

TARGET SIGHTED

SHANREE ARGENTIN - 3729

Dramatis Personae-

Shanree Argentin:

Male Miraluka, 48 years old, Grey Jedi, lacks eyes but sees in the Force. Former Rebel Soldier and Martial Arts enthusiast.

Zakai Treyzch-Biask:

Male Hapan-Twi'lek, 16 years old, Sith, has a preternatural affinity to technology and mechanical objects. Son and former apprentice of Vodo Biask Taldrya, son of Zasati Treyzch, ward of Clan Taldryan.

Borrs Tam:

Male Corellian Human, in his 70s, Investment Broker, senior partner of prestigious TH&L Galactic Capital Group

“I’m afraid that’s all I can do for you Mr. Argentin.” The line was silent for a long moment, “This is unfortunately the nature of investing. We can do all we can to--”

Shanree’s voice cut in over the broker, “I know how the frelling system works Tam. What I’m not understanding is how all of it can go bust at the same time? Don’t you-- diversify or something?!”

The Capital Group’s account manager’s voice was placative and understanding but it did little to hide the man’s growing look of boredom and annoyance, “Sir, there’s no need for language like that. We do indeed diversify but a portfolio group of ours seems to have had an extremely unfortunate series of bad investments .”

The former Rebel soldier pinched and massaged the bridge of his nose, drawing the man’s attention uncomfortably to the fact that his customer was a Miralukan and while he appeared almost entirely Human there was one very distinguishing, and noticeable, difference. The broker shifted uncomfortably as he looked into Shanree’s eyeless face. Normally he would wrap a clean piece of cloth around where eyes would be on a Human. It was lamentable but his physiology made some of them uncomfortable, so he used it to his advantage.

Shanree leaned in toward his holoprojector so that his head grew in size on the broker’s end, “Yes, unfortunate. You’ll excuse my sarcasm Tam but eight million credits doesn’t just go

missing when it's put into what, did you last say twenty-two listings? That sounds more like malfeasance--”

“Sir!” the broker interjected forcefully at that, “you have no grounds to slander our firm’s name in such a mann--”

“Shut up, Tam.” to his credit the man did, allowing Shanree to continue in a more subdued tone, “I didn’t mean to accuse you or anyone, yet. I was merely naming off possible scenarios. Internal sabotage then, external sabotage too, or as you suggest: just plain bad luck.”

Zakai sat at the diner-style table in the galley working on some contraption he’d found aboard the ship. It was plain that his friend Shanree wasn’t all that technically minded for all his other insights. That suited the young Twi’lek-Hapan hybrid. At sixteen the boy was quickly growing and lengthening into a man, though to his annoyance his somewhat stubby juvenile lekku remained short and unsightly. At least in his estimation. His mother, in her frequent video messages, was nothing but glowing in her appraisal of her son’s maturing face and features. He found those parts so uncomfortable that he could hardly sit through them, but he did because of what she meant to him.

Shanree came back from the comroom into the galley in a huff. The way he opened the chiller, searched through it, and then closed the chiller would have told Zakai that something was up even if it wasn’t being broadcast through the Force all around the older man. At 48 Shanree could have been Zakai’s father in another lifetime but he lacked the boy’s real father’s lekku, for one. The Miralukan was not Zakai’s father though and neither one of them wanted him to be, but they had grown close over the last months. Shanree was a galaxy-traveled man who had fought in the Galactic Civil War, knew more about Teras Kasi than anyone else alive, and had a unique and refreshing take on the Force that was so different from what Zakai had been taught. They were brothers of a sort, a younger one that looked up to and learned from an older one.

“Should I ask?” Zakai ventured.

Shanree took a seat across from the teenager and settled himself-in heavily out of frustration, “I’m broke.”

It was clear after a moment that Zakai had no idea what he was talking about, probably never having had to deal with matters of credits and investments so Shanree explained, “I inherited a good sum of credits from my Grandfather, which I have used to live independently and comfortably.”

“Yeah? That much was apparent, it's not like you have a job.”

Shanree shot the boy a warning look, “Right, anyhow: the firm that has held and invested my accounts since I came into them told me it's all gone. Poof, like someone had just thrown all my credits out the airlock of some cruiser.”

Zakai sat up quickly, “What!? How?”

“I’m really not sure, but they’re stonewalling me and not giving me anything more than some platitudes about winning-some and losing-some. I don’t have any proof yet but this doesn’t

feel anything like a coincidence. The Force is unstill and tells me there's more to this than bad luck."

"So... What does that mean?" the boy continued tinkering with the part in front of him, looking up usually only to speak.

Shanree said, finally interested enough to ask what the kid was doing rather than looking at him and talking like a normal person, "It means I'm going to Dandoran in the Doran system. Say, what is that?"

"It's a droid's central motivator. This one suffered some damage at some point but I think I can fix it." Zakai didn't notice the sudden change in his friend's demeanor.

Shanree couldn't see the part like a person with eyes could but he could see the way the Force shifted and flowed all around it, and Zakai, and himself for that matter. He didn't need to be able to see it though to know exactly what the boy had described, "Give that here. There's no reason for you to concern yourself with this droid or any of its parts. Just leave it be."

The older man reached out and scooped up the biggest pieces to Zakai's surprise, "Hey! What? No fair. Okay... fine."

