

Echoes of the Past

Vodo Biask Taldrya - 3729

Story Follows From Combat Fiction Entry "What Goes Bump In the Night"

38 ABY

Nesolat Platform

Arx System

The Mad Bomber was dead. That was one name off his list of high value targets. As Director of Clan Intelligence Vodo had compiled a list of such individuals that should a conflict break out again with the Collective, as it surely would, he and his Office of Secret Intelligence would waste no time in eliminating them as threats. They would decapitate the leadership and command apparatus of the enemy, throwing their forces into disarray. She'd been codenamed Cresh-3 and Vodo Biask Taldrya was now on his way to the next one on his list, codenamed Esk-4. Plenty of these targets were assigned to his Zero-Desh division, the Ciphers, but the Director had given himself the targets of the highest prestige.

He was not an overly vain man but he had a reputation, carefully cultivated over the last two decades, that required occasional maintenance. A veteran of countless conflicts, the slayer of untold enemies, Vodo was well known as a ferocious warrior and skilled sorcerer. He was also regarded as something of a schemer, a plotter, and a knower of many things that others would prefer left unsaid. This generated much enmity but their hatred also inspired respect. To his Clanmates Vodo epitomized strength and control while to his enemies he was a spectre, a constant threat to their peace and safety. It required that he, from time to time, made some significant waves to remind all who were paying attention who the Karufr Knight was.

Checking his wristlink he saw that he had 20 minutes until his ship would arrive and needed to be there in order to keep to his strict time tables. It was slow going though. The Nesolat Platform was a shambles. The sudden attack of the Collective and their soldiers' indiscriminate and vandalizing attacks had left much of the interior, in only a short time, a mess. There were still thousands of personnel onboard the platform as well, mostly non-combatants and civilians who worked in one of the Brotherhood's many bureaucratic departments. Vodo shouldered his way through a crowd that grew ever more dense as he went along, growing more and more frustrated as he did.

Finally losing his self control the Taldrya bellowed, his Force-enhanced voice filling the packed corridor, "MOVE!"

Those closest to him nearly leapt out their skin while those further down turned to see what had made the noise. Not much changed though so Vodo seized the Force and formed a wedge-shaped barrier before him and began trudging. People yelped in surprise as they were

pushed aside by an invisible wall. People, recognizing what was going on, began to move to the sides of the corridor or flattened themselves against those who already had. This allowed him to begin moving at a trot, much more quickly, and he enjoyed watching the surprise and fright on the faces of those he passed.

The station shook. This was not the trembling of a nearby explosion, much like had been going off since the Collective had boarded and begun their attacks. This was something that shuddered through the bones of the platform. Something traumatic had just affected the station and everyone present knew it. There were gasps and screams of terror from people in the crowd as the flashing amber alarms, the intruder alert, that had been filling the station for nearly a day now turned red-- the emergency alert.

“All station personnel, this is the Command Deck: Abandon the Station. I repeat, Abandon the Station. Proceed to the nearest escape pods with all due haste”, the message repeated several times over the public address system.

“Fantastic”, Vodo muttered under his breath.

People screamed as a blast door slid shut with a clang back down the corridor behind them. There had been a number of people back there who were now cut off. Vodo looked ahead and then looked for a map of his location. There was a plaque stuck to the wall with a helpful red dot proclaiming He Was Here. The concourse adjacent to the hangar where his ship would expect him wasn't far but through this crowd, and their panic, he was going to have to push.

“Out of my way! Make way!” he shouted as he resumed his way down the corridor.

His barrier shoved people out of the way and those who got to close found themselves roughly pushed away by his strong arms. People were all heading the same way but somehow no one was making any progress. He discovered why as he reached the end of the corridor before a T-junction. Two Shadow Academy attendants had loaded a hovercart with several large, heavy-looking crates. They'd been moving with too much haste when trying to take the corner and the crates had fallen off, bracing open. They fumbled to shove the crates' contents back in but were struggling with the many loose, oddly shaped items and their packing materials.

Frustration was growing into fury within the Sith. Vodo did not feel like helping them clean nor did he feel like lecturing them on their stupidity, at holding up the entire crowd behind him. He was preparing to teach them a lethal lesson when something caught his eye. It was one of the objects. The Attendants stopped working as they noticed the nearly seven foot tall Twi'lek standing there behind them, towering over their mistake. Vodo Biask was tall, broad-shouldered, and cut an intimidating figure. They stared up at his face and at his intense, piercing eyes which they saw were yellow-flecked with red and recognized in them that he was a Sith. They saw his Lekku were etched with gnarled, blackened ritual tattoos that stretch from tip to stem. Being learned as they were they recognized some of the symbols and patterns and their eyes grew wide.

