

Doctor, Warrior, Consul, Pilot

-Part I of the Conductor Trilogy-
Objective 2 - Vodo Biask Taldrya - 3729

The Sith Warlord, Vodo Biask Taldrya, slowly played the datadisc across his knuckles, watching as it tumbled from one to the next then back with light and practiced ease. The contents of the disc could well upend the present order of things the Brotherhood over. It could be the match that started a fire or maybe it was just the fuel heaped on top of the simmering embers already present among the Clans. The Brotherhood was more fractured than Vodo had ever known it and the Clans were kept off one-another by the Grand Master's iron will alone. Even Lord Cantor, who was one of Vodo's brothers in the Sons of Taldryan, could not contain the greed and visceral hatred of the Clans frothing at the mouth. Perhaps the Grandmaster's loyalties to his Clan were still strong enough that he might sanction a Feud against Arcona or better yet, a Ban on Colonel Rhy lance.

Vodo Biask Taldrya hated the Arconan in a way that he could not fully describe. The man was intelligent and calculating, not unlike himself, and had as of yet found a way to counter Vodo's every move, every machination. While the Chiss Doctor had been Consul of Taldryan Vodo had chafed under his rule and it had birthed their mutual enmity. Rhy lance was an outsider, a nobody who had flown into the Consul's chair in the midst of the destruction of Karufr and the Justicar's attacks on the Clan. Jac Cotelin, another Grandmaster and Son of Taldryan, had turned on them and lain waste to Kr'Tal System and had chased Taldryan to the edges of known space. With the intervention of Master Howlader the pogrom against Undesirables had ceased and so too had the Justicar's wrath but Taldryan had been forced to lick its wounds and seek a new home on Caelus. Though Master Cotelin's betrayal had cut him deeply Vodo's thoughts always wandered to how it was that the Chiss officer had risen from nothing to become the Clan's leader.

The two had clashed repeatedly, though never openly as Taldryan had required strong leadership to guide it through those early days. A Civil War amongst Taldryans would not have been to the Clan's benefit so Vodo had organized a resistance. He had called it the Old Guard and it stood to stymie, disrupt, and undermine the Consul's authority at every turn while acting unseen from the shadows. Vodo surmised with pleasure that by the time of Rhy lance's abdication and flight from Taldryan forces that two-thirds of all Clan members had been organized into cells operating independently from one-another at his whim. Rhy lance had always suspected Vodo of sedition against him but was so-too constrained by the need to keep from acting openly in that time of crisis. There had been that assassination attempt Vodo recalled, but it had been carefully staged to appear to be an accident and no evidence had ever

linked Rhyllance too it. It was only fair that Vodo had returned the favor, though with as much success as his adversary had had.

Rhyllance's midnight escape had come hours before Vodo's Old Guard would have arrested him and over-thrown his rule in a coup. Officially the individual responsible for leaking his plans to the Colonel had never been determined but privately Vodo knew exactly who had been to blame. He looked over his knuckles at the young Twi'lek half-breed sitting on the other side of the cabin of the ship pouring over an arcane tome at the galley table. The boy, his son and now fourteen years old, was his apprentice of four years and it was his mother that had betrayed Vodo again and again just to spite him. She had, Vodo learned later, been in the Colonel's employ for an embarrassingly long time and had used his own emotional weakness toward her to pull the wool over his eyes. She would be repaid for her cruelty eventually but first in his mind and always foremost was Rhyllance.

Richard Hehd sat opposite Vodo at the richly stained wood desk. He wore the same slightly bored, vaguely amused mask that seemed to never leave his face. It was mocking, an outward manifestation of the inward fact that he never took anything too seriously. It riled Vodo's ire every time they met but the unfortunate fact was that the Cypher Agent got the work done and produced results and the datadisc was yet further proof of that fact.

"You're sure the evidence is as clear cut as you make it sound," Vodo inflected disbelief into his voice, even knowing the man wouldn't drop his price a single credit.

"Given how hard it was to get that information, I ought to charge you double..." The Cypher threw back the whiskey in his glass and put the glass on the wood desk and not the coaster, seemingly unaware the amber liquor was expensive and rare or that the condensation dripping from the glass would stain the equally expensive wood of the desk, "Have I ever let you down Biask?"