The boy wasn't really all that upset, Shanree could tell and he apologized but all the same, he reiterated his desire for the derelict droid in the back to be left alone. The Grey Jedi held the motivator crooked in his arm, moderately surprised how heavy the parcel-sized part was. He was about to leave the galley when he was stopped by Zakai calling after him, "Wait, what do you mean *you're* going to the Doran system? What about me?"

"Yeah, no. I'm not taking the galaxy's most overclocked teenager to the new Nal Hutta. It's not a vacation Kid, I'm going there to do some business and then I'm coming right back", somehow Shanree knew this wasn't the end of the conversation but was slightly stunned, and a little suspicious, when the boy merely replied with an "Oh." and moved on to find something else to occupy his time.

I wasn't like this when I was his age. Was I? There's no way Mother would have put up with me flitting from thing to thing, tearing it open and then putting it back together. Shanree smiled at the memory of his mother as he walked back to where the old droid was crumpled. He tossed the motivator atop the pile of parts and pieces of the Clone Wars vintage IG-100. Am I a bad influence? I'm not the kid's damn father, I don't have any special responsibility to raise him. I was once like him though... a broken home, an abusive father, and fully independent at an age when most kids were still chasing after their first crush. The Grey Jedi sighed and stopped at the hatch that led to his garden, his small oasis of life in the middle of a vast, empty galaxy. I guess the least I can do is give him the advice I wish I'd had at his age.

Shanree walked Zakai down the ramp to the hangar floor of the new Clan headquarters. The gargantuan space was newly constructed, though on top of older Sith ruins. The way the Force moved here made the Miraluka, who saw the world around him in terms of the flows and emanations of the Force, shifty and restless. Zakai alighted with his gear bag and a forlorn face

but the two of them were close enough by now that those Nek-puppy eyes wouldn't work on Shanree, even if he could see them.

"You know Dandoran has a youth adventure center right? I could still go with you and occupy myself", the boy was relentless, still attempting to sway Shanree up until the moment he was tossed off the ship.

Shanree's hand hovered over the ramp controls, "Nice try. It's for youths who haven't plumbed the depths of ancient temples and know how to use the Force. I'm afraid you'd find it quite boring."

"I have explored lost temples, which means a visit to a megacity like that shouldn't be a big deal. Come onnnn Shanree..." Zakai pouted but the tone of his voice was more playful than pleading. He was just bantering.

"No... Maybe when you're older. Frell, I sound like a Dad, don't I? I'll be back in a few days and we'll pick up where we left off on our camping trip. Mind Erinyes and stay out of trouble", Shanree smiled when the kid surreptitiously held a hand behind his back and crossed his fingers so the older man added, "and don't let that girl get you into any either."

Shanree hit the controls on the ramp and smiled at himself, feeling the boy's embarrassed emotions at the mention of his somewhat girlfriend Jala. The girl, in her twenties, had the mental maturity of a teenager, being a Sephi, and so naturally the two adolescent wards of the Clan drifted together and often goaded one-another into pranks and troublemaking. It was nearly certain he'd be hearing from Consul Erinyes, or any number of other Clan Members, about what those two had been up to. He just hoped it continued to be prank based trouble and not something more serious. In some ways, Shanree was envious of his young friend. What adolescent boy wouldn't treasure the opportunity to spend the week alone, without supervision, with their favorite girl?

The exterior of Shanree's S-161 XL yacht was unimpressive. It was clear that in its 40 years of operation its owners had been quite rough on it and had been spare on funds to properly maintain her. Shanree, the holder of a substantial inherited fortune up until just the other day, had preferred to preserve the ship's hard-worn appearance. He found that while the classic yacht, a favorite speedster and iconic image of its late Republican-early Imperial vintage, didn't draw so much attention because it looked like it was about to rust through. It was by no means a stealth vessel, or beneath notice, but Aliens of all stripes seemed less interested in closely examining it--as though close inspection might pass whatever sickness the ship suffered.

The interior was a different story. Shanree had spared no expense on renovating and improving what had been his living situation since the end of the Galactic Civil War. It was decorated with modern art, stylish features and amenities, and was crowned by his jewel of a garden. The center of the ship had been gutted and renovated into a relatively large open space. There were plants from his home world of Alpheridies surrounding the space's perimeter, tracing the edges of a shallow circular channel of flowing water that filled the space with the soft burble

of water. At its center was an open patch of grass, 6m across, upon which the Grey Jedi often spent hours either meditating or practicing his Teras Kasi.

A Miraluka's lack of eyesight did not hinder them all too much. They still saw, though only through the Force. What Shanree saw was the flows of the Force, its turbulent and tumultuous darker elements as well as its more serene and tranquil parts. The confluences of these flows, concentrated in and around living things that interacted with the Force, created shapes and negatives of shapes he could identify. Here in his garden he was surrounded by the flows of the tranquil Force, what the Jedi would have called the Light Side of the Force, though Shanree and some others felt that description overly vague and inaccurate. The Force certainly had lighter and darker elements and it definitely had a will of its own but to claim that it was somehow dichotomous was a vast oversimplification and idealization.

Shanree sat cross legged at the center of his garden space and drew in slow, measured breaths. He passively observed the warm, gentle flows of the Force around him as his plants subtly vibrated with life and almost imperceptibly swayed from the movement of air-freshers pushing clean atmosphere through the ship. A transparisteel dome over his head allowed the blue-white light of the hyperspeed phenomena to play across the interior of the space but all Shanree saw was the lack of the Force around the ship, giving him the impression his vessel was an oasis in a vast, empty ocean of space.