“M-m-my Lord!” one stammered.

Vodo ignored him and bent to pick up the object he'd seen. It was semi-circular and made a black metal. It was far heavier than its size suggested, being as wide as his fingers out-stretched from thumb to pinky. It was covered in a complex maze of runic symbols and illustrations of a long-extinct language. It was cool to his touch and its edges, 10,000 years old, were as sharp as the day they'd been forged. Its inside length, along the diameter of the implied circle, was shaped with odd cut-outs and jutting protrusions like a piece of a youngling's puzzle. It was in fact part of a puzzle, the other piece of which he had in his possession back on Caelus. The Sith stared at the artifact, dumbfounded by his incredible fortune. The Force truly worked in mysterious ways. With this item he could--

“My Lord?” the Attendant again stammered.

Annoyed, Vodo pocketed the item in his cloak and rose to his full height, “Move away.”

The two men did so without hesitation. Vodo used his hands to shape the Force and using a telekinetic push he moved the pile of crates and artifacts into the T-Juncture and to the left. His hangar was to the right and now the way was clear.

Checking his chrono again, he saw he had ten minutes. Vodo looked back at the crowd and wrestled with his conscience. There were hundreds of them and though he didn't care for any of them, they were not of his Clan and of no use to him, he had the means by which to save a handful. His ship, an Upsilon-class Shuttle, was outfitted to accommodate his taste for the finer things and life and could perhaps carry himself and fifteen others provided no one sat or took up too much room. Even he had a moral compass. He glared at those nearest to him.

“Come with me if you want to live”, with that he turned, his cloak flaring behind him dramatically, and he began down the corridor to the right.

Vodo moved quickly. He paid no mind to those in-train behind him. If they wanted to live they'd do what it took to follow and those who failed to do so were of no concern to him. Bodies littered the corridor and blast marks pocked the walls and panels. Clearly combat had moved through this area already but he heard no tell-tale retorts of weapons or the thud of explosions. There was always the chance the hangar was occupied and used as a staging point but he'd deal with that issue when he got there. A concourse lay at the end of the corridor, an area in which people could wait or be received just off the hangar. Here too there were bodies, some station security, and a few that appeared to originate from the Collective.

His followers filed into the concourse behind him, panting with their exertion to keep up. Vodo had the advantage of a long stride atop his cybernetic legs. They were striking: reverse articulated at the knee like a raptor's, made of a dark burnished grey metal, and tipped in fearsome-looking taloned claws. He ran not much faster than he had with his biological legs but

these had the benefit of running on a power cell rather than his heart. The com on his wristlink blinked a message from the co-pilot of his ship: five minutes.

Vodo looked across the people who had followed him. It was not a distinct group but rather those who had been most motivated to follow him and they were being back-filled slowly by those only just now catching up. He looked at a Bothan woman and pointed to her, "Stay and here organize these people. I can take no more than fifteen."

He didn't wait to hear her response. The Sith Warlord moved to the blast doors to the Hangar and activated the switch. The doors slid open revealing the Hangar beyond. Though there were signs of explosions and evidence of a gun-battle here there was no Collective boarding party waiting on the other side. The atmospheric containment shield stretched across the expanse of the flight portal and visible beyond its pale blue glow was the expanse of space and the twinkle of stars occasionally interrupted by a distant orange-white explosion. Content that there were no issues to deal with in here he made to return to the concourse.

The blast doors he'd passed through opened ahead of him and through it ran the people he'd left in the concourse. Vodo's brow furrowed as they, with clear signs of panic, scrambled through the entry into the hangar. The Bothan he'd spoken to saw him and made for him.

"My Lord, the Collective is shooting us from behind!", she managed to get the words out before taking cover behind some barrels.

Vodo pulled his lightsaber from his hilt and strode towards the doors. He could hear the retort of blaster fire through the screams of the terrified people trying to escape it. Aliens and Humans were thrown through the blast doors by an explosion on the other side. His nostrils flared with indignation. These were non-combatants, they posed no threat; This was a slaughter. Vodo had killed many people in his life, and perhaps had let die many more rather callously as well, but even he had a moral compass. His veins pulsed with fire as the Dark Side filled him and he dashed forward. Barreling his way through the torn bodies and crawling wounded, Vodo found himself immediately beset by four identical attackers.

