

The Merry Misadventures of Sithmas Time

The Monolith

Seraph Caperion System,

40

ABY

Nightfall around the Monolith was a beautiful sight, with Ragnath proudly ascending into the night sky as the sun faded into the darkness as a glorious exposition of colors and the stars twinkling in their full glory in the darkening sky.

And just like the night sky, as a commemoration of the upcoming holiday, the main hall of the Monolith had been decorated with all the festive trimmings and finery one would want to see, along with a fantastic display of color and light to rival the night sky.

But not all who approached the Monolith were in awe of the night sky or the holiday spectacle in the main hall. There were those who looked upon both with equal parts scorn and disdain; some even wished ill tidings upon those who partook in the holiday festivities.

For at that very moment, a large vehicle had been parked just out of sight near one of the rear entrances to the Monolith, its occupant's intent upon carrying out their egregiously foul deeds that they had been preparing for.

"Hey, boss, how do we get in there?" One of the scruffy looking hired ne'er-do-wells asked as he looked over the building, scratching his head.

A side door hissed open, and a small ramp dropped into place. A loud creaking groan came from the vehicle as a hefty form appeared, and slithered down the ramp, and stopped in front of the small group.

Claudius the Hutt, a large yellow and green Hutt, was dressed in a long black bejeweled cape, and as Claudius began to speak, it came out as a combination of a low rumbling basso and a high-pitched squeaking of Huttese, complete with overly elaborate sweeping gestures. After he had finished, he grabbed the edge of his cloak and drew it over the lower half of his face, then whipped around and slithered toward the door.

"Master Claudius says, Watch and learn, my simple-minded minions. For I, Claudius, have planned for every conceivable scenario! So deep are the workings of my brain that most intellects of the galaxy cannot even fathom the depths of my labyrinthine mind!" The droid translated.

"Say, do you think that this di'kut has been chewing the luna weed a bit too much?" One of the goons asked another.

"As long as he has got credits to burn, this dweezer could say that he is Emperor Palpatine for all I care," the second replied to the first as they watched the door to the Monolith open and Claudius slither inside.

Earlier that day

50 km west of the new proposed CSP capital, Elaya Caperion System, 40 ABY

"Can I open my eyes now?" Daesha asked as she excitedly hopped up and down in the back seat of the speeder.

"Not yet, Daesha, but soon," Oriyanna said from the front seat.

"How about now?" Daesha said, feeling the speeder come to a stop and hearing the front doors open.

"Not yet," Xendar said, opening the back door and picking up Daesha.

"Okay, you can open your eyes, Daesha," Oriyanna said.

Daesha opened her eyes and gave a gasp.

"Wow!" She said excitedly.

"This is our new home, Daesha. *Alor* and *Aran* are here, and so are *Junzqex* and *Vik'mayu*," Oriyanna said. "They have been working on getting your room ready. So do you want to see your room?"

"Yes!" Daesha said as Xendar set her down on the ground, then, turning toward the speeder, he let out a loud whistle. A loud scuffling noise from the backseat, followed by a black and silver blur running toward them.

"Come on, Zeish, let's go see what the inside of the house looks like," Daesha said as she put an arm around the Correllian sand panther and started walking toward the house.

"This was a good idea, you know," Oriyanna said as she took Xendar's hand. "Especially after living in that military emergency shelter for a while."

"It is, but how do you feel about sharing a house with yours and my parents?"

"It was my mother and father who found this place, and it took all six of us to pay for it, and with Caelestis City in ruins, where else is there for them? Besides, it's a large house, and it's perfect. So, no, I don't have any problem with them living with us. Though, I wish you could live with us instead of staying in the city site," Oriyanna said as they walked toward the house.

"Yes, I would like that as well, but somehow, things never work out that way. But what about you and your SPAR team? I would have thought that The Emperor would have placed all special operations units on high alert for the foreseeable future." Xendar said as the two of them stopped near the front entrance to the house and as he turned to face Oriyanna.

"With as many force users and soldiers around the site now, I think that The Emperor may be considering the spec-ops teams to be a bit of overkill," Oriyanna said.

"Yeah, well, interestingly enough, I am one of those force users," Xendar said dryly. "But on the bright side, I get to spend the holidays here. Or did you forget that?"

"Oh, I didn't forget," Oriyanna said with a mischievous smile. "But right now, we are waiting for the movers to finish up, and then we have a lot of unpacking to do," she added as she playfully poked him in the chest.

Xendar gave her a flat look. His hands whipped up, and he grabbed Oriyanna around the waist as she tried to run away, his finger moving at a furious rate.

"Ah, Xendar! Stop! Oriyanna squealed between bouts of laughter.

"Hey, Daesha, you want to help me tickle mommy?" Xendar said in a loud, sing-song voice.