As he meditated he considered what may be behind the sudden loss of his fortune. He was not a miserly or greedy man but he was only Miralukan... He had grown accustomed to a certain standard of living. That fortune too was wrapped up in some emotional baggage and whatever pain he associated with it, it was his and not anyone else's to possess. All his accounts with the brokerage Tam, Hurin, & Loial had been drained by seemingly poor investments. TH&L had handled his trust capably for 25 years up until this point without issue so he found it suspect that they would not only invest in a single poor option, but many at the same time. He doubted the loss was their fault, his funds made them a fair amount of credits on returns and commission; they would not throw away his custom for a quick grab at a few million Republic credits.

Someone either knew the destination of his investments or directed investments to specific companies. Shanree suspected it was the latter of the two; someone likely created a series of false investment opportunities and somehow influenced or redirected TH&L's strategic matrix. They had to have access to the firm's databases to find their investment records and then changed the perimeters to funnel new investments into what would later appear to be volatile stocks. Shanree made a note to himself to contact Hansah, she could research if those volatile stocks had ever been legitimate companies or if they'd been shams. The woman had a way with computers that few other beings did.

"Master, we are close to decanting from Hyperspace. ETA Doran System 10 minutes," the inhuman voice of the ship's droidbrain announced.

"Thank you, Dee-bee, I'll be on the bridge in a moment." He followed the main corridor that stretched the length of the ship's interior space back to the fore, to the command deck. There

he seated himself into a chair and waited. He was not much of a pilot, hence the upgraded droidbrain that essentially did the flying for him. He allowed Zakai to operate the ship manually from time to time, having seen the boy behind the yoke of a shuttle like his father's Upsilon-class several times. He liked to be here at the end of the lightspeed jump though to see the transition in the flows of the Force from the empty, alternate dimension of Hyperspace, suddenly converge with the torrents and currents of Realspace. He liked it especially around planets with vibrancy and it helped too if there were a lot of sentients and Dandoran was no exception. The S-161 slipped out of Hyperspace and made to enter orbit of the Hutts' newest planet-wide vice endeavor. Nal Hutta, having been ruined beyond all habitation, was all but abandoned now and its crown was now worn proudly by Dandoran.

"Unregistered Yacht, state your serial number and destination. State any cargo and or passengers you are carrying or you may be boarded for a compliance check under Severian Principate law", the voice was an automated message sent to all inbound ships, it appeared when he looked over at the coms panel. He tapped a few controls and sent off the required data. The Imperial Nebulon-B frigate in orbit above Dandoran changed its course and headed towards him. His heart leaped with surprise when at the same time a new voice, this time a man's, came over the coms.

"Latero Spaceworks Yacht auresh-cresh oner-two-two-niner-oh desh, heave to and power down your engines. Lower your shields, disarm any standoff weapons you may have, and prepare to be boarded," concerned Shanree desperately played over the control panel with his eyes for anything that would be out of the ordinary, anything that might have flagged him for interest. He was not, of course, carrying anything illicit and any Principate boarding party was going to leave empty handed. It was the hassle of it all, and the off chance these tariff enforcers, off on the edge of the Principate's sphere of influence, were crooked and ready to shake down travelers for a little something extra. Shanree didn't have anything extra to give them that he didn't feel hard pressed to part with.

"Umm... Principate warship, this is Shanree Argentin. I'm with the Dark Jedi Brotherhood, here on personal business. There's no need for this, what's going on?" he sent the message off on the same channel he'd been issued orders on a moment ago.

"Brotherhood Yacht, you are ordered to heave to. Failure to comply with these orders will result in us firing upon you. Again, heave to."

"Oh, frell this. Dee-bee, I want to be on the surface in five minutes. Avoid that ship at all costs." Shanree's hands danced over the controls in front of him angling the deflectors forward, priming the engines for high speed maneuvers, and most importantly-- strapping himself into his chair, "Ready when you are."

"Commencing landing procedures," the droidbrain answered simply. The Stinger XL ship was much faster than it appeared and when its three thrusters lit up, they flung a trio of pink and blue-white thrust trails. The big gimbaled arm that gave the ship its distinctive appearance shifted ninety degrees from upright so that the ship now appeared not to have a great sail like an ocean going vessel of old but rather a wing like an aership might have. The approaching

Nebulon-B opened fire at the first sign he intended to challenge the ship's blockade. Dee-bee deftly maneuvered the ship through the oncoming fire, choosing an angle of attack that limited the challenging ship's firing arcs. They roared beneath the Nebulon at full tilt, the reinforced deflectors absorbing a handful of light turbolaser fire hits as they passed under it. With the ship behind them Shanree whooped and unbuckled himself, enjoying the view of Dandoran growing in his viewport.

There was a little turbulence as they entered the atmosphere and the ship shuddered until the inertial dampeners caught up and compensated. From somewhere aft there was the nose of metal on metal crashing to the floor, as though something had fallen over. Puzzled, Shanree stood and walked back to see what had happened. Getting there, he was dumbstruck momentarily before the anger rose in him suddenly, "What are you doing here!?"

Zakai looked at him sheepishly, standing amidst the dispersed pile of the IG-100 droid. The kid had apparently hidden himself under the shroud that Shanree had tossed over the pile at some point to avoid looking at it with guilt, "Uhh..."

