SHADOWS OF THE MIND

General Zentru'la (5951)

A Star Wars Story

Contents

Prologue

'A name means nothing on the battlefield' - General Zentru'la

Blaster fire filled the air. The temperature was stifling. A relentless stream of superheated crimson plasma radiated heat. Smoke filled the air, eclipsing the twilight sun. Explosive weaponry detonated left, right, centre, up and down. Vision was poor. Breathing was worse. The city of Eos was under siege. Zentru'la gave it a day or two before the city fell.

He didn't know who his allies were. A mix of Jedi, Loyalist and Mercenaries from all seven clans, and some troops from the Iron Legion. The Brotherhood forces from all backgrounds were slowly being herded inwards from the suburbs by the relentless Collective advance. They didn't know who he was either. He held no official ranks or titles over them, but the General was born for battlefield command. And so he commanded. In the face of impossible odds and impending death, they rallied behind the giant

twi'lek in shining white armour, with big guns and a voice stronger than the cannon-fire that bombarded them.

"Get down!" Zentru'la tackled a man in stormtrooper-white behind a waist-high duracrete barricade. A bolt of plasma as wide as a tree trunk barreled down the street where he once stood. Collective artillery. His head immediately turned to follow the bolt, where he saw it blocked by an invisible force. A man in a black robe, his face obscured by a cowl, stood where the bolt once was, a double-bladed crimson lightsaber in his hand. A Sith Master.

"I don't like soldiers dying under my command." Zentru'la helped the stormtrooper back to a crouching position behind the barricade.

"Hive Mind Marines!" someone shouted from across the street. Four of them swarmed in formation, high in the smog, encased in suits of black armour and equipped with jetpacks. The smoke was no barrier to their impossibly precise co-ordination. The barricades were no barrier to their blaster carbines firing from the air. A volley of carbine fire glanced off the Vornskr General's Beskar armour. The stormtrooper was not so lucky, as the bolts ripped through his standard-issue armour like a lightsaber through parchment. He dropped to the ground, dead in an instant. Another tree-trunk-sized plasma bolt struck the ground a few metres away.

"Take out that artillery!" Zentru'la roared at the Sith Master. His keen eyes quickly scanned the battlefield. "Mando! Support him with your missiles!" The Sith and the Mandalorian with the iconic T shaped visor joined forces to deal with the artillery. "You three protect them!" He shouted at three stormtroopers. "Everyone else, focus fire on the

Marines!" Zentru'la checked the name tag of the fallen trooper. KM-3946 would be remembered.

Zentru'la raised his repeater cannon and fired shots of his own into the sky from his giant weapon. Using a jetpack to bypass cover worked both ways. They were vulnerable from all directions. He landed a glancing blow on an arm, but the marine kept fighting, wielding a two-handed carbine with only a single hand and never breaking formation with his squad.

Something shone in the air. It was only by the ignited propulsion trail that Zentru'la identified the wrist rocket coming towards him. He sprinted from cover, joining a group of Iron Legion troopers as the barricade was blasted into a hundred pieces. Rapid-fire wasn't working. He pumped the foreguard of his cannon. He could feel the weapon strain under the generated power, a restrained force wanting to be unleashed. The haze from the heat generated by the jetpacks gave away their locations in the smoke. He took a deep breath, aligned the sights, and fired.

"Damn, nice shot," said a trooper as the Hive Mind Marine fell to the floor, a gaping hole bore through the helmet, and the head.

"I thought they were invincible," said another.

"They still die when you shoot them," said Zentru'la gruffly, lining up another shot.

"This is Commander Lyme, all forces converge on my position!" one of the Iron Legion troops shouted down a commlink. "No! But if you do, you might not die!"

Zentru'la's next shot struck firm and true against a jetpack. No organic could have survived the explosion in

the sky no matter how much of their body was cybernetic. But as Zentru'la's allies called more forces to rally behind the indomitable general, four Hive Mind Marines replaced the two he had killed.

Discipline, coordination and order. Zentru'la embodied these qualities and demanded them in his troops. They won wars. The Hive Mind Marines were the ultimate soldier. They needed to be stopped, and even under his leadership, no amount of random cobbled-together forces rallying to his position could ever hold up for long.

"G14, come in G14!"

"Yes, General?" said a smooth, female voice on the other side.

"Where's Masakado? We need Masakado!"

01

Awakening

A thousand burning hot knives pierced his skull. Masakado slowly opened his eyes. A blinding white light overwhelmed his vision.

"You're awake," said a soft voice, smooth as silk beside him. As Masakado's sight slowly began to fade back into focus, the first thing he could recognise was Lilina's electric purple hair.

"What happened?" Masakado growled in a gravelly voice on the border between synthetic and organic. His eyes narrowed sharply from another pulse of intense pain that flowed from his brain through what little of his body was not replaced by machinery. "Where am I?"

"You're safe in the *Harbinger*'s medical bay. You suffered another absence seizure," said Lilina, whose expressive voice of sympathy and care made up for the Miraluka's

blind eyes being hidden behind a navy blindfold. "Do you remember any of what happened?" As Masakado's vision slowly returned, he could make out Lilina's light brown robe and then the dark details of the *Harbinger* interior.

"I remember… we were on the *Nesolat*. I took control of their intelligence system. We were winning. Then nothing."

"The *Nesolat* is lost," said Lilina. "The Collective brought a new kind of soldier we've never seen before. We were forced to retreat."

"The General would never run."

"There was no other option. They're calling them Hive Mind Marines. Their minds are linked somehow…"

Masakado's eyes flared with anger. "They're still experimenting…" His normally low, half synthetic growl developed a menacing undertone as his mind flashed back to his earliest memories: life in a Collective lab seventeen years ago, undergoing experiment after experiment, body after body, drug after drug. He was supposed to be the ultimate assassin, Daggo Mouk's first foray into cybernetic engineering. The cost of breaking free had been heavy indeed. A war still raged inside his head, a war of neurons against Collective nanotechnology, a microcosm of the world outside. Even three years after he had escaped the Collective lab leaving a trail of death and destruction on the way to his freedom, he felt the toll of their experiments on his brain.

What remained of Masakado's original, Shistavenan body still pulsed with pain as he clambered out of the medical bed and onto his powerful mechanical legs. The pain began to ease somewhat as he consumed a packet of Bacta

gel. He used more than a small hospital as his condition worsened, becoming as dependant on the substance as their pilot was on alcohol. "Where is the General now?"