Vodo narrowed his eyes at the man's arrogance and disrespect. "For the last time you will address me as *My Lord*, *Your Excellency*, or *Master Biask* if you're not into the whole brevity *thing*."

The correction flew over the Cypher as though he'd never heard it. "Everything is there. Put that disc into the right hands and watch the whole system fall over itself dealing with the outcome. Just remember us little people on your way up, will you?"

"You're well compensated and the fact I haven't taken your head as a trophy should keep you warm at night. You'll excuse me now, I have much work to do," Vodo turned in his chair to the holoterminal embedded in the desk, in effect dismissing the man.

Richard shook his head with a smirk and rose to leave but stopped by the table where the boy sat, "If he treats you twice as well as he treats me then I still don't envy you."

Zakai looked up from his book at the man, and after a brief glance at his Father and Master to ensure he wasn't looking, smiled, "You really should mind your manners around him. He took my mother's hand off for mouthing-off in front of others once."

That took the jaunty smirk off the Agent's face for a moment as the boy's nonchalance unbalanced his own. The man left the two Twi'lek aboard the Upsilon-class shuttle and disappeared into the Caelus Spaceport terminal. Vodo didn't look at his Apprentice but smiled inwardly at the boy. He was coming along nicely and was growing into a stronger, smarter, and more capable Man by the day. With Vodo's guidance and training he would one day be a powerful Sith equipped with the cunning, learning, and knowledge of the Force's mysteries to achieve great things.

The Consul's steepled fingers were interlaced and he leaned his face against them as he concentrated deeply upon the files crawling across his terminal screen. The blue translucent image of Vodo Biask's hologram waited in patient silence. The Warlord was a mentor to the Consul, Rian Taldrya, in many ways and had played a large part in installing him as the Clan's leader in the aftermath of Rhyllance's departure. He owed much to the man but if everything he was reading was true his debt ran far deeper than he'd previously believed.

"This is it then. Everything we suspected confirmed, his name scrawled all over the evidence, and bank records supporting it all front to back. It's almost too good to be true, Vodo," Rian sat back in his plush chair heavily.

"I agree but you're well aware of the work Agent Hehd produces. I've verified the data myself through my own contacts and resources separate from SIS and it has all checked out." The hologram showed the Warlord crossing his arms over his chest. "The question is: Who do we give this evidence to?"

There was a heaviness in the air between them for a moment. Both men were of one mind these days when it came to the Brotherhood. Taldryan had stood for decades as the defenders of the Dark Council and the Iron Throne. They'd been loyal to the Covenant in the face of the carnivorous Clan's insistent warring and back-stabbing. They'd defended Antei and provided forces against the mad Jedi Omancor Crask and the other Clans of the Brotherhood at the same time. Jac Cotelin's betrayal and the Dark Council's persecution of Taldryan had soured that relationship and poisoned the well of trust between them irrevocably. The evidence should go to the hands of the new Justicar, whose job it would be to hold Rylance to account, but neither could be sure that the Son of Plagueis held any more love for Taldryan than Grandmaster Cotelin had. There were Sons of Taldryan among the Dark Council, chiefly Master Howlader and the Grandmaster himself; Dare they risk the Justicar's wrath to go over his head to their brothers? The Master-at-Arms held no power to prosecute Rhyllance's treason so there

was nothing to gain by giving him the information and while the Grandmaster disliked being seen individually dispensing justice he could order the Justicar to do so on his behalf.

"I believe we need to deliver this information directly to Lord Cantor himself," Rian said decidedly.

Vodo nodded. "That was my belief, though I didn't want to act without your sanction. I will take the disc to him directly."

"I don't know about that Vodo, you're too close to this. The Grandmaster might see this as an attempt to manipulate him into finishing your rival," Rian watched the Sith's face closely, wondering himself if the data before him had more to do with Vodo's need to destroy Rhyllance than it did with ridding the Brotherhood of a traitor.