"No, don't answer that," the older man told the boy, "I know what you're doing here and it doesn't make it any better to hear it from you. You ignored me and disobeyed me, you stowed aboard my ship and your lifesign was probably why that frigate just tried to intercept me.

Shanree saw the flows of the dark and turbulent Force begin to swirl around his young friend, "You aren't my Dad!" the boy shouted at him.

Wiping a hand over his face as he tried to determine how to respond to this, Shanree said to the boy with a measured and conciliatory tone, "I'm not your father Zakai, and I'm not your Master, but you do have to respect my authority aboard this ship and over your well-being as an adult."

Zakai, for his part, had felt remorse as soon as he'd shouted at his friend. He was still sensitive to anyone asserting their authority over him, something the Consul had once told him he had inherited from his father in a way he would not understand for a long time, "I'm sorry, I shouldn't have yelled at you."

"And you shouldn't be here, but both happened and now we move forward", Shanree sighed nasally in frustration but clapped a reaffirming hand on Zakai's shoulder anyhow, "Come on, we're almost landed." He cast an eye over the pile of parts and pieces of the droid, "I have a chore for you, a way you can make it up to me."

The hovertaxi delivered Shanree to the landing pad outside the modern but reserved facade of the Cadsuane Building where TH&L leased the top five floors and suites. Entering the lobby he checked his Westar-35 in with building security then proceeded to the turbolifts and up to the 56th floor where the firm's receptionist was already awaiting him. The woman, a Twi'lek, smiled warmly, reflected in the way the Force flowed around her in warm and serene tones, and offered him refreshment. He accepted the hot caf and took it to a floor-to-ceiling window that overlooked the breaking waves of the bay fronting the east side of the city. The window stretched

all the way up the first three stories of the firm's floors and was cast against a large spiral staircase made of transparent plasteel.

He enjoyed the view for only a few minutes until Borr Tam, a Corellian by birth, descended the stairs, "Mr. Argentin! What an unexpected but entirely welcome surprise! Welcome to Dandoran. How was your flight? Still on that old racer?"

Shanree greeted the little man, who was nearly a head shorter than him, with a generous grin. They were professional associates, not friends, but the business of money progressed more smoothly he felt when the niceties were observed. At least at first, "I'm fine, Tam, thank you. The Stinger is doing well too, it's sitting just over there, I believe."

The Miralukan pointed out to the bay where a series of circular landing pads dotted the surface, upon one such rested his yacht, "I hope I haven't caught you at a bad time, I just thought that as I was in the sector I might stop by and we could discuss the matter of my accounts."

Tam beamed him his biggest, falsest smile, "Yes, of course. This way, we'll take the lift to my office. Have you had lunch, should I order something? There's an amazing Ashcanari place down the way that delivers. Loorea!" he called to the receptionist, "Place an order at Juhungr's for two. My usual and Mr Shanree--"

"--already ate before landing", Shanree interjected, stopping the man, "It's really okay, though I could do with a stiff drink."

The diminutive man never missed a beat and corrected his order, "Cancel lunch then, dear. Bring the Corell Platinum up in a moment, instead. This way, if you please, Mr. Argentin."

The lift brought them to the 60th and topmost commercial floor of the Cadsuane. A short walk down glass fronted minor offices brought them to Tam's own magnificent one. The senior partner, it had been his family's firm originally since the days of the Old Republic before the Clone Wars. Borr swept around his office to the desk and seated himself in a chair that appeared one part modernist art and one part throwback to an ancient throne. Ostentatious in the extreme, it did have the effect of magnifying the presence, and the apparent wealth, of the Broker.

"I'm glad you've come to see me, Shanree. Our last holocall left me worried about your future relationship with the Firm. I want to assure you that we have options available for clients who experience a substantial loss", the man slid a paper folder across the desk to Shanree, then realized with an embarrassed start that the man seated across from him had no eyes (a common occurrence for most common-form humanoids). With a slick movement Borr made to sweep it aside as though that had been his plan from the start. He continued as the door to the office clicked open and the receptionist entered with a platter, upon which were two glasses and a matching crystal decanter of amber liquid, "ah, thank you Loorea. As I was saying; we have options--"

"Yes, I understand but I think we both know I didn't experience a *loss*, Tam..." Loorea poured the amber whiskey from the decanter into the crystal glasses, deliberately set a couple rocks of ice in each, distributed them without acknowledging the conversation or topic at hand, and then left after a hand signal from Borr dismissed her.

The investment broker spluttered at this interruption, genuine indignity could be felt through the Force. This convinced Shanree that the firm itself had not defrauded him. Borr Tam did radiate another emotion however-- anxiety, "Are you accusing us of theft Mr. Argentin!? I must vehemently protest and assert that this Firm is run along galactic norms and conventions and are bonded by the local authorities!"

"Calm down Tam," Shanree put up both his hands, "I believe *You* didn't do anything to my money but let's drop the bantha poodoo, yeah? How many of your other clients suffered this calamitous loss of their investments?"

"Our investment records pertaining to our other clients is confidential and I cannot--"

Shanree cut him off again and leaned in this time, the flows of the Force moved from him to swirl around the Corellian man menacing, "--answer my question, Borr."

The investor took his glass and took a hesitant sip, which Shanree casually mirrored with his own. The man itched something by his ear as he wrestled with the Grey Jedi's demand. He knew he should not say anything but something made him want to tell the Miralukan man sitting across from him, "No one else. Your accounts were the only ones affected."