"He's protecting Eos from the Collective," said Lilina serenely. "I stayed behind to look after you." Masakado dared not think how much worse his condition might be had Lilina's healing and medical expertise not slowed the progression of his sickness.

"We should be fighting alongside the General," said Masakado. "We're no use to anyone here."

"You're not well enough," said Lilina, trying to urge the Shistavenan cyborg to rest more.

"My body is a machine," he growled. "I can *always* fight."

"Incoming communication from General Zentru'la," interrupted a female voice within the walls. "Patching it through."

"We're taking heavy fire!" said the voice of Zentru'la over the background of shouting, blasters, and explosions. "Hive Mind Marines! Too many of them! How's Masakado?"

"He still needs res-

"My sword is ready," Masakado cut across Lilina. "What do you need?"

"They're too strong! Find a way to turn them off!" He heard the unmistakable sound of Zentru'la's cannon firing. "Fall back! FALL BACK! Do it quickly!" Zentru'la said and Masakado heard a thunderous explosion over the comm-link. "Or there won't be an Eos left to save."

"So just deactivate a load of perfect super-soldiers?" said a slurred, female voice from the cockpit. "I wondered where the rum went."

"Everything can be hacked," said Masakado, walking to the cockpit where Rohla was half-way through another drink, keeping the *Harbinger* out of sight in Arx orbit. At the dashboard, his mechanical fingers flicked through holographic projections of the maps of the battle above Arx, the siege lines and ground units around Eos, and dossiers of key Collective personnel. "But this will be very difficult."

"You hacked the AI on the *Nesolat*," Lilina said softly. "You can do this too."

"That was different, I understood the technology."

"So we need to learn more about how they work?" suggested Lilina.

"G14, where do they deploy from?" Masakado said to the ship.

"The Hive Mind Marines garrison on the *Skylla*. They have all deployed to Eos by shuttle. The project lead scientist, Professor Atlas, has a laboratory on board next to the medical bay," replied G14.

"Atlas…" Masakado growled.

"What is it?" Lilina asked, sensing another flare of anger in Masakado.

"Atlas was the scientist in charge of my project too… the first name I remember learning. I'll go to his lab and kill him with the body he designed. Then deal with the Hive Mind Marines."

"The knowledge from his experiments could help us treat your sickness too," Lilina said pensively.

"Soo… the usual thing?" said Rohla, taking a large mouthful of drink. "I fly you in without getting us all blown up, I have a few more drinks then get you all out?"

"That would not be optimal," said the voice from the

walls. "The *Skylla* is protected by four frigates and eleven cruisers."

"I can do it!" Rohla snapped at the AI.

"G14 is right," said Masakado. "They'll see us coming and without the General, we can't fight their crew head-on. But I will not pass up this opportunity for vengeance."

"So what are we going to do?" said Lilina with unerring calm.

"I'll sneak aboard the *Skylla* myself," said Masakado. "Learn more about what drives these Marines, kill Professor Atlas, and get out."

Rohla spluttered a foul-smelling beverage over the cockpit. "It's in space, how you gonna sneak aboard?"

Masakado continued to scroll through intelligence dossiers and maps of Arx, stopping on a live map of the ongoing battle. Red icons of Collective troops and tanks moved further and further into the city, while blue icons of Brotherhood resistance were grouped further and further inwards, occasionally disappearing from the map. "Drop me here," he said, tapping on an area on a hillside behind the advancing Collective line. "Fast, slow, silent. I'll find a way aboard from there."

"I'm coming with you. I won't let you go alone," said Lilina.

"I work faster on my own. And time is critical."

"It's too dangerous," said Lilina with a touch of pleading in her voice. "What happens if you have another seizure on the *Skylla*?"

"Have you *ever* done a covert operation before?" Masakado snapped as he looked through estimated floor plans of the *Skylla*.

"No, but I can learn," said Lilina. "The Force will protect us."

Masakado growled. She was an excellent healer and medic, but the naïve mystic knew precious little in the way of war, its severity, and its harshness. The last thing he needed was Lilina slowing him down, but she was right about his condition. As much as he would never admit it, there may be a time when he needed her lightsaber for protection.

"When we're aboard, there's nowhere to run. No support. No extraction. If we make a mistake, we die. You need to do exactly as I say." Lilina nodded. "And," Masakado continued, "You may need to kill if necessary."

There was a moment of silence. Lilina almost stepped back. It confirmed to Masakado what he already knew about her. She had never killed anyone before. "That's not the Jedi way."

"Then I'm going alone."

Lilina said nothing for a while, she seemed pensive, thoughtful, like she was wrestling with something deep down. "I will do what needs to be done." Masakado cared not for her spirituality. They had a job to do, a dangerous, difficult job that needed her head in the right place. His mind ran over all the possible ways she could give them away, but her power was undeniable…

"You can't wear that," he gestured to her traditional brown and beige Jedi robes. "Too bright, too obvious and you need to cover your hair." While Masakado's natural black canine features and black cybernetic body blended neatly into the shadows, and a Collective-made cybernetic body could even blend in with their soldiers, Lilina's electric-

purple hair would be spotted from a mile away, and the robes of the Jedi the Collective despised so deeply would give away her allegiance.

Masakado briskly walked off without saying another word to the living quarters. Lilina's blindness and associated lack of understanding of light and shadow were major concerns. The *Harbinger* still contained many of the possessions of its original owner. It was unfortunate that Masakado would never have the chance to work with the legendary spy, but her old Inquisitorius armour would have to do for Lilina - a black, lightly armoured cuirass with a dark cowl that would hide her hair and face. Lilina wouldn't be the only one carrying one of her possessions, at Masakado's hip was The Silencer, an ancient, arcane dagger whose ebon blade thirsted for blood.

02

Spotlights

The *Harbinger* began its swift descent towards Arx. Lilina had agreed to wear the black armour. Her double-bladed lightsaber was hidden in an inside pocket and an array of medical tools were attached to her belt. Masakado was armed to the teeth with a sleek, black curved sword hung at his left hip, The Silencer at his right, and a slender stiletto dagger inside his right boot. On his wrist, a launcher filled with darts coated in a tranquillising agent, and various other tools including sharp throwing objects and a pair of electro-binoculars were fastened to his belt.