Vodo's face remained stern and unreadable as usual. "The Grandmaster will see the truth. I will step lightly; I don't have a close relationship with Telaris but I can be convincing."

The Warlord awoke to a chiming from his bedside. The cabin of his sleeping quarters aboard shuttle, the Karufr Knight, was dark and the gentle glow of the holoclock said it was still very early. Too early, in fact, to be emerging from Hyperspace already. The ship was on autopilot, the droid brain doing the task of keeping the ship running as it usually did in light of Vodo's indifference to the actual workings of the vessel. As he blinked away the sleep from his eyes he saw the comlink on his bedside stand blinking and emitting the chime.

He grabbed it and thumbed the activation switch. "This is Master Biask."

"Good Morning Your Excellency. This is Gui Downston, the Consul's secretary. Master Rian has asked me to get ahold of you," the voice on the other end was professional and warm.

"This could have waited a few more hours..." Vodo growled

The voice paused for a moment, "Unfortunately, My Lord, it could not. Starfighters bearing every hallmark of belonging to the Iron Legion have attacked the Severan Principate during the on-going negotiations."

Vodo sat up straight, "When did this occur?"

"Reports are filtering in now from the Advanced Inquisitorius Network. The Dark Council is still quiet on the matter. It sounds like the first attacks occurred only an hour ago," Gui could be heard tapping away at a datapad, "I've forwarded all available information to you, Master Biask."

Vodo acknowledged him and shut the comlink off and sat in silence for a moment. It had begun far sooner than he could have imagined. Rhyrance had already begun his plan and it was far bigger than even he had suspected. Vodo keyed in the information for the Dark Council priority channel.

The line was answered by another profession, if bored, voice, "Central dispatch, how can I direct your communication?"

"Office of the Grandmaster," he said curtly.

"The Grandmaster's Office is currently unavailable. Can I direct your communication to another Office?" the voice was indifferent to his tone.

Vodo practically snarled into his comlink, "This is Vodo Biask Taldrya, I am calling on Clan Business by order of my Consul. You'll patch me through to the GM's Office now or I'll have your spine for a trophy!"

The line cackled with static for a moment before another voice came on, a female this time, "Lord Biask? This is Trini Helenus, shift supervisor for Dispatch. I apologize but your request cannot be completed presently. I will personally notify the Grandmaster's front office of your attempt to contact them."

He could tell he was being stonewalled by the two functionaries, one sharing the name of the Arconan Navy's chief officer, and took a deep breath to calm himself, "Very well. In the meantime transfer me to the Master-at-Arms."

"I'm very sorry Your Excellency but I cannot complete that transfer either," she did sound very sorry.

"Then who can you transfer me to?" the Warlord's roar filled the small cabin.

"Sanitation Services, the Commissary, and Family Wellness," she said quickly as if anticipating how the voice on the other end, Vodo, would receive it.

He snapped the comlink in his fist and threw the pieces into the corner with a frustrated, petulant flick of his wrist. He wasn't going to be able to bring his evidence to the Grandmaster. Lord Cantor was probably in full on crisis mode now and has-been Dark Council emeriti didn't really get to waltz in and demand an audience. Vodo sat in silence for a few minutes contemplating his next move but came to only one conclusion. He rose from the bed and entered the main cabin of his ship. He moved to the desk terminal and pulled up the navigation display.

“Ship, take us out of hyperspace at the earliest possible moment,” he watched as the ship processed his request.

<We are not yet to our destination>

Vodo didn't need attitude from the droid-brain right now, “Yes, I know. Remove us from hyperspace and plot a course to the Lyra-3K-a System.”

<Destination set. Hyperspace duration: 14hrs. Confirm?>

“Master?” Vodo saw his son standing at the door to his own sleeping cabin, opposite his own. Zakai was wiping the sleep from his eyes and looking at his father with confusion, “What's going on?”

“Adversity teaches us to bend with the wind rather than break under it. Plans have changed; we're headed to a warzone,” Vodo sized his Apprentice up and down and saw that the boy had grown much in the four years he'd been with him.

Zakai nodded and returned to his room, deciding that further questions could wait until he'd finished his sleep.

