The comfortable free-range Ewok farming approach pioneered under Empress Shadow Nighthunter had been corrupted under the yoke of power of Kamjin Lap’lamiz. The humble barn with open pastures and ample space for the diminutive Ewoks had been replaced with a labyrinthian complex of feeding parlors, cramped cells, and a massive slaughterhouse. While the farm was turning over massive profits as fur and meat production edged towards a zenith, the facility had been stripped entirely of its responsible and moral farming practices. It its present form it more resembled a prison than anything else. The conditions were horrendous.

Thran was impressed with the efficiency of the process. Selective breeding had produced the finest quality and color of furs he’d ever seen. The raw fur was transported to other facilities for the manufacturing of felts, which in turn would be transported to another facility for producing clothing, hats, and other fine luxury garments. At the consumer level, no one understood the full logistics chain. The wealthy people of the Caperion system were just happy to have indigenous luxury clothing. They gave no thought to where it came from. Likewise, they gave little concern to the source of the tender meat that now routinely occupied their dinner tables.

The Adept had spent considerable time pressing his influence against the sitting Emperor, as if he was a knife to the small of his back directing him where to move. The rapidly growing industrial sectors of the Empire were the product of his gentle persuasion. So far, it was showing promise. While the extreme torture of the Ewoks had not been expressly laid out in Occasus’ development plan, Kamjin’s unique interpretation of the directive merited acknowledgement. There would be time for that later.

Clan Taldryan had been attempting to infiltrate and disrupt the sprouting economic machine of Scholae Palatinae. The alleged offenses which had taken place at the combined summit combined with the age-old rivalry between the two Clans made open hostilities an inevitability. Until fleets and armies were mustered, subterfuge and targeted disruption would be the gameplan. Both Thran and Kamjin had been prepared for the facility to be subject to an attempted infiltration. Several prominent members of the Clan had been assigned to production facilities around the Caperion system. Either by pure luck or as recompense for past transgressions against the Consul, Thran had been assigned to overwatch the Ewok farm. The latter seemed more likely. At least he’d brought company.

They’d been sitting on station for nearly four hours, finding ways to keep himself occupied in the lull between the patterned blips which appeared on the AT-ST’s scanners. The complex system tracked motion. Anything more than the automated gates and machinery would light up as a prominent white dot on the field of red. The Walker was positioned among other large harvesting and transportation vehicles. It was perfectly hidden. They had closed armor shielding over the command viewports. The Bureau bandits were illuminated only the red-interior nighttime lights of the cockpit. Thran kicked his feet up onto the Walker’s dashboard. Fighting boredom, he bounced a small rubber ball off the armor plating catching it and tossing it again.

“Will you stop that? You are driving me crazy,” Rayne asked with a hint of frustration in her voice.

“Hrm?” he said, pretending not to hear her request.

“Where did you even get that?” she inquired.

“Found it,” he said plainly.

“What? Where? Give me that.” The Battlelord said, trying to snatch the ball from him.

The Adept rolled his fingers, tapping into a sinister cosmic energy. Darting back and forth between her attempts, the ball repeatedly evaded her snatching grasp. He smiled as he taunted her. Her lips turned upwards, revealing a pair of sharpened cuspid teeth. In the red light, her blue eyes were a dark color. With every missed swipe, they took on a redder hue, indicating they were lightening in color. The simple playfulness was getting under her skin. He considered for a moment pushing her further, but to unleash her feral nature would lead to a tussle and that would give away their position. If the Taldrya did show their snouts while he wrestled with her within the confines of the small cockpit, he would never notice the blip on the motion tracker. He gave up his teasing and relinquished the ball to her hand.

“Thank you.” She said, huffing.

The Adept let out a sigh. With his boredom defeating rubber ball no longer in his possession, he’d have to find other ways to pass the time. Stakeouts were never much fun for a man of his limited patience. It did not take long before Rayne was bouncing the ball off the durasteel panel, catching it and tossing it again.

“Hey!” he exclaimed.