Collective cruisers and frigates littered the obit of Arx. The *Harbinger* rocked and swayed in harmony with its conductor, staying out of range of any sensors powerful enough to detect the state-of-the-art shuttle. The details of the planet came into view, first the oceans and continents, the

Great Lake of Elos Vrai, and the city of Eos, the soft, glowing amber cluster in the night, an illusion of peace while violence and bloodshed ravaged the city streets.

"Optimal trajectory for projectile descent achieved," said the voice of G14. The low hum of the *Harbinger's* engines came to an abrupt halt. Whatever Rohla was drinking when she came up with her ideas, she never let anyone else have any. A black ship obscured in a night sky lit only by the reflected light from the moon Arx Minor, the main dangers to detection as they approached the ground were the emissions of heat or sound. Letting gravity do most of the work on approach to minimise both was the kind of idea only the inebriated mind of Rohla Trugaim could think up.

From their aerial view in freefall, Masakado could see the major districts and buildings, and the peaceful illusion from afar was shattered. As they approached the surface from the far side of the Collective siege line, near the mountainous Dark Ascent region, Masakado could hear the artillery fire that bombarded the inner city. This far out, however, was a quiet patch. Where the city met the mountain, many of the buildings were encased in scaffolding, with missing roofs and uneven walls. This part of Eos, elevated by the terrain at the base of the mountain, was still under construction when the fighting started.

Rohla slammed on the engines to halt their descent at the last possible moment, low enough to have avoided the range of any anti-aircraft sensors scanning the sky. There was a sudden rush of cold night air as the boarding ramp opened, the ship hovering half a metre above the ground.

"Be careful down there!" said Rohla as Masakado and

Lilina jumped down from the *Harbinger* onto a soft grass verge overlooking the outer city. No sooner had their feet hit the ground than the *Harbinger* sped off away from Eos, staying close to the terrain of the Dark Ascent. Rohla would fly halfway around the planet before fleeing the vicinity.

The night was dark, with the sun completely set and the waning crescent moon of Arx Minor doing little to provide ambient light. Most of the light came from the city at a distance. The half-finished buildings were scattered thinly and still lacked a power supply.

"Stay low, and stick to the shadows," Masakado instructed in a whisper, keeping his stance at a low crouch.

"I don't see the same way as you do," Lilina said softly.

"Just stay close," he replied. "We need to find a vantage point. Time spent on reconnaissance is never wasted." He didn't even begin to understand Lilina's sense of sight, her explanation to him that she can only see shapes and auras was incomprehensible to him. More worrying was that she did not understand the enemy's sense of sight, and how to avoid it. She stayed within touching distance as he moved from building to building, shadow to shadow, looking for just the right spot. Dressed head to toe in black, Masakado and Lilina would be practically invisible to the naked eye at any reasonable distance.

Eventually, he found what he was looking for. However tall the building was supposed to be, only the first floor had been fully constructed, the others were of various stages of completion with the side facing the city had been constructed higher than the others. "Up there," Masakado said before taking one swift step towards the wall. With the athleticism and grace of a cat, he took one step up the wall

before reaching for the ledge and climbing onto it. Lilina stood still, took a deep breath, before jumping onto the first floor in a single leap.

The unfinished building on a naturally higher elevation provided them with both a vantage point and protection from line of sight from the city. Masakado immediately moved to cover, pressing himself flat against the wall next to an unfilled window. He could hear Lilina's heavy breath as she did the same. Keeping most of his body hidden, he reached for his electro-binoculars. He paused, not knowing the right word for Lilina, but settled on "Look."

Most of the heavy troopers were fighting on the front lines. The rear guard was thin on the ground as they patrolled the outer-city. Masakado zoomed in on a patrolling guard, the rangefinder reading 400 metres, 10 degrees down. He watched the guard's patrol route as he walked around the unfinished streets, and observed his gear, lightly armed with a cheap, standard-issue blaster rifle and a flashlight, sporting a dark grey and cold colour scheme on his coat. "Liberation Front Partisans," said Masakado to Lilina. "Usually volunteers. Poorly trained."

"I can sense their presence," said Lilina. "But it's hazy, like a sound on the edge of hearing."

Masakado heard the sound of engines at a distance overhead. He looked up. "Do you see the freighters?"

"Clearly," said Lilina. Larger shapes were apparently easier for her to detect than a single person far away. A small fleet of five light freighters, each 30 metres long of the common YT line, flew over their location in a V shape formation, landing almost a kilometre away amongst a small army of Partisan engineers, with cybernetic arms

and an array of tools attached to their belts. The engineers entered the light freighters, exiting with storage containers larger than the carrying capacity of most organics.

"It's a staging area," said Masakado as they placed the cargo onto large, wheeled land vehicles. "They deliver supplies here where it's safe… weapons, ammo… and distribute it to the front lines by land."

"We can get on board the *Skylla* from there?"

"They have to go back eventually," said Masakado. "We hitch a ride back."

"But we don't know where the shuttles are going," thought Lilina out loud.

"So we need to find more information. We've done all we can here," he said as he had watched the guards complete a full loop of their patrol routes. "Let's move."

They climbed down from the building, landing as softly as possible on the unfinished paved road before moving further into the city, with Masakado leading Lilina through the shadows that she could not see. Masakado's mind constantly calculated the likely positions of the Partisan guards. They slalomed through the guard patrol routes, staying out of sight at all times. He just needed to be in the right place at the right time…

The guard's torch gave his presence away long before he came around the corner. Masakado waited, pressed flat against the wall, listening for the footsteps, watching the flashlight grow larger and larger as the steps became louder and louder.

In one swift blur of motion, Masakado struck with a low kick to the side of the knee, knocked the blaster out of his hand, drew The Silencer with one hand and held the

Partisan in a chokehold with the other. The blade of his dagger dug into the guard's neck.

"Tell us which shuttles dock at the *Skylla*," Masakado growled quietly in his ear.

"Brotherhood dog!" the Partisan squirmed, trying to escape Masakado's grip, but Masakado had the better of him in both technique and raw power.

"I've killed plenty of you before," he said darkly, pushing the blade of his knife harder against his captive's throat. "And if you won't speak… someone else will."

"Fine. I'll talk," he whimpered as Masakado increased the pressure. "They take the spoils of war back to the *Skylla*. The Lord Superior collects them. We sell the others."

Without another word, Masakado pulled tighter on his choke, until the Partisan fell unconscious in his grip. He gently laid the sleeping guard down on his side, a bent arm propping up his head. "Dead guards raise alarms. Sleeping ones get punished."