His lightsaber thrummed to life and twirled defensively as he intercepted red blaster bolts and redirected them into the deck and walls around him. There were four humanoids of varying species, who were bedecked in Collective weapons and black Imperial-style armor, that now ignored any other lifeform in the room and focused entirely on the Twi'lek with the lightsaber. Vodo momentarily considered a retreat through the blast doors but tossed that plan as quickly as it formed. The hangar on the other side was wide open and had no cover, he would be no better there once they crossed the threshold than he was now. There was only one path and it lay forward.

The Collective attackers had not bothered to seek cover when they'd begun their attack. Clearly, they'd not anticipated a fight from the mass of people they'd begun firing into and as such there was no need. They were spread out though in a line across the far end of the concourse where the corridor Vodo had arrived from emptied into the room. They had put five to ten meters between themselves so Vodo chose the one furthest to his left to start. The Force

propelled him forward with preternatural speed and he closed on that man far quicker than the man had anticipated, though no surprise emanated through the Force from him. Vodo speared him through the chest with his white-red lightsaber blade, levering it with downward pressure on the bottom of his long hilt. The Blade wheeled through the man's neck and skull, bisecting him from the breastbone up.

Curiously the other three soldiers had followed the Warlord's movement with a coordinated redeployment. They moved simultaneously to encircle him from behind, laying suppressive fire that forced Vodo to move to cover behind a pillar. Drawing a breath he concentrated and was pleased when the blaster fire began tracing the wall behind him and to the right. From the perspective of the Collective men Vodo had dashed from there and was now running along that wall, an illusion requiring little of his concentration. He spun from out behind the pillar to his left and caught the nearest soldier off-guard with a tremendous telekinetic strike that sent him flying into the wall on the other side of the concourse with a loud crack.

Again the two remaining soldiers shifted their position and fire simultaneously. With only two blasters firing it was easier to deflect the shots with precision and Vodo ensured two bolts of crimson light buried themselves in the man lying crumpled against the wall for good measure. His enemies changed their tack seeing the ineffectiveness of their present course. One dropped his main weapon, which hung from a sling across his chest, and pulled something from his belt. He tossed it at Vodo as his comrade dashed to Vodo's left. It was a small explosive, a grenade most likely, so Vodo waved his free hand dismissively, causing it to change course in midair and crash into a wall. It exploded with a brilliant orange flash as flames leapt from it.

The sudden blast heat caught Vodo on a back foot and he covered his face with his right arm, raising his saber into the air. The second Soldier took the opportunity to lay three shots on him. Two of them impacted on his ribcage while the third buried itself in something hard at his side. Dulled by his synthweave cloak and his chestplate the impacts weren't lethal but they did knock the air out of his lungs. With steel determination he fought through the pain and deflected the next two shots. The first soldier, who had thrown the incendiary device, pointed his wrist at Vodo. Gwendolyn had just pulled this trick less than a half-hour ago so Vodo was prepared. He raised both of his hands and commanded the force to push against the rocket that fired from the wrist launcher there. The miniature explosive emerged from its housing, its rocket motor firing out the rear, but it quickly froze in the air before the man who had fired it and then exploded in his face.

Vodo danced evasively as the last soldier wasted no time in continuing his assault on him. In the full of his fury with one last enemy Vodo advanced on him with deliberation, batting away blaster bolts disdainfully. His eyes glowed with malice as he closed with the man. The Soldier ditched his carbine and drew his vibrodagger. He was brave, the Sith commended his opponent, but the small blade was greatly outmatched by his nearly two-meter long weapon. The soldier played his last trump card when from behind him a plume of rocket exhaust sent him sailing forward into Vodo. Unaware he'd been equipped with a jetpack Vodo was caught entirely off-guard as the mass of the man barreled into him and he felt the cut of the vibrodagger across the flesh under his ribs where his chest plate did not protect him on the side. The two men crashed to the deck and rolled in a tangle of limbs and equipment.