“Oh, sorry...” Rayne said, stopping the ball on its rebound and placing it in a recess in the vehicles central console.

“You could’ve just asked me to toss it to you and we could have kept each other occupied,” He said, pouting.

“Oh? And you would’ve shared your toy with me?” Rayne replied, chuckling.

“Yes! Well, no...but, that’s not the point. Now we’ll have to find another way to keep ourselves from going crazy,” he said.

“I suppose we do,” She said coyly.

“Yeah. And I have an idea,” The Sith Adept responded eagerly.

“Oh, I am sure you have many ideas...” she said with a grin.

“I do,” He replied.

“How about we just talk?” she suggested.

“Oh, yeah...I guess we could do that. It’s not as fun as what I was thinking though...” The green-eyed Bakuran said with a devilish grin.

She didn’t reply, she only shot him a slight smirk. Thran had always been overly flirtatious and she was not exempt from it, despite their friendship. If anything, that had only exacerbated his playfulness. The man was an absolute menace. She’d always found that quality was what made him so much fun to be around. All his mischief, while exciting enough to keep anyone engaged, was just a thin slice of everything going on behind his beautiful green eyes. She looked him over with a faint look of admiration. He’d grown in power since the last time they were together. He had secrets he wasn’t sharing. The Firrerreo dwelled on her thoughts for a moment. Thran looked around the cabin of the AT-ST aimlessly, it would not be long before he started talking. He was not the type to just enjoy silence.

“You should spend some time with Jasmine,” He said, finally breaking the silence.

“Oh?” she asked quizzically.

“Yeah, the girl talks about you all the time. She’s a good student, but she doesn’t do all her studies,” He said, picking at his cuticles.

“I wonder where she learned that. What’s that saying? The namana fruit doesn’t fall far from the tree?” Rayne said smiling.

She pulled her knees up to her chest, wrapping her arms around them as she attempted to get comfortable for the long lecture that she was soon to endure. He cast a side-eyed glance at her before continuing.

“I’m just saying, I think she could benefit from learning some more defensive techniques. She wants to emulate me, but to force her into my mold would be doing her a disservice.” He began “Besides, there is only enough space in this galaxy for one of me. You all do not want me making a carbon copy of myself.”

“I know that’s true.” She said, listening intently to him.

“Though, perhaps it is the challenge of teaching a student that is so different from me that has revealed more of the secrets of the Force. It’s as if I am seeing some things for the first time,” He said, trailing off in thought.

“I can sense just how much you have grown.” She said softly.

“I figured as much. I won’t bore you with trying to explain the unexplainable, though.” He replied.

“It’s not boring. Besides, I like listening to you.” She said, playing with her hair.

“Stop that! I know exactly what you’re doing. You’re doing that thing where you bat your eyelashes at me and then I tell you what I’m up to, because you tell me how handsome and charming I am. You’re trying to play me!” He said, narrowing his eyes.

“What? Me? I would never!” She gasped sarcastically, batting her eyelashes at him.

“HA! The feigned insult! That’s your tell! I caught you!” he said, laughing.

“Pssshaa! Never stopped you from telling me before... Come on, out with it...What do you mean ‘it’s like you’re seeing things for the first time’?” she pressed.

A series of four white dots appeared within the concentric circles, illuminated with each pass of the sweeping sensor bars. Thran settled down into the pilot’s position, flipping toggles and switches as he moved.

“Perhaps I’ll enlighten you another time, my dear. We have work to do.” He said, pointing to the AT-ST’s motion tracker.

He grabbed his helmet and slipped it over his head. Rayne also settled into her seat and fastening her seatbelt. The Battlelord had flown enough with Occasus to know that the personal collision restraint was necessary. The louvres covering the command viewports flipped open. The whir of the walker’s gyroscope and the slight clang of metal could be heard as the walker rose out of its dormant position.

“Ahh! I’m so excited! What do I do?” Rayne asked with a slight panic in her voice.