The route to the staging area was a wide-open road, with small buildings on each side. Tall watchtowers equipped with searchlights scanned the area, overlooking the buildings, their cones of blinding light cut through the darkness of the night. A detachment of Partisan guards patrolled the area.

"With me," Masakado said, gesturing towards another building whose far side was in a blind spot from the towers. "Stay low." Lilina followed Masakado as he hurried, staying in a low stance, towards the safe side of the building. Masakado kept his eye on the nearest tower as its searchlight scanned the area. The operator must have seen something, as the light swept back towards them. He quickly

adjusted his movement to avoid detection by the outpost, but Lilina was totally oblivious to the cone of light. She tried to follow Masakado, but avoiding something you can't see is impossible. Masakado saw her leg illuminated in bright light as they scurried for cover. It was exactly the kind of thing Masakado had been afraid of. These small mistakes can mean the difference between life and death.

"What was that?!" he heard a shout from the watchtower. They had been spotted. There was no time to lose. The watchtower kept its searchlight trained on their last known position. Before long, guards would be investigating the area.

"This way," Masakado growled, bringing Lilina to a position safer from the scanning searchlights.

"We'll go check it out!" he heard a shout from close by. Masakado quickly scanned the area once more, taking note of all the spots for cover. They needed to be in a position that both they and the guards would not be seen by anyone else. He crouched behind a trash compactor behind the building, and waited, listening for the footsteps as he did before. But this time, there was no time to take a chance taking care of the situation non-lethally. He slowly drew his sword to avoid making any noise.

Fighting on a stealth mission was always the last resort used when no other options were available. But Lilina's stray leg in the searchlight had made it inevitable. Masakado's sword strokes were so smooth and clean that the guards never even made a sound as they died. He hid the bodies in the trash compactor and they swiftly moved out of the area, towards the staging area. By the time the bodies would be found, they were far out of the area, in a dark

corner behind a vehicle garage, with a view of the parked light freighters.

Security was heavier around the landing zone. Guards swarmed like insects. Masakado observed that they were carrying heavier equipment too, armed with heavy repeaters and tougher armour. Technocrat soldiers.

A Technocrat in heavy commando armour approached one of the freighters, a bundle of robes over one arm, a bag in the other, loot from fallen Dark Jedi. He watched from the shadows as the soldier entered one of the parked light freighters, and a moment later, returned without the goods. That would be their ride to the *Skylla*.

"Once we board that ship, there's no return," said Masakado. Lilina nodded slowly. "And if we're spotted there, it's over." Lilina was unfazed. She was in this til the end.

Masakado watched the patrolling of the Technocrat soldiers, waiting for a moving blind spot that they could move through. He continued to watch, but the security was here tight. Every time one guard turned his back on a potential blind corner, another turned to face it. Just walking past was too dangerous. The time for caution was over. They needed a distraction. Masakado prepared a smoke bomb. He took a deep breath and threw the grenade. He was back in cover by the time the device landed and rolled underneath a parked ship.

Smoke billowed out from underneath the freighter, rising high into the sky. "Fire!" shouted a Technocrat soldier. "Ship's on fire!"

"Now," Masakado grabbed Lilina's arm roughly.

"Engineer! Engineer over here now!"

With all the attention on the smoking ship, Masakado

and Lilina sprinted through the staging area, their dark clothes offering camouflage in the thick black smoke, and up the boarding ramp onto one of the other ships.

They boarded into a brightly lit, circular corridor, leading to cargo holds, the cockpit, and various engineering and living compartments. "This is Captain Newman," announced a voice from the cockpit. They didn't have a lot of time. They needed somewhere to hide. "Fire in the LZ. Departing immediately."

Staying low, moving silently, Masakado led Lilina to the furthest cargo hold from the cockpit. Heavy weapons, small arms, high-grade armour, Jedi robes and other mysterious Jedi and Sith implements that never made it into the assortment of various size storage crates littered the floor.

He could hear the footsteps a member of the crew approaching. There was no time to prepare a hiding place. The footsteps grew louder. The ship would never take off if they were spotted onboard. Masakado had his hand on his dagger, ready for combat when the soldier turned the corner, seeing the two in the cargo hold.

"Who ar-"

"You should go back to the cockpit," Lilina said, waving a hand slowly.

"I should go back to the cockpit."

"Nicely done," Masakado acknowledged as the soldier turned and left them alone.

With more time and breathing space, he was able to identify a dark grey plasteel box, waist-high, barely a metre wide, carrying only a few small weapons. He emptied the box and picked up two black robes from the floor, pre-

sumably looted from now-dead Dark Jedi.

"Perfect," said Masakado, looking at the box. "We disguise ourselves as cargo." He climbed into the box, curling into the tightest ball he could. Lilina seemed hesitant, there wasn't a lot of room left in the box, but they had no other option. After Lilina squeezed into the box, Masakado covered them both with the black robes, so they could remain hidden even if the lid was opened.

Lilina grunted as she tried to find a comfortable position. "You were expecting first class?" Masakado growled as they felt the world shift and sway - the frigate had taken off towards the *Skylla*. If Lilina thought covert ops were glamorous, she was in for a nasty surprise.

O3

The Heart of Danger

They remained undetected aboard the freighter, despite the crew regularly checking the cargo hold. They felt a jolt of movement as the freighter touched down in the *Skylla* hangar. It had been an uncomfortable, but uneventful short trip. They had successfully arrived at their destination with only a small amount of trouble. If the bodies of the men Masakado killed had been discovered by now, they would never connect the assailant with being on the *Skylla*. But that was just the easy part.

Infiltration on a ship was incredibly dangerous. They were at the heart of the Collective fleet. Oligard's flagship was as deep in their territory as it was possible to go. There was no opportunity for extraction, Rohla would never be able to get the *Harbinger* into the hangar bay and back out again without detection. Security was tighter, as the *Skylla*

was a military ship, manned almost entirely by combat-capable personnel. This was a covert operation, and there was no opportunity to call in support. Large troop transports would have even less luck making it aboard. One wrong move and they would have to face the entire crew with no support. Even though most of the soldiers were deployed on Eos, a straight fight simply was not an option.

Lilina was almost about to climb out of the box when Masakado gently stopped her with his mechanical arm. Hangars were dangerous… large, open areas with lots of people moving around. "Stay *perfectly* still," he warned.