Managing to break free of Xendar, Oriyanna dodged to one side, then turned and tackled Xendar from behind, sending them both to the ground.

"My turn!" Daesha yelled as she came out of nowhere and landed on Oriyanna and Xendar, followed by Zeish.

"Okay, I forfeit," Xendar said, his face squashed into the ground. "Daesha and Zeish win."

"I agree," Oriyanna said, her face pressed into Xendar's back.

"Oh, there you three are. I hope I am not interrupting anything," Ristaria said as she opened the door and stepped outside.

"No, mom, you're not," Xendar said, pulling his face out of the ground.

"Mommy tacked Daddy, and now we are squashing him; do you want to help, *Vik'mayu?*" Daesha asked as she and Zeish slid off of Xendar and Oriyanna.

"No thanks, sweetie. I just came out to tell your mom and dad that the movers have finished up and we all can start unpacking," Ristaria said, smiling at Daesha.

"Right, thanks, mom," Xendar said as he quickly rose from the ground. Reaching around, he grabbed Oriyanna, who was still on his back. She let out a squeal and wrapped her arms around Xendar's neck.

"Daddy's is giving you a piggyback, mommy," Daesha said, loudly giggling as she walked over and grabbed Xendar's hand.

"Ah, you can put me down, Xendar," Oriyanna said as Xendar walked to the front door carrying her.

"Why? I could use the practice," Xendar said, walking into the house.

"And besides, your dad carried your mom into the house. The same with my parents,"

"Yeah, they did. But not like this; you're carting me around like a backpack," Oriyanna huffed.

Ristaria gave a start. "Oh, that reminds me, Xendar, the moving company got ahold of me, and they are overbooked with work and have limited storage space, so I had them bring your stuff over today instead of later," Ristaria said.

"Well, well, I guess that means you get to help unpack the other things. And then we can start working on the master bedroom, so we can move in after we get married," Oriyanna whispered mischievously into Xendar's ear as he walked through the front door. "And just think about how much fun you can have, helping me move furniture, adjusting it again and again until I think it is just right..." Oriyanna started to say before Xendar force-leaped on the railing leading to the upstairs.

"Or, I can act like a little kid and run crazily through the house, yelling at the top of my lungs," Xendar said as he landed.

Ah! Xendar! Are you crazy?! Get off the railing! Use the stairs! Oh no, you don't! Don't you even think about it! XENDAR!" Oriyanna yelled as Xendar took off up the railing to the upstairs.

"Those two," Ristaria said, shaking her head and sighing.

"Hee! I wanna try that," Daesha said, walking towards the stairs.

"Ah no, Daesha, sweetie, let's not do that."

"But Daddy just did it."

"Yes, yes, he did. But your daddy also owns part of this house. That is the only reason why your mom, me, your grandfather, *Alor*, or *Aran* will put up with that nonsense," Ristara stated.

"Okay, *Vik'mayu*. Daesha said, looking downcast. She then perked up and turned toward Ristaria.

"*Vik'mayu*, what part of the house does daddy own?"

"That's not really a question I can answer in a way you could understand; why do you ask?" Ristaria said with a puzzled expression.

"Because if it's a problem in any other part of the house, then I can do it in the part that daddy owns, right?" Daesha asked innocently.

Ristaria rolled her eyes and sighed, "Xendar! You are setting a really bad example for your daughter," she yelled up the stairs.

"So, how do you like our home?" Xendar asked Daesha as he tucked her into her bed after reading a bedtime story.

"I like this place a lot! The house is way bigger than *Vik'mayu's* and *Junzqex's* old apartment. You and mommy are here, as well as *Alor* and *Aran*. And *Junzqex* says that the house is on a huge chunk of land that we can explore. He also said, the Mysterious Giver not only visits Ragnath, but he will come here too."

"Oh," Xendar said as he tucked Daesha in. "If he does, what would you ask for?"

"Hmm," Daesha said, scrunching up her face as her lekku twitched. "I dunno. I have you, mommy, Zeish, *Vik'mayu*, *Junzqex*, *Alor*, and *Aran*."

Daesha paused for a moment as she thought. "Oh, I know!" she said, her red eyes glowing brighter. "A nexu like Shaydris from *Fierce Friends*, she is Zeish's best friend."

Xendar's eyes widened; *why shouldn't I be surprised that she would ask for that*, Xendar thought to himself, "Well, that certainly is a feat that the Mysterious Giver would have a hard time doing, but who knows?"

"Daddy?"

"Yes, Daesha,"

"Is it bad to ask for something else as well?" Daesha asked in a shy voice.

"No, I don't think it would be bad," Xendar said with a smile as he looked at her.

Daesha looked down for a moment, then back up at Xendar.

"I want a baby brother or sister!" She blurted out.

Xendar went quiet for a moment, both from the shock and the uncertainty of how to answer that.