The news confirmed what Shanree's suspicions, "Do you know who did this? How did they do it?"

Borr took another drink before the swirling anxious flows of the Force around him coalesced into a single stream; Borr decided to tell Shanree everything he knew. Only Shanree's investments had gone bad. Most of the companies, TH&L's internal investigations had found after the fact, had been digital shells. They'd been sham fronts to take in money and had folded without trace at some prearranged moment, simultaneously. The few others that had been real companies had been targets of widespread setbacks that had collectively closed them all down. Every last credit invested by Shanree, at the direction of TH&L, had been siphoned into one of these two types of scams and lost.

Nearing the end of his glass Borr looked into Shanree's eyeless face, "The part that buggers me most is that this could not have been done without inside help." The sudden truthfulness of the statement caught the Grey Jedi by surprise but he managed to hide it, remaining silent, so that the man would continue onward, "I mean, I approved every last investment but any one of my analysts may have been in on it. Someone was anyhow, otherwise how did they direct all your money into those specific accounts?"

"Mr. Tam, there's a holo for you on Line One," Loorea's voice followed a dull beep on Borr's desktop com.

He hit the reply button with some unnecessary force out of frustration, "I'm still with my client. Take a message."

"Mr. Tam, I apologize but the caller insists that you-- and your client-- take the call..." her voice was shy, acknowledging the queer forwardness of the request. It was highly unusual, Borr thought, and highly out of the ordinary for the usually so demur receptionist to disrupt his meetings like this.

"The caller wants to speak with my client too?"

“Yes, Mr. Tam. Shall I send it through?”, Loorea asked, ignoring the tone in her boss’s voice.

“Frell, do it. This day can’t get any stranger, can it?”, Borr leaned back in his throne-like chair heavily, watching the holoprojector emerge from his desk, begin to glow blue-white as it warmed up, then as it projected the face of a Zabrak male.

“You’ll excuse my interruption, I expect”, the man said to the two sitting in the office, “I am not acquainted with either of you but the content of my message is intended for Shanree Argentin only.”

“Now listen here! This line is reserved for company business and not personal calls. You can ring-up Mr. Argentin’s personal comlink without bullying my secretary into--”

Shanree watched the holo for a moment before his attention was distracted by the way the Force swirled around the room. Between them a nexus in the flows appeared, centered on Borr’s desk beside the man’s hand. It corresponded to a targeting laser-dot that would have been visible had Shanree had eyes. He recognized what the nexus was though, having seen this sort of behavior from the Force before. The dot, and its corresponding trail of turbulence it left in the Force, traced a small path from its position on the desk, up Borr’s arm, and continued rising until it stopped, centered on the side of the broker’s head.

“Tam, don’t make any sudden movements,” Shanree became very tense as he recognized what was happening. There was a sniper positioned outside the office somewhere, pointing a precision rifle of some sort through the windows, “I suggest you listen very carefully to what the caller has to say.”

The broker caught the seriousness in the Grey Jedi’s voice and froze. Satisfied the man’s head in the holo continued, “Thank you, Mr. Argentin. Mr. Tam, you should slowly rise from your chair, exit your office, and go home for the day. Comply with these orders and nothing and no one will bother you from this point forward. Do you understand?”

Borr nodded his agreement nervously, “Uhh, yes. I... Uh... right, well. Good day to you Mr. Argentin.” He slowly stood, and certain his head was still on his shoulders once he was on his feet, he briskly walked out of the office.

The head in the hologram had followed the exit of Borr Tam and now sat floating in the air facing Shanree, “Welcome to Dandoran, Shanree. My name is Toro and it was my team that has your money.”

Shanree sat quietly for a moment before answering, “You wanted me to come here.”

“Yes, we have a task for you,” the Zabrak man’s smile was full of teeth and a little condescension, or perhaps self-satisfaction, “complete it and we will return most of your money to you, minus a finder’s fee and some operating expenses, but I promise you will have most of it.”

“And why should I trust you? Who do you represent? What is it you want me to do? This feels less and less like a financial crime with every passing parsec.” Shanree folded his arms over his chest and leaned back in his chair dubiously.

The Zabrak's grin never left but his voice hardened, "I never asked you to trust me, Shanree, just to follow orders. It doesn't matter who I work for or what we're doing. All you need to know, and all you're going to find out from me, will be waiting on a physical disc that will be delivered to your ship in the next ten minutes. Your young companion will help you since you brought him along." The holo flickered and disconnected before Shanree could respond, leaving him sitting in the office, with an empty drink glass in hand, alone.

"What the frell is going on?" he said to no one.

Returning to the Stinger XL Shanree went straight to the lounge where he entirely expected the boy to have already opened the contents of the disc, contrary to his orders over the comlink. To his surprise the boy was busy cleaning the ship and the disc sat unopened in its sleeve, "What's all this?"

"I felt bad. My Mom always liked it when I apologized and then cleaned something," the bashfulness of the statement was reinforced by the way the Force swirled dolefully but hopeful around him. It brought a profound warmth to the 48 year old Shanree.

Shanree grabbed the disc and informed Zakai what had happened at the office and what the disc was supposed to contain. He put the boy in the seat at the lounge's terminal, as he knew how to use it better than Shanree did, and watched as the boy rifled through dozens of folders and files. Zakai stopped after a bit and turned to Shanree, "Who does this guy work for? This information is perfect; transit orders for an entire naval vessel, recent thruster and sensor parameters and signatures, a suite of IFF codes, and as far as I can tell there's more than one Mandalorian Horse-malware trying to learn everything it can about us now as well."