"Remove the cargo," he heard the captain announce over the ship's communication system. The usage of the box was not over yet. They heard members of the crew enter the cargo hold, taking various spoils of war out of the hold.

The box rocked slightly and returned to upright. And again, a little bit more, but then returned to upright with a thud. Luckily, it was sturdy enough to support both of their weight.

"A little help here?" someone shouted. "This one is heavy!"

They heard another member of the crew come to the cargo hold. They strained as they lifted the box with their combined strength.

"What did they put in here?" grunted the second crew member

"I don't know," the first said between breaths drawn out in rags. "Let's just… get it… on the cargo shunt."

The box bounced up and down as the crew members carried it to the cargo shunt - a common repulsorlift sys-

tem designed to carry cargo from the unloading gate to the storage bay. Lilina gasped in pain as the box was dropped onto a conveyor belt, but the sound was masked by the thud of the box landing and the crew getting their breath back after unknowingly carrying two intruders onto the ship.

They felt the forces of slow, horizontal movement, before a short pause. And then, Masakado felt his stomach sink into his feet as the repulsorlift carried the box up to the storage bay. The speeds of the cargo shunt were not designed to carry organic life. Shortly after, he felt the opposite feeling, the feeling of weightlessness and his stomach jumping into his chest as the box slowed to a halt, and was carried into storage.

A cargo hold was a much better location for them to start on the *Skylla*. Cargo offered many more places to hide than a hangar. Masakado peered out of the box. The bright lights of the cargo container were blinding for a few seconds as Masakado's eyes adjusted to hours in darkness. The coast was clear. The cargo hold was largely automated, freeing the crew to guard more critical areas. Lilina followed him out of the box.

"So now we go to the med bay? To Atlas' lab?" asked Lilina, her voice still smooth and serene despite everything that had just happened. Masakado had to credit her for that. For as awful as she was at staying out of sight, she had an exceptionally strong mind under pressure backed by a resolve as strong as the General's armour.

"No," said Masakado. As much as he wanted to go straight there and kill Atlas immediately, preparation was essential. His face would not be a welcome one to anyone

working in the lab during his violent defection. "If we're spotted, they'll call support immediately. And there will be cameras everywhere. First, we disable security."

He had memorised the layout of the ship from studying the deck plan aboard the *Harbinger*. Just out of the storage bay and right down a short corridor, but security was always one of the most heavily guarded areas. Getting in would be difficult. Getting in with Lilina… impossible. "But this is a solo job. Stay here and stay hidden."

"I understand," she replied. After the searchlight incident, Lilina finally understood the fine margins involved with sneaking and infiltration. "The Force will protect us." As she said it, she vanished from sight, leaving behind a vaguely discernible shimmering silhouette, barely visible to the naked eye. Masakado was familiar with Force Cloak. It was an ability that would have made his life so much easier on many occasions. Even if Lilina was unable to move while maintaining the power, it would at least keep her safe from detection.

Always maintaining vigilance, looking for cameras and guards, Masakado weaved between large storage crates in the cargo hold. With very few dark corners in the straight corridors of the well-lit ship, simply sneaking past wasn't an option. It didn't matter how silently he walked, or how creative he was if there was simply nothing there to break line of sight down the corridor. He scanned the storage bay until he found what he was looking for. A small gap at the top corner of the room. A ventilation shaft.

With a well-trained step up the wall, grabbed the edge of the vent and slid his body inside. It was barely wide enough for him to crawl through, but it provided an excel-

lent way to move around the ship undetected, especially
when the security centre was not too far from the cargo
bay.

As he crawled through the ship he could hear conver-
sations of patrolling Technocrat soldiers down below, how
the Hive Mind Marines were winning the battle for them
on Eos, and how Rath Oligard himself had joined the fray.
Were he here to gain intelligence, it would be a gold mine,
but there were more pressing issues. He crawled onwards.

From the next gap in the vent, he found what he was
looking for. From his elevated view in the vent, he had
a perfectly good view of an office. Lightly armed and ar-
moured guards, presumably specialists from the Techno-
crat's Guild, observed live footage of security cameras from
all over the ship. Masakado watched them, scouting out
the office, its corners, its exits. One of the operators dis-
patched a stronger security force to engineering after re-
ceiving a call of a possible intruder. It would seem they
weren't the only Brotherhood forces on board. That was
exactly the kind of call he was here to prevent.

A security door looked like the main way in and out.
He had seen similar areas on similar ships, often from a
similar vantage point. There was always a data processing
centre around the back, a place where computer techni-
cians lived to maintain the communications network was
functioning.

The officers monitoring the camera footage stared in-
tently at their monitors, looking closely for anything that
looked out of place. It was ironic… so focused were they
on knowing what was happening throughout the whole
ship, they had no idea what was happening in their own

office.

The guard closest to his vantage point was the only one that might have line of sight on his path to the data centre. Masakado prepared his wrist dart launcher. Hidden, and at close range, he had all the time he needed to prepare a shot at the guard next to him. He lined up and fired one dart to the carotid artery. The guard passed out seconds later.

"Hey! You ok?" the guard closest to Masakado rose from his feet, checking on his colleague, who now had his head on the desk. It was just the distraction he needed. Masakado dropped down from the vent, landing silently, and moved through to data processing.

Computers ran from floor to ceiling, taking up the majority of the room. Enough processing power to manage the entire ship. The two technicians in the data centre, a male human and a female Rodian, were also members of the Partisans, in black jackets with gold trim, presumably placed there due to their technical skills. They presented another opportunity. Masakado crept up behind them. One vicious open hand strike to the back of the neck, one kick to the jaw of the woman next to him and they were both out cold in a flash.

He always carried a computer spike just for moments like this. It saved the time it would take to hack into the system manually. He approached the main terminal and sliced into the administrator's account and within a few seconds, the security network for the *Skylla* was open to him, all the security doors, all the cameras, the communications...

He could do whatever he wanted to their security, from

turning off all the lights to unlocking all of the cells and letting loose any prisoners on board, but doing too much would raise suspicion. If all the security cameras suddenly turned off, guards would be there to investigate immediately. He set them to repeat the previous two hours of footage on a loop. Security camera footage was so monotonous and repetitive that it would be a long time before they noticed. He quickly scrolled through the menus of the applications, until he found the program that managed the communications between the security centre and the guard team. They would never know the application had been deleted until they tried to use it and found it didn't work.