The conversation with the Consul ended up being a short one. Rian was as frustrated as Vodo but understood that the Dark Council was in a frenzy at the moment. Reports were coming in of the extent of the damage from the attacks and now new reports were suggesting the Deputy Grand Master was held by the Principate along with the Clans' representatives. His course had been agreed upon: Vodo would take the *Karufu Knight* to the Lyra-3K-a system and rendezvous with Task Force Arbiter. They would bring justice to Colonel Rhyllance and pray the current Justicar overlooked their transgression against his authority given the peculiar circumstances.

The shuttle made its jump to its new destination and a few hours later emerged from the dazzling dimension of hyperspace in the shadow of a distant moon and planet, Temnos and Thillon respectively. The ship did not have specialized sensors, Vodo had opted to have a powerful shield system installed instead, so he allowed his vessel a few minutes to collect information so he could make a plan. The information the ship returned was not as he'd hoped. He was given only seconds warning before the Com lit up with an incoming transmission.

“Upsilon Shuttle, this is Gold Squadron flight lead. You are violating Principate Space and will be escorted to our carrier. Acknowledge.”

Vodo cursed under his breath. Calling over his shoulder the Sith shouted to his Apprentice, "Get to the rear gun, don't fire a shot until I say so!"

Zakai shouted his acknowledgement as he excitedly ran to the aft. The Com lit up again, "I repeat: Upsilon Shuttle, acknowledge. We will fire on you in ten seconds if you do not comply."

"Lead, this ship is showing Brotherhood registration," another voice came over the net, presumably another pilot in the flight.

At that moment two starfighters crossed over the ship's forward field of view, the pink of their ion exhaust plumes left short trails behind them, tracing their arched path across the starscape of local space. Vodo looked at the ship's chronometer and saw that the given time for rendezvous was close but not close enough.

"Ship, raise shields and begin evasive maneuvers," Vodo buckled himself into the pilot's seat, though it was more for his safety than so he could control the ship.

"Sir!" the second voice said, "Shuttle has powered up shields."

"Light him up!" the flight leader commanded.

Under normal circumstances, the Karufr Knight was not a nimble vessel and with the hardened shielding activated power was diverted from the repulsors and thrusters making the ship even more sluggish. Even so the droid brain kicked the shuttle's thrusters up to maximum and Vodo was pressed into his seat until the Inertial Compensators came online a moment later.

"Zakai, open fire," Vodo said into the on-board com system.

Scarlet bolts of coherent light erupted from the aft turret of the shuttle. The pursuing starfighters broke formation into their own evasive jukes and turns. Behind him, Zakai's excitement rippled through the Force, an electric prickle across Vodo's senses. With a sternness smooth and heavy as stone, Vodo sent the boy a reminder remain focused and determined.

"Come on you Banthas," the warlord cursed under his breath. "Where are you?"

He glanced at the ship's chronometer and saw that they were close but would it be soon enough? He pulled up on the yoke and the ship obliged by climbing upward in a long arc, a maneuver the TIEs behind him easily matched. Bolts from the starfighters impacted against the Karufr Knight's shields ineffectively and translated only into a barely perceptible shudder inside the ship.

"It's a tough nut to crack, Lead," said the second pilot over the Com.

“Torpedos are authorized,” responded the first pilot, “Let’s break it open.”

Fierfek, Vodo thought as he sent the shuttle into a spin as it seemed like a good idea. He placed his trust in his hands and allowed those hands to be guided by the Force. The first torpedo sailed harmlessly between the shuttle’s upward turned wings as the second impacted against the aft shields concussively. The lights flickered. Several of the control surfaces in the cockpit cackled or popped as they short-circuited. They’d survived that one and they might survive a second like that but the third would surely be their end.

Abruptly, a twinge of excitement raced down Vodo’s lekku and he altered his ship’s course, a familiar feeling of premonition from the Force. Above them the wedge-shaped mass of a Star Destroyer decanted from Hyperspace followed shortly after by several more shapes to its left and right. Vodo could feel the sudden surprise from the two pursuing pilots as the *Resurgent* seemingly appeared out of no-where.