Shanree started at that, "What!?! Take the disc out! Unplug the terminal, or... uh something..." It started to be clear from Zakai's giggling he'd either said something stupid or assumed something stupid. It turned out it had been both.

"Don't worry, I opened the contents of the disc in a shell-- a digital cage-- and spoofed the layout of the ship's systems. The Mandalorian Horses are exploring a fake ship's network and learning nothing about ours." Shanree clapped the boy on the shoulder and squeezed firmly. It said *don't give me another heart attack like that today*.

"Wait, did you say naval vessel", what Zakai had said suddenly caught up with Shanree, "Like a VIP shuttle or something?"

"Like a warship." His answer was short.

There it was on the holodisplay, sure enough, when Zakai threw up a 3D model. It was a Nebulon-B class frigate. Bigger, better armed, better armored, and least of... it had hundreds more crew than they did. Zakai sat back in the terminal chair roughly and stared open-mouthed at the model, "They want you to steal that? There's no way..."

Shanree was quiet, the image forming in his mind was uncomfortably familiar. His comlink had networked with the holodisplay and was translating it to him. He wasn't sure the

boy was far wrong when he got the full measure of what Toro had given him, “This is that Principate ship that nearly killed us! Nine Corellian hells.”

“The Principate? Why would they want you to steal that? And why you? You’d need another warship to pull this off!” Zakai was on a roll now, “It’s like they want you to fail.”

“Yeah, it seems that way doesn’t it? And you are also right in asking ‘why me?’, Shanree seated himself in the lounge table chair that they’d shared their conversation the day before, “It’s not like I’m known for capturing ships or even destroying them. I worked on the ground during the War.”

It wasn’t often the older man discussed the War, or any of his part in it, save that he’d told Zakai in various ways it was not a topic of conversation he would entertain. Zakai didn’t need to be told twice there. His own experience with combat, shorter though it was, had left him with a few memories he’d rather left unvoiced. The two of them sat in silence for a minute. It was Shanree that broke the silence by deciding to continue, “I was an Alliance Special Forces operator and I did a lot of things but I never stole a ship.”

Zakai looked over at him and saw the older man’s jaw working, “Did they teach you anything we can use to do this? My Master-- I mean my... Vodo always said ‘that when something seems impossible, no solution is without merit.’”

“I suppose that’s true. They trained us to think outside the box, to translate skills from one problem to another I guess. Let’s see...” Shanree thought back through his history to a world he left 20 years ago. He hadn’t been lying when he said he’d done a lot. Ten years spent in the Rebel Alliance and then the following New Republic military had seen him fighting on on a hundred worlds with as many environments and different mission profiles; seek and destroy, sabotage, and assassination missions, VIP protection, reconnaissance, counter-insurgency, and ambush missions all. They stayed up late throwing ideas back and forth and found themselves eventually delirious and tired but with the barebones of a plan to steal the ship.

Shanree lifted up a deck plate from one of the sleeping cabins, “The next time you stow away, use this. It’s shielded from scans so I won’t get pulled over.”

“Unless you want to, right?” Zakai cracked a quick joke before lowering himself into what was a surprisingly spacious smuggling compartment, “You won’t forget about me in here, will you?”

It was Shanree’s turn to crack a joking smirk, “Dee-bee, remind me to let Zakai out before he suffocates. How did you stay hidden without me sensing you?”

Zakai waved a hand through the air theatrically and disappeared. The flows of the force ceased swirling around the boy and all that remained was a barely perceptible shimmer in the background. Impressed by the illusion, Shanree replaced the lid on the hidden compartment and returned to the bridge where Dee-bee was actually awaiting his take off command. Getting back into his pilot’s seat he gave the order and the Stinger XL took off without proper clearance from local control. He had landed without clearance, something common enough to have a

standardized landing fee, and it stood to reason he should take off without one as well. He wanted the attention, afterall.

The yacht rose up and up first on its repulsors and then under the power of its three powerful thrusters, the sail gimbaled into a horizontal position still, “Unregistered Lotero S-161, this is Doran Ground Control. Return to you pad.”

“Negative, ground control”, was all he responded. To his surprise they did not respond in kind or continue to order him around. If he had judged the local Hutt’s relationship with the Severian Principate, Ground Control would be handing his information over to the orbiting *Liparis*, the frigate from earlier, for them to capture him and shake him down as an example to other would-be cowboys. Sure enough, sensors soon picked up overhead the approaching Nebulon-B frigate.

“Dee-bee, quit rising into orbit, avoid that warship.” Shanree buckled in as the ship suddenly accelerated horizontally and pressed him into his seat. He spared a brief moment of thought for Zakai in the smuggler’s hole, and the lack of cushioning. The yacht made long sweeping curves, making every attempt, it appeared, to find a way to escape the atmosphere and get away from the orbiting warship. In a pursuit like this however the advantage always goes to the one with the higher altitude as any attempt to rise from the planet was easily blocked off by a more nimble, less atmospherically encumbered, craft.

Shanree ordered the ship to again begin rising into orbit while continuing its evasions but with time the Frigate managed to close the distance with him a little more with each maneuver that failed, “Yacht auresh-cresh oner-two-two-niner-oh desh, you will heave to once in stable orbit or we will fire upon you. Heave to and prepare to be boarded.”