He was running out of time, but he wasn't done with the knocked out Partisans just yet. While it was difficult to disguise a cyborg bipedal canine, just wearing the clothes of a Liberation Front Partisan could buy them valuable seconds. He removed the jacket and trousers of the man, changing into the Partisan clothes and reattaching his gear. This wasn't the time to think about decency. He removed the clothes from the Rodian woman too. It would be perfect for Lilina.

He peered from the data centre back into the security room. "Relax, just try to relax." Medics had arrived, surrounding the guard he had knocked out, who had been laid flat on the floor. Masakado turned his face away as he walked past in a hurry, the Rodian's clothes bundled under his arm.

There was no need to use the vent this time. The security cameras would not pick up his face, as they were still rolling 2-hour old footage when he simply walked back to

the cargo bay, and back to Lilina.

04

Seventeen Years of Justice

"It's done," said Masakado, arriving back at the cargo bay where Lilina had turned invisible. "We still need to be careful, but if we're spotted, we'll have longer before reinforcements arrive."

Lilina's visible form flashed into view. "You've changed your clothes?"

Masakado dumped the clothes on the floor. "A Partisan uniform. Put this on, and hide your lightsaber in an inside pocket." Masakado's gear was generic enough that he could pass off as a Liberation Front special agent, and Collective-made cybernetic body parts were not uncommon on board a Collective ship., but Lilina's lightsaber would give away Lilina's status as a Jedi immediately to anyone that sees it. "And try not to look directly at anyone." Regardless of her weapon, Collective personnel identifying her as a Miraluka

from her blindfold was likely to raise unwanted suspicion.

With their disguises donned, Masakado led the way out of the cargo bay and towards the research and development section. Despite having no formal training in stealth, Lilina's naturally centred mind and impeccable self-control helped her to act completely naturally as she followed Masakado through the ship.

Without incident, they arrived at the turbolift, taking them up to the med bay deck. "Be prepared for a fight at any moment." While it moved, the lift was a rare moment of safety behind enemy lines, a moment in which they couldn't be spotted by a random passing soldier.

"You seem tense."

"It's been seventeen years since Daggo Mouk kidnapped me and gave me to Atlas for experimentation. I will kill him tonight."

"Do we have a plan?"

"Hope the disguises work and walk straight into his office."

The turbolift stopped, and the door opened. They walked straight past the office, turning into an atrium that served as the entrance to Atlas' research facility. They walked straight past a guard, towards the lab.

"Hey, you!" Masakado instinctively turned to face the voice, and instantly regretted the reflex. He immediately recognised the Zabrak, dark brown-skinned with large horns, one cybernetic eye, wearing heavy black armour hiding two cybernetic arms. One of Atlas' personal security force. "Traitor!" he raised his repeating blaster rifle, its sights trained on Masakado's head.

"Lilina," Masakado growled.

An invisible jolt of energy knocked the blaster offline. The guard's immediate reaction was to pull the trigger, but the bolt shot hit only the wall behind Masakado, leaving a burning orange hole. Masakado wasted no time in pressing the advantage, drawing his sword and slashing it across a weak point in the neck of the heavy armour in one motion. Smooth and precise, the guard clutched at his throat blood spurted onto the ground.

It was a mere few seconds before the rest of Atlas' personal guard, four Collective cyborgs, overheard the commotion and arrived on the scene. Two heavily guards in heavy black armour, equipped with blaster rifles, and two in black leather, armed with electro-bisentos, exotic halberds that glowed with a red plasma filament. "It's him!" shouted a female voice hidden behind a heavy helmet.

Lilina's double-bladed sapphire-blue lightsaber sparked into life with the trademark snap-hiss. "Jedi! Focus fire on the Jedi!" Before they even fired, Lilina's lightsaber was ready to deflect the shot. Using both blades of her weapon to deflect blaster shots, she mounted an impenetrable defence. Masakado charged, sword in hand, slashing at everything that moved. "Send reinforcements ASAP!"

Lilina deflected a blaster bolt back at the shooter's arm, knocking the weapon out of her hand. Masakado killed a soldier with a series of sword strikes, splattering crimson blood onto the pristine white floor before Lilina's target howled with pain as the burning blue blade slashed straight through her wrist, reducing the Collective guard to the two guards with spears. "Security respond! Reinforcements to the med bay!" shouted one of the remaining guards.

"It's no use," growled Masakado. "No-one can hear you."

"Filthy Brotherhood dog!" the guard slashed at Masakado, but the Shistavenan ducked under the full-force attack. He countered, slashing at the arm, but landed only a glancing blow. To his left, Lilina engaged the other guard, parrying a flurry of attacks with her lightsaber. They didn't have time for this. The longer the fight went on, the more chance there was of reinforcements arriving.

Masakado lowered his weapon to his side. The guard jabbed at his gut with the point of the halberd, but the cyborg assassin was far too quick for him. He stepped to the side and grabbed the shaft of the weapon with his left hand. With full control of his opponent's weapon, the fight was over with one swift thrust of the sword to the gut.

Lilina's battle had reached a stalemate, with the guard unable to break down her skill in the defensive lightsaber form, but the plasma-filament on his halberd resisted her attempts to cut the weapon in half. Masakado ripped the halberd from the dead guard's hand and slashed it into the back of Lilina's assailant. He never saw the attack coming before his fallen ally's blade found itself embedded in his spine. He fell to the ground, dead in an instant.

"We can't leave her alive," said Masakado, standing over the one remaining guard whose hand Lilina had severed. She seemed to have passed out from the pain.

"She's no threat to us now," Lilina deactivated her lightsaber.

"But she will be," Masakado growled, sword in hand. Leaving anyone who had seen them alive was an unnecessary risk, she would call for help as soon as she woke.

"She's unarmed," said Lilina. "It's not the Jedi way."

Masakado wasn't here for an argument. Without another word, he stabbed his sword through the neck of the armour, killing the downed guard. Lilina's mercy would not be the source of his death. The Jedi seemed disappointed, but not surprised by Masakado's actions. They had worked together for long enough. He turned and marched towards the laboratories, with Lilina following.

Rows of scientists in white labcoats matched the white of the laboratory equipment. "Continue as you are," Masakado growled at the scientists. "We have no business with you." Armed only with the pipettes and chemicals on which they researched, none would stand to oppose the assassin and the Jedi as they continued to the office of Professor Atlas.