“Enjoy the ride. And when I tell you to, press the red buttons.” His tinny voice said, coming through the helmet.

Sweat, blood, and waste. All floating over a bed of slight decay. The smell was offensive. It stabbed at the gut, wrenching it into knots. He tried not to wretch.

The sound of wailing, grinding machinery, and made it hard for the Taldryite team to effectively communicate. Raistline was doing his best to relay the various orders between the infiltration squad’s members. It was the unfortunate burden of being the Force user among them.

Their orders were simple, they were to breach the facility, set explosive charges, free the Ewok captives, detonate the explosives and exfiltrate. While these operations seemed easy on paper, they were reliant upon accurate intel. Unfortunately for the members of the strike team, they were realizing with every turn that what they had been fed in the mission briefing was incredibly out of date. The rapidly increasing industrialization of the Caperion system had been underestimated.

The interior of the factory farm was disorienting. They had twisted left and right through the pens. Crysenia, Dasha and Liandry were nothing short of aghast at the conditions within the facility. The constant pool of sludge at their feet made traversing the space between the pens difficult. They moved down the central gulley between the racks of Ewoks. The small creatures were locked in the racks, packed shoulder to shoulder and fixed with collars and manacles.

The creatures whined and moaned. They squeaked and spoke in their native tongue. It did not require an academic studied in Ewokese to know that the cries were of pain and suffering. The team worked the electronic locks free on each group of Ewoks. They made quick work freeing half a gross units of Clan Scholae Palatine’s product. Seventy-two of the furry beasts ran free on their stick thin legs.

As they prepared to release the next batch of Ewoks, the cacophony of mechanical sound that was the farm floor went silent. The ventilation fans, pumps, and grinding meat processors slowed. Along a central catwalk, elevated nearly eighty feet above the pools of foul sludge, a row of red strobe lights began flashing.

“Shit. They know we’re here,” Raistline said.

“Move quickly! Liandry, plant the charges!” Crysenia exclaimed. “Dasha, Raist. Let’s free these little guys.”

The trio went to lift the next batch of locks holding the Ewoks in their pens. The electronic locks were unmovable. They had been secured firmly in their closed position with the apparent loss of power. They fumbled with the devices. As they struggled, the sound of a distant thumping echoed through the massive buildings. With each successive impact, the impacts grew in volume.

“What’s that?” Dasha asked as panic gripped her.

Two spots of the deepest crimson appeared at the end of the gigantic building. They were elevated, twenty-seven feet above the ground. Like the eyes of a demon, they stared into the souls of the Taldryan force. The whirr of gyros and the metallic clang of the footpads striking the ground shook them, even at distance. The soft hiss of pistons and other actuators broke the silence between footfalls. The behemoth paused for a moment. The cockpit turned slightly, adjusting its orientation in their direction

“AT-ST!” Crysenia screamed.

“Oh...by the Force...” Raistline said. “RUN!”

As they turned to run, back through the twisting metal maze, the sound of the AT-ST’s large twin blaster cannons could be heard. The air around the superheated plasma crackled and fizzed creating a terrifying harmonic over the shrill whine of the blaster bolts. The energized streaks of crimson smashed into the ground behind them, leaving a twisted pile of metal and smoldering Ewok limbs. Geysers of the filth that covered the floor sprayed up into the air.

The metallic monstrosity did not stay put. Like a predator having startled it’s prey out of the long grass, the chase was on. The rhythmic thud and clang of the walker’s footpads increased from its previous tempo. The Taldyra did not dare to look back. They scrambled like rats. The said silent prayers, hoping they could find their way out of the maze, before the AT-ST could close in on them.

Specks color moved through the field of smaller mostly stationary thermal signatures. Each body was illuminated with two spots of deep red, one placed near the center of mass and the other about their heads. Tracking them through the field of other hotspots was like trying to track four single namana hard candies in a duffle bag full of the sweets. Thran flipped the toggle at his check, switching the helmet’s viewing mode back to the standard optical display.