Dee-bee complied with the frigate’s orders at Shanree’s command-- Now was time for him to play act a bit. The ship came to a gentle stop in orbit where it was met by a lambda shuttle and its escort of two TIE Fighters. The shuttle attached itself to the hull of the larger yacht, its sail now gimbaled in an upright position. There were clunking noises audible through the hull of the yacht as the docking clamps worked and then the temporary airlock installed between the two ships. When the noises stopped the airlock door of the yacht slid open before Shanree who stood there waiting.

A squad of ten Stormtroopers flowed into the yacht. The first two, identifying him as a non-threat, split up and were followed each fore and aft by three more troopers. The final two, one NCO wearing his orange command pauldron and the other an officer in his naval uniform, entered the yacht. The officer sneered at the Miraluka, visible to Shanree as a sour mix of turbulent flows in the Force around the man, and a dark cloud that hovered over his armored subordinate. The officer, a Junior Lieutenant, spoke, “You are under arrest by the Severian Principate for the offenses of avoiding tariffs and duties, failing to heed commands, and making unauthorized landing and launches. Your vessel is hereby impounded.”

“This is a crime against my Sentient Rights. You have no authority over me or my craft by Old Republic Law”, Shanree spat back at the man convincingly, “This vessel is a sovereign state belonging only to itself and it shares its space, for whatever time we both belong to each

other, with me. You cannot impound it or my person, also a vessel, by decree of the 17th Chancellor Aurec Vallorum.”

Momentarily stunned, the officer said nothing. He was young and had never encountered anyone spouting such nonsense. His NCO however merely stepped forward and butted the Miraluka in the stomach with the butt of his blaster rifle. This doubled Shanree over and he sank to his knees struggling to refill his lungs with air. With the business end of his blaster now pointed at the kneeling man the NCO said through his white helmet’s mic, “Smuggler scum.”

Wheezing Shanree said, “I’m not a smuggler! I’m just a visiter! I came to gamble!”

A boot slammed into his stomach this time which crumpled him to the floor, “Shut up, scum.”

The Lieutenant watched patiently then calmly intervened before the trooper could kick their prisoner a second time, “Remember what the Commander said. No more than they need to be made to comply. This one has been softened up enough, I think.”

The other Stormtroopers returned from the various parts of the ship and two of them picked up the prisoner by the arms. Shanree’s head lolled as he languished in the dull pain of his abdomen, “Sir, we didn’t find anyone else onboard. Nothing of note, no weapons, no hiding holes, but there is an old disassembled Magna Droid. Its no danger to anyone at the moment though.”

The officer nodded, “Very good. Everyone, back aboard our shuttle. The *Liparus* will tractor beam it in.”

Loaded aboard the shuttle then shifted over to the frigate where he was none too gently tossed into a holding cell in the brig. *So far, according to plan*, he mused while rubbing a sore elbow where he’d landed hard. It had been clear it had to be Shanree who was arrested because this part required patience. Shanree settled himself into a cross-legged sitting position and fell into a healing meditation while he waited.

The force swirled languidly in the brig, currently empty of everyone save for him and the one single guard on duty. The entry to the bay opened with a hiss, revealing no one on the other side, then closed with the same hiss. The guard raised an eyebrow at the door, but gave it no mind after a second when it didn’t seemingly malfunction again. A crack-thud brought Shanree out of his meditation. He saw that the swirls in the Force around the guard had changed, signalling the man was unconscious.

The force field containing the Grey Jedi flickered and turned off, “Miss me?”

Shanree rose to his feet, reaching out and taking his two fighting sticks from the boy, “I rather enjoyed my moment of peace and quiet. What took you so long?”

“I had to take care of something before I came for you. Feel free to stay here then”, Zakai’s voice imitated seriousness but the flows of the Force around him danced.

Shanree liked it when the Force leapt in delight around his young friend in contrast to the dark thunderous clouds that had enshrouded him when they had first met, shortly after the boy’s father’s demise, “come on, we need to get going.”

The kid tossed Shanree two lengths of weathered looking wood, each wrapped neatly at the bottom in leather strips. He used them as fighting sticks to augment his martial arts. Each length of hard wood was .78m long and a little over three and a half centimeters in diameter. As blunt weapons they were swift, dense, and very useful against lightly or unarmored opponents. As lightsabers, they were even more useful. Worked cleverly into the center of each fighting stick were all the required internals for a lightsaber, activated by wooden buttons worked into the exterior. Shanree warmed his arms up by sweeping and windmilling them each a handful of times as he followed after his young friend.

“Aft is this way”, the boy said at the door.

Shanree shook his head, “The datacore is this way. You’ll be better off there.”

They followed signs directing them to the ship’s central nervous system, avoiding crowds of ship’s personnel by virtue of having chosen a time designated by the ship’s commander as nightshift. Everything was quieter and less busy than it would be for the other 16hrs of the galactic standard day. More quickly than either of them had anticipated, they found themselves at the door to the ship’s datacore. Unsurprisingly, it was locked.

“I can get this, just... Hold on a minute,” the boy wedged his Spike into the lock and then went to work on the device with his datapad.

Shanree watched the kid work for a moment, bewildered how someone so young took to something so complex and esoteric as datacode. It was almost like, sometimes, Zakai could talk to machines. Shanree turned to watch his back. Fortunately the corridor that led here was a dead end, a short branch off a longer hall stretching the length of the ship’s midsection. He’d just taken up position when Zakai coughed to get his attention. The Grey Jedi turned his head just in time to see Zakai hit something on his datapad that caused the door to slide up. “How did you do that!” Shanree hissed in disbelief.