His lightsaber, knocked from his grasp, lay a few feet away. The saber's blade retreated into the hilt when the safety switch was no longer held down in Vodo's hand. The soldier quickly maneuvered himself into a dominant grappling position atop Vodo and attempted to plunge his weapon, which hummed sonically, into the Sith's chest. Vodo grasped the man's wrists with both of his hands he pushed with all his might, his ears pounding with the thump of his heart. Slowly Vodo watched the tip of the blade sink closer and closer to his breast as the emotionless mask of the Collective soldier's helmet stared down at him. The hum of the dagger niggled at Vodo's ears, its buzzing filling his awareness as he watched the blade inch closer and closer.

It won't end like this, the Warlord vowed to himself, there's too much left to do. It won't end like this!

The Dark Side was still there with him. It coursed through his veins still like cold fire. It filled his chest with the desire, no, the need to act. It whispered to him, tantalized him with promises of strength, of power, and of freedom. It was a familiar presence, more like a family member than a friend. Vodo seized the Force and bent it to his considerable will. His fury exploded into rage and power coursed through his body lending him strength. At last, the vibrodagger ceased moving. The air between the two men rippled momentarily before it seemingly turned solid and hurled the soldier straight into the air. The man hit the ceiling with a crack and fell back to the ground dazed. Vodo had rolled out from underneath him and forced himself atop the Collective soldier now, his metal legs pinning the man's arms and his hands wrapped mercilessly around his enemy's neck.

"DIE YOU SON OF A WHORE!", Vodo bellowed his rage, spit flecking the man's armored helmet below him, "DIE!"

Vodo's hands were like vices. The soft flesh of the neck squeezed and compressed under his grip until he felt the popping of the larynx, the crackle of vertebrae, and the strength of the man flee from him. He stood there, his hands locked around the man's neck for a moment longer as he felt the life leave him. His chest heaved as he struggled to fill his lungs with air. It was fortunate he no longer had legs of muscle and flesh or it was likely he would have collapsed. He remained atop his cybernetic legs but it took great effort to keep his torso upright. He summoned his lightsaber to his hand and noticed that his wristlink had been beeping for some time now.

Vodo answered the com with the press of a button, "This is Biask".

The man on the viewscreen was in his mid-twenties and dressed sharply in a Taldryan uniform, "Lord Biask, we've arrived in the hangar. There appears to be a crowd of--"

"I'm aware", Vodo looked out the open blast doors as he limped towards it and the hangar beyond, "admit twenty of them. No more."

There was hesitation in the man's response but he knew his master well enough not to talk-back, "As you command."

Vodo shouldered his way aboard the *Karufu Knight*, his luxuriously appointed shuttle. In normal times there was space enough for himself and his son but now it was packed well beyond capacity and going was difficult as he made his way through the main cabin, opening the hatch to his bedroom as he went to provide just a few more square meters of space. He proceeded to the cockpit. The Sith tried to forget the looks on the faces of those who had watched as their friends and colleagues boarded the ship, followed by the half-cyborg Twi'lek, as he told them there was room for no more. The Bothan woman had been among those left standing on the hangar's deck as he used what little strength he still possessed to push the crowd back with the Force as the boarding ramp closed. Once inside the cockpit, he found he could stand between the pilot and co-pilot's chairs with space to breathe at last.

"What are your orders, My Lord?" the Pilot asked.

He was quiet for a moment as he stared out of the view panel at the black of space, "These people will accompany us back to the fleet. Make for the *Relentless*."

Those men he'd fought had been queer. Their coordination was eerie, rivaling that if not surpassing that of trained Force Users. He thought back on the fight, only a few minutes passed, and he rubbed the sore spots on his ribcage where he'd taken the two blasts. It was then he remembered he'd taken a third shot but had only barely noticed at the time and that it had not impacted his flesh. He examined his cybernetics but saw no damage reminiscent of a blaster's discharge. His left hand sank into his cloak and reached for the pocket where he'd stashed the artifact. It was there, cool and heavy, and he grasped it.

Bring it up to his face he could see the circular carbon scoring of a blaster shot on it. It was undamaged, the strange metal proving resistant to even that, and he felt thankful. The shot it had taken likely wouldn't have killed him, it might have damaged his prosthetic legs in some manner, but he was thankful that he still had this. This odd black semi-circular object, the second half of a puzzle, might be the answer to a great many questions-- chief among which was the secret to immortality. Staring at the artifact he was transported to an earlier time, a memory of a different epoch in his life.