“It’s the Broth—” the second pilot’s voice was cut short by an emerald lance of light passing through his starfighter’s pod.

“Genju!” the first pilot called out to his wingmate but it was too late.

The man’s hesitation cost him as well, though far less than his friend had paid. Zakai scored a couple of glancing blows against the starfighter, overloading its minor shielding and destroying its thrust emitter. The small craft tumbled into an uncontrolled spiral which was arrested by the invisible hand of a tractor beam from the *Resurgent*.

Pulling back on the throttle Vodo opened a hailing line to the Clan’s flagship, “I’m pleased to see you, *Resurgent*. Your timing leaves little to be desired.”

A middle aged woman’s voice replied after a moment, “Your Excellency is too kind. The Consul is awaiting you in the Conference Room. You’re cleared to land in Hangar 2A.”

Vodo did not know Alejnja Ninra well but the few times they’d met he’d been impressed by her knowledge and bearing, “Thank you Commodore.”

Rian sat at the head of the table comparing data from two different datapads. He was buried in work handling the logistics of mobilizing the Clan. At the same time he was interpreting the incoming transmissions and intelligence about the situation developing with the Principate. Vodo sat beside him on his right quietly drumming his fingers on the highly polished wood table.

Around them, the conference room gleamed. It had a utilitarian purpose, of course, acting as a place where the ship’s officers could meet and attend briefings or where visiting dignitaries could be greeted in comfort and privacy. Most of the time however, the room served

as a place where trophies of war, battle honors, and the Ship's Silver was kept on display. The silver was actually two distinct sets and drew by far the most attention in the room. The first set belonged to the ship's crew and was brought out at official functions and celebrations in their honor while the second was a commissioned set by Rian himself for use in state functions and was orders of magnitude more intricate and beautiful. Vodo felt at ease in the room surrounded by reminders of the victories he and his clan had fought towards.

At the far end of the room the door slid open with a gentle hiss and in walked two armed Marine Security troopers. Between them was a human man wearing a TIE pilot's flight suit save for the bulbous helmet. The Marines stopped the man once they were standing before the Consul. "The prisoner, My Lord Consul, as ordered."

Rian dismissed the Marines with a casual wave of his hand. They looked at one-another and left without argument. Both knew full well the men seated at the table were seasoned warriors and Force Users to boot. They had little to fear from the pilot whose hands were shackled before him with electrocuffs.

Rian spoke first once the Marines were gone, "I am Consul Rian Taldrya of the Clan Taldryan. This is His Excellency Vodo Biask Taldrya, former Dark Councillor of the Brotherhood and former Clan Consul."

"I am Lieutenant Goreg Hanshu of the Severan Principate's 3rd Fleet", the man replied, "Service number 24K-A989-22L."

Both of the men seated at the table waited patiently but disinterestedly to the man. When he'd finished Rian again spoke, "Thank you. Your information, situation, and condition will be transmitted to your chain of command shortly."

Hanshu looked surprised at the cordiality of his captors but remained silent as the Consul continued, "We'd like to ask you a few questions."

"Sir, I will not answer anything that would place the Principate in harm's way—" Hanshu replied curtly.

"That would not be our purpose, I assure you," Rian told him calmly.

The pilot was not impressed and his disbelief was plain through the Force, "Why would I believe you? You're with the Brotherhood. I've seen the aftermath of what your surprise attacks accomplish and we've been briefed on your on-going transgressions. I suppose this small fleet is a peace offering?"

Vodo tapped a few controls on the embedded holoprojector and watched as datasheets, bank records, intelligence reports, and connected miscellanea, "We have evidence and proof

that those attacks were staged to ruin diplomatic ties between our two factions and drive a wedge between us to the benefit of the Collective.”

The man’s lip curled in a sneer, “Seems to me, Sir, it would be far simpler to mock up some convincing data than it would be to field a squadron of starfighters with false IFF tags, employ dozens of saboteurs, and destroy a shipyard.”

“Fortunately for you and I,” Vodo said leaning forward to place his elbows on the table, “all of what you describe requires paperwork. It requires bank accounts, deposits, and leaves traces if you know where to look.”