In a large, leather chair behind two state-of-the-art computer terminals was an old, wiry human with long white hair and a crooked nose. Clearly, the Collective had afforded the professor with all the comfort he wanted to continue his experiments onboard the *Skylla*, with the entire office exuberantly furnished with wood and carpet. Professor Atlas stood up from behind his terminal, a beaming grin on his face.

"Masakado!" the professor greeted Masakado as if he were seeing an old friend again for the first time. Masakado felt the rage growing inside him, seeing Atlas' face and hearing his voice for the first time in years. "You're back! You won't believe what we've be-"

"I don't care about your research!" Masakado cut him off, his voice shaking with anger. "We're here to shut down the Hive Mind Marines."

"The Marines? They're just the start of it! You don't understand, We've already progressed from them!" Atlas

spoke with pride as if he were pitching his grand ideas before a grant committee. Masakado drew his dagger and approached the scientists, weapon drawn. "We can reverse your condition!" Masakado stopped dead. A cure to his disease… that was the whole reason he had joined the General's squad in the first place. That's what he left the Collective to find. If Atlas had found a way to cure it… "Join us once more," continued Atlas, "And we can make you whole again!"

"You…" Masakado growled "You have a cure?" He didn't trust Atlas. Not at all. Seventeen years ago the experiments started, and every one had given him crippling adverse reactions. But if there was any hope that he could reverse what was happening to his mind…

"Don't listen to him," said Lilina's smooth voice right beside him. "Look at what he's done to you before. His research isn't safe."

"We must all make sacrifices in the name of science," Atlas said to Masakado, not even looking at Lilina. "Just look at the Hive mind Marines! My research unlocks the full potential of organic life. Your new doctor is blinkered by ethics. She'll never achieve what I have."

"I am not a doctor," Lilina said to Atlas. "I am a Jedi. The Force will show us the way, not your barbaric experiments."

Atlas scoffed at the mention of The Force. "Don't listen to that 'Force' rubbish. You need cold, hard science, not a witch. You were my greatest work."

"Lilina… what if he really does have a cure? What if he's the answer?"

"Let me finish the experiments, and you can be the ultimate weapon you were supposed to be!"

"You're more than a weapon to us!" Lilina said.

"I'm just a machine."

"No!" Masakado turned to look at her, he noticed her bottom lip quiver. "Your body may be a machine… but a heart of a wolf beats inside you. Stay with us. We'll fight this together."

At that moment, hearing the pleading tone of Lilina's voice, hearing her once so calm, smooth voice shake with emotion while Atlas eyes burned with greed, Masakado realised what was important. She was the only person who had ever truly cared about him for who he was. Despite how he had just killed an unarmed woman in front of her, she still cared for him. Atlas didn't care. Maybe Atlas had the cure. Then he'd be an expendable weapon for the rest of his life. With Lilina, they would fight his disease together. The outcome no longer mattered. If he died, then he would die knowing what it was like to have a family again. He turned to Atlas.

"Without Lilina, I would already be dead. Without you, I would have a normal life."

"A normal life? You are an extraordinary specimen! You were destined for greatness, not normality! With the body I built you, you've achieved greatness your way! You took back your life!"

"Yes… and now I'm going to take yours." Masakado had heard enough from the deluded scientist. Before Atlas could say another word, Masakado slashed his dagger across the scientist's throat. The Silencer lived up to its name. Blood poured from Atlas' neck. He fell to the floor gasping for air. The man who loved his own voice so much died unable to speak. "That felt good"

"You made the right choice," said Lilina.

"Killing *him* isn't against your code?" Masakado didn't particularly care about Lilina's moral compass, but not five minutes ago had she tried to protect the disarmed Collective guard.

"I follow the Jedi Code," said Lilina. "You are not a Jedi."

05

Revelations

There were many ways to slice into a terminal. Slicing the throat of the administrator while he's still logged in was just one of them. Masakado pushed his body to the side and sat down at the blood-soaked desk.

With Atlas out of the way, they had full access to his research notes. All the notes, all the test subjects, all the results, all the technology. Everything was at Masakado's fingertips as he browsed the file system. He had everything he wanted, except time. His work at the security centre would not keep them safe forever, and a file system as eccentric as the professor himself slowed Masakado down more than any formal security system would have done.

He ran a search for anything related to the Hive Mind project. After sifting through several documents of dubious interest, he finally found something promising: a list

of test subject names involved in the Hive Mind Marine project.

The first jumped off the terminal screen at him.

```
Subject Zero: Masakado
```

He was meant to be a Hive Mind Marine? He clicked through to his profile and read more.

```
Subject reacted poorly to neurological implant.
Insufficient quality for Hive Mind Marine but
may have uses. Recommend transfer to the
Bloodhound Assassin Project.
```

He was always told he was supposed to be the ultimate assassin, the pinnacle of the Bloodhound Assassin Project, but he already knew that he was one of Daggo Mouk's early experiments. It didn't matter any more which project. Although if he was supposed to be a Hive Mind Marine… then the Marines were just using a more later form of the technology causing his sickness…

"That gives us two reasons to learn more about them," Lilina was clearly thinking along the same lines.

After a while more poking around Atlas' personal files, he found the folder containing all of the scientific research articles that he had written since he began working for Daggo Mouk. It was only then, seeing the titles of hundreds of reports, did Masakado understand the breadth and depth of the Collective bio-engineering projects. "How many lives were lost to this research?" Lilina wondered out loud, reading over the titles of the experiments.

"If we don't stop the Hive Mind Marines, half of Eos will be among then," Masakado said as he found just what he was looking for.

Nanomachine Regulated Synchrony in
Organic Life: Best Protocol

"This was written last year," said Masakado. "This must be the latest version of the technology." A technical paper on communications technology was well within his grasp. The Hive Mind Marines connected with each other on a specific wavelength. The signal was sent straight from the nanomachines in the brain to the cybernetic limbs. The ultimate synthesis between man and machine. "If we can overload this frequency… we can interfere with their communications." He saved the article to a datapad and went back to the list. There was something else that had caught his eye.

Neural Nanomachine-induced Neurological
Degeneration: The Latest Developments

This must be what Atlas was promising. Masakado opened the article, but even the abstract was steeped in heavy, technical neuroscience terminology to the point of being unintelligible. What few of the words he understood were in a sentence so convoluted he couldn't even begin to understand the meaning. It got worse the further he scrolled down, with complicated diagrams of brain topology and machinery.

"What does it mean?"