Instead of relying on the limited function of technology, the Adept turned his tracking methods to the infallibility of the Dark Side. Among all the thousand waning instances of life, only four had the vitality left in them to give a fight. He could sense every Ewok. They were beyond fear, resigned to the realization that the only salvation they would receive was in the cold arms of death. The Taldryites were the only entities left in the farm which did not beg to meet that embrace. Their fear was still ripe. Yet, with the overwhelming sorrow he felt among the farm’s cattle, that presence was being drowned out.

He adjusted the heading of the AT-ST, leveling each ovoid foot of the walker in line with the rows of imprisoned Ewoks. With each forward step, the depth of misery he could sense was alleviated slightly. Some of the creatures met swift ends, crushed under heel like grapes fallen from the vine. The slight pop and the spray of fluid being the last sounds emitted from their squat bodies. The little beasts exploded and their torment ended there. Others found their deliverance at impaling end of the fence cutting blades at the walker’s toe. They need only endure the pain for minutes longer and the sweet kiss of death would take them too.

“WEEEE-OOOOOH!” Rayne screamed gleefully. “SQUISH EM ALL!!!”

Thran remained silent, focused intently on their real prey. He intentionally aimed the blaster cannons slightly left, slightly right or slightly high. Each impact of the twin blaster bolts sent a spray of parts and effluence of the Ewoks skywards. Each sundered Ewok further clarified his lock on the terror within the souls of the fleeing infiltrators. They were getting desperate. At times, ducking around corners, or pausing between the rows, they would take pot-shots at the walker. The hand-held small arms fire fizzled and evaporated against the armored hull.

“I’ve got you now...” Thran said to himself, sufficiently focused on the infiltrators.

He dragged the chase out several minutes longer, mostly for his own enjoyment but the elation his partner was showing in the destruction made the carnage that much sweeter. Wrecking this farm would also serve to put Kamjin back in line with his “suggestions”. As he committed to the hunt, his shots were more precise. Each explosive impact guided their rivals towards the massive disposal grinder at the end of the primary facility. Once there, they would be trapped. With each well-placed shot, the band of saboteurs drew closer to what would be a grizzly end. When they cleared the last row of Ewok paddocks, they paused in behind the relative safety of the large metal framework. From this height, the tall AT-ST would have difficulty depressing its cannons far enough to land a killing blow.

“Rayne...It’s time. Push the red button on my mark.” The Elder said.

He coordinated a masterful dance with the controls, sending the AT-ST in a slightly backwards crabwalk. His hand flicked the gyroscope controls and the secured cockpit pivoted. He leveled the target reticle on the space just in front of where the Taldryanite force was hunkered down.

“Mark.” He commanded.

Rayne depressed the red square button as instructed. A series of thwumping sounds came from the cheek of the AT-ST. The DW-3 Concussion grenade launcher sent forward its barrage of ordinance. Eight contrails of smoke marked the trajectory of the explosives. The streams of white smoke held in the silence for a second or two, before the impact fuses detonated the charges. The shock wave of the grenades could be felt through the viewports on a light breeze of foul stench. The Firrerreo woman went wide eyed and began cackling. It was a natural reaction to experiencing the power of an AT-ST first-hand. It brought a slight smile to his face.

The Adept pushed the sticks forward again and the walker lurched forward, rounding the corner of the makeshift defensive emplacement which the enemy squad hoped would give them shelter. As the twin blaster cannon leveled on the area where the Taldryanite bodies lied writhing in pain, Thran focused intently on them. They had been sheltered from the blast by Raistline conjuring an arcane shield at the last moment. The bubble had prevented them from being killed instantly, but the force of the explosion left them with spinning heads and the breath punched out of their lungs.

“The red trigger, Rayne. Now.” He said, coldly.