It might have been the light mental pressure Vodo was exerting on him or the fact that he made a good point but the pilot took a moment to examine some of the pieces of displayed data more closely, “Okay, so what are your questions?”

“The Brotherhood’s leadership is keeping information close to its chest”, Rian said, “Aside from the basics we lack a lot of clarity on what it is that is exactly transpiring here Lieutenant.”

Hanshu explained what he could without divulging specifics of the Principate’s forces, dispositions, and defences. The picture he painted was one of wide-spread destruction, confusion, and all evidence pointed to the Dark Jedi Brotherhood as having perpetrated the entire thing; the ACE hardware in the mines spontaneously exploding, the attacks on the colony and the spaceyard by Brotherhood starfighters, and the very appearance of Vodo and the Task Force that followed him. In reply the Consul and Vodo told him of the importance of their evidence and how it pointed blame for the war to the Collective and a traitor within the Brotherhood.

“If its as you say, Sir, why can’t you just go arrest this man?” he asked in incredulity.

Vodo leaned back in his chair, “The Brotherhood is not a unified entity. The Clans are largely autonomous to the Dark Council and without the full weight of the Dark Council behind us... It would be war.”

“Well Sir, it seems like you have a war”, the pilot was young, perhaps in his mid twenties, but he seemed unintimidated by the two Force Users.

The Consul stood and walked to a wall where more than a few flags of defeated enemies hung draped and stopped in front of the one bearing the Shadesworn Crescent of Arcona, “With your help we could keep it from growing any worse.”

“You’ve still given me no reason to believe you. You wave these documents in front of me and they seem to add up but they could still just as easily have been made by you... Sir.”

Goreg remained in a rigid yet practiced position of attention, his body language communicating his disbelief.

Vodo would have liked the man if he hadn't been in a rush, "Lieutenant, consider the facts: The Brotherhood is seeking closer economic and defensive ties with the Principate. The Brotherhood has made no small deal about rebuilding your spaceport, about updating the equipment your kyber miners use and training to use it, and also about wanting to be your single biggest exports-buyer. What possible reason would we have to attack a small, forgotten colony of a faction we have shown every indication we want to be friendly with?"

Vodo stood to his full height, which was considerable, and starred the pilot down, "Your fleets aren't as strong as our combined might but it's still great enough that most of our clans would balk at such an attack. Every Clan has to leave a good part of their fleet at home lest one of the others, jealous of its power, uses the opportunity to strike at the heart of their enemies. The Iron Navy doesn't command our ships Lieutenant, the Clans do and without the Clans the Grandmaster only has his own few fleets. You have nothing to fear from us at present."

"Your Principate is being manipulated by the Collective into pushing us away and drawing you nearer to them," the Consul added, bringing the conversation back to its roots.

Goreg Hanshu returned Vodo's hard stare, refusing to be the first to look away. Vodo for his part didn't level his sternest glare on the man across the table from him. Rian stood too and removed the pilot's electrocuffs, "Your feelings on the matter are clear through the Force. You believe us, so will you help us?"

Hanshu looked down at his wrists and up at the Consul. He nodded.

Rian returned to his seat and punched in several commands. The documentary proof faded and was replaced by the face of a white haired man in a clean Imperial-style uniform, "Rear-Admiral Greyson."

The man replied, "Lord Consul."

"I have with me a pilot of yours, a Lieutenant by the name of Hanshu, who would like to speak with you", Rian sat back and beckoned Goreg to step forward into the holo lens's range.

Again the *Karufu Knight* transited the void of space alone. The Taldryan ships had remained in stationary orbit opposite the planet from the moon of Temnos as Vodo, Zakai, and the Severan Pilot made their way to the moon. There they would rendezvous with Admiral Greyson's liaison and make their case in person. The Rear-Admiral was skeptical, in the same manner Hanshu had been, but found the free release and return of his skilled flight leader to be

too sweet of an opportunity to resist. Vodo was prepared for a trap in any case, never trusting in the good will of others, and prepared both his Apprentice and the Pilot for the eventuality.

“These are my people”, Goreg sniped, “Why would they attack me?”