"It means Atlas' cure didn't work," Lilina said over Masakado's shoulder.

Masakado cursed under his breath. It was unfortunate that he had already killed Atlas, as it meant he couldn't kill him now for lying about the cure, but it reaffirmed his decision. Atlas truly did see him as nothing more than a weapon. "Is there anything that can be done?"

"The work may be useful, but I'll need longer to meditate on its content."

"Clear!" shouted a voice from the labs.

"Prepare for combat." Masakado quickly downloaded that article to his datapad and drew his sword. They had what they needed. Information that may lead to a cure, and information that can help against the Hive Mind Marines. Lilina activated her lightsaber beside him. There remained one final task: get out of there alive.

They were ready as a Collective strike team entered the office. Atlas' terminal rose off the desk, launching itself at the incoming team before they had the chance to orient themselves. Masakado had seen Lilina in combat many times, usually standing in front of the General while he shot everything. He was only just starting to learn what the mystic, pacifist healer was truly capable of despite her refusal to kill her opponents.

Unbound by her Jedi Code, Masakado pounced on the disoriented opponents. Blood soon soaked the wooden office floor. More Collective soldiers awaited in the lab. Lilina stood in front of Masakado, blocking their blaster shots to enable them to get close. A distraction with a telekinetic push gave her the chance to cut two blaster rifles in half with a sweeping slash of her lightsaber and

Masakado the chance to do what he did best. He picked the halberd up off the guards they killed before entering the lab. The time for stealth was over. He needed a true battlefield weapon.

"We can't fight them forever," Lilina blocked a point-blank blast in the atrium with an invisible shield, countering by throwing out a hand, sending the assailant hard enough into the wall to knock him unconscious.

"We need to get to the escape pods!" Masakado killed a soldier, using the devastating power of the polearm to batter through their heavy armour.

They sprinted through the ship, Collective soldiers hot on their tail wherever they went. Masakado exhausted his entire supply of throwing knives and shurikens, throwing them at anyone out of reach of his halberd while Lilina blocked shots from behind with her lightsaber and barriers.

Many of the escape pods in the long, narrow corridor had already been jettisoned. With Lilina in tow, Masakado ran to the nearest escape pod that was still there, pulling on the handle. "It's locked!" They must have shut all the pods down to prevent their escape. They had nowhere else to go.

"Can you unlock it?" Lilina dodged a blaster shot as more Collective troops started to form up.

"Cover me!" Masakado was already working on bypassing the lock.

Lilina stood in front of him, her double-bladed lightsaber moving with blinding speed to intercept shot after shot, but more and more joined the Collective strike team, firing down the narrow corridor with nowhere to hide. A

trooper with a missile launcher crouched down, readying the weapon.

"I need more time! Lilina you have to take them out!"

"I can't!"

"DO IT!!!"

Time froze. A trail of fire followed the missile. Lilina saw it accelerating towards them. She acted on pure survival instinct. As if magnetically repelled from her, the missile turned in the air, flying back the way it came.

It connected with the soldier who fired it. A devastating explosion engulfed the strike team. All were consumed in its destructive blast. Nothing remained of the Collective attackers.

Lilina stood still as she looked at the aftermath of what she had just done. Masakado grabbed her by the arm and pulled her into the unlocked escape pod.

Epilogue

'When morale breaks, formations break. When formations break, armies break. When armies break, wars are lost.' - General Zentru'la

It was first light on Eos. The Hive Mind Marines turned every fight they joined into a Collective victory. The Brotherhood was losing, herded into Eos city centre.

Zentru'la had been fighting all night. His voice was hoarse from barking commands. Every muscle on his body burned, pleading him to give up the fight. His grenade launcher was empty. He had made allies, and lost them. The lives he saved, Jedi, Sith, Mercenaries, Loyalists had fallen to the Collective advance.

As Brotherhood forces rallied to stories of the General in shining white armour, so too did Collective forces mobilise to neutralise what became the centre point of the Brotherhood resistance. Attack forces grew heavier and heavier. His armour became less and less shiny.

"General," breathed his last surviving ally. His blade burned as red as his anger as they were backed into an alley with buildings on each side. His black cloak was now tattered, torn, and stained with blood. The Sith Master had been with him since the beginning, and yet he still didn't know his name. It was mutual. They both were born for battlefield combat. He was one of the greatest warriors that Zentru'la had ever seen. That may have been a mutual feeling too.

Zentru'la fired off a round of blaster fire as swarming troops threatened to form up around them. Disrupting the enemy's formation was essential. While he reloaded, the Sith Master released his double-bladed lightsaber, the hilt spun through the air like a boomerang, the blades whirling like a buzz-saw, cutting apart a wave of Collective troops. As he recalled the weapon to his hand, Zentru'la had reloaded and took point once more.

They were two against an army. The Collective forces arrived on the scene quicker than they could kill them. The Sith Master threw his lightsaber to the side and stepped forward. He roared, not in anger, but in *power*, like the entirety of his being was being channelled. The air around them crackled as he extended both of his hands. Lightning streamed from both his fingertips. The power of a master sorcerer. Zentru'la didn't even know how many the Sith killed in his Force Storm.

But then, through the violent blue crackling lighting, was a small, red line in the sky from a distant building. "Get down!"

It was too late. One sniper shot and the lightning fell silent. The Sith dropped to the ground. Zentru'la pumped

up his repeating cannon and fired a return shot, killing the sniper and avenging the Sith.

Zentru'la backed away as he spotted a team of Hive Mind Marines. A cape billowed in the wind up high. He looked down to check the Sith Master was still there, then looked back up at the caped figure. It was now holding a sword. "Masakado?"

The figure jumped down from the building, landing low between Zentru'la and the Hive Mind Marines. A black cloak, a black sword, cybernetic arms and a mane of black hair. Masakado held a small device in his left hand. "Sorry I'm late."

He activated the device. The frequency matched. The Hive Marines' cybernetic inputs were overloaded, as they fell to the ground, convulsing wildly. He dashed forwards and finished them off. "It won't last forever."

But it lasted long enough. Morale was everything on the battlefield. All over the city, battles which were once won by the impact of the Hive Mind Marines were now going the way of the Brotherhood defence forces. The Collective forces lost faith quickly with their main weapon gone. Some began to flee, lowering morale even further. With their spirits risen, the Brotherhood forces finally began to retake control of Eos.

And Professor Atlas was dead. Vengeance after seventeen years.