’ll never forgive you for this!”

“I don’t expect you to, nor do I want your forgiveness. I don’t deserve it,” Reiden said without bothering to turn around. “Just live your life and provide for your child as best you can. I’m sure you’ll both make it out okay. Other families with less have survived worse.”

The Corellian walked away, leaving the two behind. On his way back to Zukalo’s, he stopped at a small bar for a quick drink. He downed it in one gulp and set the glass down, his hand shaking. He hadn’t been lying to the wife. He really didn’t want to kill anyone tonight. He could have tried wounding Yono, sure. But in his experience, when someone is that desperate, they won’t let something like that stop them. It was unfortunate, but he truly felt that he had no choice but to kill the man. He gave a nod to the bartender and left, heading back to Zukalo’s casino.

Back in the office, Reiden explained what had happened, but of course it wasn’t the full truth. He left out the part about Yono shooting at him, or even that he had a blaster at all. He left out the part about leaving some credits behind. He told Zukalo that he would personally cover the remaining debt so that the casino owner would be made whole again. Zukalo tried to talk him out of it, but it wasn’t a large amount compared to what Reiden had saved up himself, so he was happy to do it. Besides, he knew he’d make the money back easily enough.

Reiden offered to stay on and work with Zukalo for a few more jobs since he had nowhere else to go. But he decided to make one stipulation very clear: he wouldn’t harm families, no matter the circumstances. Zukalo agreed, figuring that if everyone was dead, there would be no way to get his money back. Reiden let him think that was his own logic, but kept the truth to himself. He didn’t want to do to anyone else what was done to him when he was young.