“It doesn’t matter why: *If* they do attack you when we arrive, you must have a plan for what you will do,” Zakai answered the pilot’s question while tinkering with some electronic thing at the galley table.

The pilot was left temporarily speechless by the teenager in the corner, “Its nonsense and you’re both paranoid.”

Vodo gripped the man’s shoulder as he past and squeezed tightly enough that Hanshu winced, “Paranoia has kept me alive, its protected me from men the likes of which you’d blanch to know of.”

The starfighter pilot shook his head and sat on a couch. His service blaster had been returned to him and it sat in the holster hanging against his right thigh. Slung low he could easily grab it with his long arms while standing or sitting. For the briefest moments he did think about what he’d do if his own people shot at him but quickly pushed that thought aside. It wouldn’t happen. He looked around the shuttle’s main cabin to distract himself. The older Twi’lek had joined the younger one, his son Goreg guessed, at the table and they sat in silence, eating a quick, simple meal.

The shuttle’s interior did not match up to what Hanshu had imagined it would be. It was no spartan military vessel, nor was it merely a comfortable transport. It was lavish and ornate. It was richly decorated and furnished with antiques and plush furniture. It was like stepping into a Triumver’s penthouse suite. Hanshu was certain that he’d never seen such a display of wealth with his own eyes. Vodo Biask did not do anything by half-measures it appeared.

“I guess my answer is,” Vodo looked up from his plate and looked at the pilot, “I’d shoot back at whoever was shooting at me.”

Vodo nodded and went back to his food.

A short time later the *Karufr Knight* entered the moon’s orbit and quickly descended to the surface. The ship piloted itself, much to Goreg’s dismay, to the small mining outpost and touched down inside its pressurized hangar bay. Awaiting in the bay was a transport shuttle and several armed Principate soldiers. Vodo wasn’t concerned about four men with blasters but his eyes scanned the rest of the hangar for places where most could be hiding. He reached out with the Force and felt no additional life forms other than the one still aboard the other ship.

“Okay, let’s go have a talk,” he said lowly.

His Apprentice followed him out of the cockpit cabin and into the main one. They were followed by Hanshu. The three of them descended the ramp to the hangar floor and then walked towards the waiting soldiers, stopping when they were still ten meters apart.

One of the soldiers leaned sideways to look around the wide shoulders of the Warlord and saw the Lieutenant there, "Sir, are you alright?"

Goreg stepped out from behind the Sith and nodded, "Yes Sergeant, I'm fine."

One of the men must have used their helmet com as the Liaison, who had as of yet remained aboard their transport, emerged. The Liaison was one of Rear-Admiral Greyson's adjutants and authorized to meet with the Dark Jedi Brotherhood's representative on this occasion. He would of course transmit an accurate report of what was discussed and then return with Lt. Hanshu for debriefing and observation. He was a Twi'lek as well and his eyes flitted over the tall, half-cyborg Twi'lek's Lekku. The two aliens read each-other's tail language within moments.

Amicable Hello, Vodo intoned.

Greetings, the Liaison's read.

We mean no subterfuge, Vodo's announced.

I'm disbelieving, the Liaison's returned.

"I am Vodo Biask Taldrya. I have something for you to give to your Admiral," The Warlord held up a datadisc holding a copy of the evidence.

The Liaison nodded, "I'm Captain To'phir Al'abaran. Give the disc to Lieutenant Hanshu and send him over to us."

Vodo stared at the other Twi'lek a moment then looked at Goreg and handed him the disc, "You know what's at stake."

"I'll convince him," Goreg assured him and walked towards the soldiers waiting, their weapons held at a low-ready.

The small moon had no atmosphere, meaning no sound gave warning of the new transport shuttle until it had already crossed the atmospheric shield at the bay's mouth. The ship had no sooner touched the deck when hatches dropped over and men began pouring out. Vodo cursed loudly and Force pushed the Lieutenant forward, careening into a soldier, so that an explosive round destined for his torso impacted a grounded speeder instead. The men coming

out the ship made no pretext of pretending to represent the Dark Jedi Brotherhood and shot at Captain Al'abaran and his men as much as they did at the two lightsaber wielding Sith.