19 Years Earlier

Antei System

The red sandy soil was kicked up in tufts as the young Twi'lek man stumbled backward, attempting to catch his balance. His lekku headtails, unblemished, flailed around as he attempted to set his feet right. Aware of the armory saber still in his fist he did his best, as his arms swung about for balance, not to accidentally sever part of the sensitive organs. Vodo's

boots finally found purchase and he arrested his backward momentum. Regaining his defensive stance the young man grasped his saber and held before him.

He wore simple dark robes, traditional in style and cut so that the overgarments layered over the front in a V-pattern and was cinched at the waist with a wide belt. His robes and his pants were made of plain, unadorned cloth except for that he wore a blue armband tied over his right bicep proclaiming his, and his clan's, allegiance to the Blue Grandmaster. He stood across a short distance from a brute of a man, a human, who was taller and broader than he was. The man, an Arconan, wore polished pieces of armor over his shoulders and bore a red armband proclaiming his fealty to the Red Grandmaster. Behind them loomed a temple, built in the ancient days of the Triumvirate, within which the two Grandmasters battled one-another. Out here, on the plain, the forces of the Brotherhood clashed in hand-to-hand combat.

Vodo Biask was a Jedi Hunter, the Tetrarch of his Battleteam, and still only just beginning his explorations of the Dark Side. An escaped slave, Vodo had fled from bounty hunters, slavers, and the criminal underbodies of countless systems until he'd found the Brotherhood and been assigned to Clan Taldryan. He had tasted war by now but he was by no means a warrior yet. The man across from him was clearly in his element: More powerful in the Force, more experienced in battle, and far more confident with a lightsaber. The smirk he wore on his face made it clear that he knew all this and that he was playing with the little Journeyman.

"First I'm going to lop off that arm of yours, then the other one", the man taunted while whisking his red blade back and forth, "then I'll make you beg for me to kill you, carving you apart little by little until you say please..."

Vodo didn't honor that with a response; he charged the man instead. Trained as he was in Form III Soresu his initial attacks were clumsy and awkward, easily parried by the Arconan. His opportunity came however when the man switched to offense and swept the red lightsaber at Vodo's shoulder. The Jedi Hunter's blue armory saber caught the weapon close to the emitter and stuck there, that curious effect that kept lightsaber blades from sliding across one another. He used that contact to pivot his weapon around and over the other and in the blink of an eye had severed the Arconan's wrist from his arm.

The man roared in pain and his closed fist crashed into Vodo's jaw sending him flying to the ground dazed. Blood filled his mouth and it dribbled from his swollen lip and he attempted to pick himself up. A boot crashed into his ribs flipping him on his back instead and between coughs, Vodo saw the man had picked up his lightsaber in his remaining hand and stood over him with malevolence in his eyes. Vodo scrambled backward across the sandy soil of Antei, the man slowly advancing on him. His back hit a rock and there was nowhere left to retreat. Seeing his victory at hand the man grinned and raised his saber high into the air for a killing blow.

With nothing left to lose Vodo's hand swept across the soil, passing over something hard and cold, and flung the sand into the Arconan's eyes. Blinded, the man yelled furiously but his voice was cut short as a short length of sharpened durasteel plunged into his heart. The improvised weapon, Vodo's only constant companion since his earliest days after escaping bondage, jutted from the Arconan's chest from where an upwelling of crimson blood pooled and

began pouring down his chest. Vodo stared into the man's surprised eyes and watched the life go out of them.

Panting heavily Vodo collapsed onto his ass and sat there, staring dumbly at the man he'd just killed. He'd killed before, a number of times by now, but it still left him feeling numb inside as some voice told him over and over it was wrong. The battle raged on across the plain but it ignored the Jedi Hunter sitting there against the rock for the moment. After a while, Vodo heard something. It was like a whisper, but one in his head rather than his ear. He looked down at where his hand rested on the ground, where it had scooped up the sand to throw. A dark object was partially covered in sand and dirt there. He brushed it off and pulled it from the ground and studied it.

The thing was semi-circular, dark, and made of incredibly dense metal. It was clearly very old, covered in indecipherable runes and images, but aside from the encrustations of dirt and time, it was unblemished. He could not read what it said but as he studied it he saw that it must be part of something larger as its long end, the diameter of the circle, had irregular shapes that looked as though they would fit and slot into a matching piece. He pocketed the item and climbed to his feet. There would be time enough to study it later.