Zakai shrugged and they entered the small command room. It was nothing more than a large number of control boards and terminals but each was connected directly to monitoring systems that watched the various components that made the warship function. Zakai took a seat at what appeared to be the most comprehensive terminal and set to work. Shanree thought about asking if it was worth him standing guard if he was only going to find out the boy had finished already. *No*, he thought to himself, *this is a much bigger job*.

“Something’s wrong”, Zakai said almost immediately.

Of course it is.

“What?” Shanree peered over the boy’s shoulder to see if there was something obvious in the flows. It was all gibberish, as usual, to him read through his comlink assistant.

Zakai continued typing quickly and with increasing intensity as his frustration mounted, “Frack it! I mean--”

“Just spit it out”, Shanree eyeless face looked down calmly at boy.

“The ship is already rigged to explode. We need to go, nowish would be best.” Zakai stood and together they immediately left the terminal room. The obvious silence of the hallways was starting to pick at something in Shanree’s head. Zakai lead them back to where the Stinger

XL yacht had been tractoried into the space between the fore and aft sections of the frigate and harddocked.

“Who rigged the ship? Could you tell?” He asked the younger man.

Zakai shook his head as they moved briskly through the suspiciously empty ship, “No clue. The reactor is going critical as we speak and someone disabled the alarms. We should warn the crew!”

Shanree spared a moment to beam pride through the Force in his young friend, who was usually a bit on the gloomy side-- even for a teenager. Raised and trained by Vodo Biask, a man whose reputation even the Grey Jedi knew well, Zakai tended towards a more negative, darker worldview. This was new, “That’s what we were going to do. Can you do it from there?”

“Yeah, hold on.” The kid went to work one more time, tapping out commands then spoke into a small headset that popped out of the device, “Attention Bridge, attention Bridge: Reactor systems critical, alarms sabotaged. Again, the reactor is going critical.”

Zakai tossed the headset down before the voice on the other end could even ask who was speaking. Someone on the Bridge, though, must have thought to throw a second look over their readouts and discovered that the alarms had indeed been disabled somehow. Shanree didn’t have to be prescient to know this because only a few seconds later the alarm klaxons did come on and then shortly thereafter the Captain’s voice over the PA to abandon ship.

“We have to go!” Shanree was already jogging to airlock terminal that would lead them to their yacht when the door opened. Standing there dumbfounded for a moment was the young Junior Lieutenant and his, now un-helmeted, NCO, also dumbfounded.

The Lieutenant didn’t have much time to do much more than say, “Hey!” before Shanree barged into him, shoulder first, sending him crumpling to the floor back into the terminal room. The NCO, still in his Stormtrooper armor minus the helmet, was quicker and had rolled over his shoulder backwards and out of the way. During his roll his right hand slipped to his hip and drew a Sonn-Blas SE-44C pistol which he then leveled at the Miralukan Grey Jedi. Shanree spun out of the way of the first blaster bolts then, whipping his left around his body, he only briefly activated the lightsaber within his fighting stick, intercepting another bolt, which rebounded at its source.

The Stormtrooper flinched, which likely saved his life, and the reflected blaster bolt embedded itself in the wall rather than his eye. Shanree closed on him nevertheless and the man drew a second pistol from his hip and began unloading on the Grey Jedi with both hands. Shanree, following the flows of the Force, found it easiest to imitate the shapes and nature through study of Teras Kasi. That study, and many hours of practice, manifested here and he became a whirl of spinning wood and flashing emerald lightsaber blades. The Stormtrooper Sergeant was not easily killed however and he continued to give ground to buy time, keeping the Jedi just far enough away not to dismember him.

The airlock leading to the Stinger XL slid open with a hiss. The Stormtrooper didn’t let the noise distract him, which was a mistake. A metal fist crashed down on his head knocking him out cold. Shanree, holding a shape with his body called ‘Crane Drinks From the Water’, looked

up and stopped short. Standing over the collapsed body of the Sergeant and his Lieutenant was a Magnaguard Droid. Shanree looked over at Zakai who sheepishly smiled, "I know you said to leave it alone but I wanted to be sure we had some back up. If we needed it."

To that, Shanree said nothing; Couldn't argue with him about that, "Get aboard the ship, you too *Emm-Gee*."

"You're not very creative with naming things, are you?" Zakai got the droid turned around and followed it into the airlock, "This ship is just the model name, it's piloted by DroidBrain, your nanny bot was Emm-Gee..."

"Yeah yeah, I didn't name her or Dee-Bee."

"Her? How can you tell?"

"You can tell."

The Stinger XL disengaged forcefully from the frigate and, with shields angled to the rear, it blasted away at full thrust. The ship did not pay them any mind though. It was presently disgorging its escape pods as the crew rushed to abandon ship. Zakai was adjusting their descent back to Doran but Shanree was gazing out the rearview screen and saw the moment it exploded. He could feel it in the Force: not everyone made it out of there alive. His heart grieved for them but he also allowed the fire in his chest, slowly growing since this whole ordeal had begun, to finally roar. Someone had been pulling his strings and he wanted to know why. He wanted to know why he'd been given this task and who stood to gain. Toro would be in touch, Shanree imagined, rather sooner than later.