Vodo locked eyes with his Apprentice for the briefest of moments between deflecting shots. His son returned the look with confidence and Vodo knew he could trust the boy to hold his own ground. The Warlord propelled himself forward atop his long, powerful cybernetic legs. The armorweave cloak about his shoulders billowed behind him as he was soon running at preternatural speed. He leaped high into the air, sailing through it as he drew his lightsaber. The hilt of the weapon was black and nearly a meter long while the blade that emerged from it was silver with hints of red in the core. The first man he encountered fell beneath the metal talons of his cybernetic legs as he landed, the second to a decapitating sweep of his lightsaber, while the third impaled himself on its point at the end of the swing.

Zakai bellowed a warcry as he landed a short way from his Master and used his saber's dull blue blade to deflect a blaster bolt. A Quarre, who thought he might overpower the boy, found the prospect much harder after losing a leg and an arm. Zakai marveled at the avatar of death his father became in the heat of a fight but caught sight of someone training his weapon while the Warlord wasn't looking. Zakai hurled his weapon at the Togruta and called it back to his hand after it had twirled through the man's torso. He was congratulating himself on his keen eye and for saving his father when a fighter from the enemy transport screamed and died only a few meters behind him. Zakai looked around and saw Lt. Hanshu crouching behind a few stacked barrels with his blaster. The pilot gave him a wave and began firing at another target somewhere else.

Goreg's blaster flew from his hand when it was struck by someone else's bolt. His hand was fine, though it stung, and he quickly reached for the blaster rifle a few feet away from him where one of the soldiers lay dead. He checked the weapon and once satisfied it was loaded he resumed firing. He took one of the attackers in the chest and a second in the neck. The barrels weren't much cover and he decided it was better to reposition on his own terms than on someone else's. Bodies littered the hangar floor now but fifteen or more men still maintained the attack.

Vodo roared as he mauled his way through their attackers. His lightsaber was a blur of motion, weaving large circles in the air as he twirled it around his body to deflect blaster bolts. There were so many of them though and they had fanned out making it increasingly difficult to counter. Zakai had already fallen back after realizing he'd bitten off more than he could chew by getting so far forward with his Master. Vodo began yielding ground himself once he was certain Hanshu had retreated nearly to the Severan transport.

"You need to get that disc out of here," he bellowed at the pilot, "Go!"

Hanshu looked at him for a moment and then nodded and made his final dash to the transport's landing ramp, one remaining soldier following him. Captain Al'abaran crouched

behind the hatch's rim firing out the occasional shot with his hold out blaster. Vodo cleaved a man in two with a brutal overhead strike proving which of them had the guts and the other was alive. Only when the hatch on the Severan transport closed and the ship took off did Vodo retreat fully to his own ship.

Zakai was aboard powering up the ship's systems and preparing for an emergency take-off. With fighters approaching the *Karuf Knight* from most directions Vodo practically jumped into his seat in the cockpit. Zakai overrode the start up sequences with practiced ease, which Vodo was not aware his Apprentice could do, and the ship lifted off. As it rotated, floating on repulsors, Zakai fired off the shuttle's main guns strafing a semi-circle in front of them. He then rammed the throttle bar to its stops and whooped as the ship rocketed from the hangar bay into space.

"You got out of there!" a familiar voice said over the Com.

Vodo nodded to himself as he responded, "So did you. You know who that was who attacked us, don't you?"

"I can guess," the pilot replied, "how did they find us, do you think?"

"There are only a few ways," Vodo admitted, "and I'm not sure I like any of them. I'll look into it."

"I think that nails down your story pretty well, for the Collective anyhow. Your traitor—"

"That traitor is driving a wedge between us by cooperating with the Collective. He wants the Brotherhood in a vulnerable position for his own plans and he's using the potential of a three way war to bring us there. If you convince the Admiral," Vodo explained, "then our two factions could put aside our need to fight and concentrate on the real enemies."

"What will you do to this Colonel Rhyllance when you catch him?" the Pilot asked

"I'm going to kill him."