He too depressed the triggers. The Walker’s primary armament, twin blaster cannons, sublimated Crysenia immediately. Where the loyalist officer once was, there was now a fine mist of blood. Rayne’s trigger finger had unleased the secondary armament, two light blasters. They fired quicker, but required a more precise aim to be effective. He was letting her get in her fun. She painted back and forth, hosing down the area with blaster fire. The repeated fire would prevent them from running in the seconds while the primary blasters charged to full once again. They repeated the process until they had systematically eliminated the remaining three would-be-infiltrators. He had hoped they would have presented more of a challenge, after all he was itching for a fight. If he wanted to fight fair, he wouldn’t have brought the Anti-infantry armor. But the concept of fighting fair was foreign to him.

“More! MORE! MORE! Mwhahahahha!” Rayne screamed, drunk on the power she felt at the controls of the walker.

Thran turned the head of the AT-ST back towards the pasture of destruction they had left as they dug out the rats. Rayne went wide eyed looking at the pillars of black smoke and fires which had erupted across the farm. The Adept tapped two buttons and the heads-up targeting system in front of Rayne morphed. Along the bottom, it indicated the two larger blaster cannons in silhouette.

“Go on...Have some fun.” He said with a smile.

She let out a squeal and depressed the trigger again. A shower of crimson blaster bolts impacted in the distance. She traversed the guns, shooting at whatever Ewoks she saw still moving. Her eyes were wild and her normally tame hair had begun to frizz out slightly. The excitement had tapped into the primal nature inherent in her species. Thran smiled to himself and he calculated the ramifications of destroying Imperial property. After several minutes, he deactivated the cannons. The Farm had been reduced to a smoldering mess. The cattle had all been culled. Thran had seen to this personally. He despised Ewoks. They reminded him of the Battle of Endor. It also served to remind Kamjin that while he may be clever, breaking from Thran’s vision for the future of the Empire would ensure that the metaphorical knife at his back could and would draw blood if pressed.

“Okay, enough,” He said.

“What? NOOOO! I was just getting started! Awww, come on! YOU USED TO BE FUN YOU KNOW!!!” She screamed, crossing her arms over her chest and slamming herself back into the chair.

“Okay, I’ll admit...Things may have gotten out of slightly out of hand,” Thran replied.

“OUT OF HAND?!” Kamjin roared. “THE FARM IS DESTROYED!”

“Mind your tone, Kamjin. Remember with whom you are speaking. You’re lucky I stopped with the farm. Besides, Rayne was having fun. She gets excited, I get excited. It’s an unstoppable feedback loop, ya know? No predicting what happens.” The green-eyed Sith said, smirking to himself.

“Thran...You can’t just destroy stuff on a whim. We’re trying to build the Empire stronger! You’re here just...tearing it down!” The Emperor said.

“Oh, I absolutely can destroy stuff on a whim. And what exactly are you building the Empire with... felted hats and lounge slippers? Kamjin, my dear Consul, don’t be so short sighted. This industry does not strengthen anything...The plan is not to prop up the existing bourgeoisie with luxury products...The plan, dear Emperor, is to lift up the impoverished. Lift them up on Durasteel and clouds of Tibanna. Lift up all so that they may know the Imperial truth. Not... frackin’ fuzzy slippers. You said it yourself...The most fertile ground is one that has been burned. My office will have over plans for the Doonium foundry that will take the farm’s place by the weekend. A bright new light shall emerge from the ashes...Do you know what that light is, Kamjin?” The Adept said, straightening his eyebrows whilst glancing at his reflection in a mirror nearby.

“Progress...” He said, shrinking a bit in his words.

“Yes, indeed. It is progress. Progress for the Empire. I’m so glad we understand each other,” Thran stood, lightly patting Kamjin on the shoulder.

The smarmy Sith waved with his fingertips as he strode out of the room. Kamjin sunk into his chair. In his bid to strengthen the Empire, the Sector Admiral feared he had made a deal with the devil. He had the sinking feeling that Occasus’ cooperation could not be bought. Even worse, he thought, perhaps his own already had been. The Emperor put his fingertips to his temples, massaging in a small circular pattern.

“That man will be the death of me...” he said aloud.