"Uh, well, that is... that is certainly something." Xendar stammered. "But, uh, who knows, it could happen."

"Really! You think so? Yay! I'm gonna get a baby brother or sister!" Daesha nearly shouted.

"Okay, let's calm down a little bit, and you go to sleep, okay?" Good night, Daesha. I love you," Xendar said, kissing Daesha on the forehead.

"Good night, daddy. I love you too," Daesha said as she turned on her side, throwing an arm over Zeish.

"How's Daesha?" Oriyanna asked from the couch in the living room.

"Oh, she's curled up with Zeish, happily dreaming about getting either a Nexu," Xendar said, stepping into the living room. Then, looking over at Oriyanna, he added, "Or a baby brother or sister." As Xendar said the last part, Oriyanna started to intently stare at her padd. She also seemed to be turning a peculiar shade of dark red.

Uh-huh, every time Oriyanna gets embarrassed or excited, she turns that shade of red. You can definitely tell she is part Zeltron. Xendar thought to himself.

"So, uh, what did you tell her?" Oriyanna asked hesitantly.

"I told her..." Xendar paused as he knelt down, opened a container that had been sitting on the floor next to the couch where Oriyanna sat, and began taking out his equipment and weapons. "...Who knows, it could happen."

Oriyanna expelled a long breath. "She has been asking for that for a while now." She then noticed that Xendar was kneeling on the floor and asked, "What are you doing?"

"I need to go to the Monolith. I have a few things there to pick up."

"Hey, do you want me to go with you?" Oriyanna asked, leaning over and tapping Xendar on the top of his head.

"No, uh, it's okay; it's really no big deal," Xendar said with a nervous smile.

I hope that the store clerk did what they promised and had those gifts wrapped and delivered to the Monolith on time. Xendar thought to himself. "Besides, your show is coming on. And you have been waiting a while to see the finale, so don't worry about it. You enjoy your show. When I get back and after your show, we have an important job; those presents will not wrap themselves."

"Hey, boss, we got the gifts and the food loaded." One of the goons said to Claudius.

Claudius looked at the goons and fired off something in his usual combination of a low, rumbling basso and a high-pitched squeaking of Huttese.

"Master Claudius says," The droid stated, "Indeed you have, my trifle-minded minion, but there is still a voluminous amount of material left to be purloined."

"But, what? Boss. I donts see anything else to grab," the goon replied.

Claudius made a grand sweeping gesture as he began to talk.

"Master Claudius says, look to the veneer of trappings festooned across the architecture of this chamber. The accommodations, the tables, and most certainly, the cathedra."

"The what?" The goon asked bewilderingly.

Claudius made a rather long-sounding derisive croak as he started to flounce away.

"Master Claudius says, You commiserable ignoramus, were your parents not fortunate enough to send you to the most basic of schools? Seize the tables, the chairs, and for the love of Da'soocha! The confounded throne!"

"Oh, uh, right. Tables, chairs, the stuff on the walls, and the throne. Got it. We will take care of it right now, boss," the goon shouted.

Claudius gave off a barking hoot as he turned around to face the goon.

"See that you do," the droid translated. "And do not stray elsewhere in this structure to pillage. Heed my words, for I have commanded it; so shall it be done."

"Look, you overblown slug!" The goon muttered to himself as he walked away, "I don't know what you are up to. But I am not about to let some self-important blowhard tell me what I am doing. This place is ripe for the picking, and you can't stop me."

As the night progressed, the goons surprisingly managed to clear out the main hall, the dining area, and the kitchen with only a few minor incidents. That is, if you exclude the goon who accidentally set himself on fire with an antique candle lighter. The one who threw out his back, picking up some chairs. The one who accidentally got rolled up in the carpet. The one who got stuck in the food storage unit. Which took twenty minutes to get him out. The one who tried taking down the ceiling decorations and ended up sailing across the room, faceplanting himself in the wall, and breaking his nose. And the one who got stabbed in the backside with a nonlethal poison blade hidden in the seat of The Emperor's throne when he tried to sit in it.

But throughout the process of the goons moving and loading the vehicle, no one noticed that three members of their group had slipped away and were in the process of trying to loot the building of whatever valuables that they found.

"So, what did you two find?" One of the three goons asked the other two as they met in one of the Monolith's hangar bays.

"Not much; most of the rooms around here have some massively heavy-duty security protocols, along with some impressively tough doors," the second replied.

"Yeah, the whole place screams, *Go away!* And right now, I feel like someone is watching us," the third one piped up.

"There's no security, droids, or operational cameras. Ol'Claudedink made sure of that. So, there's nothing to worry about," the first replied.

"Yeah, nobody knows we're here. So as long as we stay away from the upper floors. Nobody or thing is going to know we are here."

"Then what's that?!" The third one nearly shrieked, his voice on the edge of hysteria, as he pointed a finger toward a figure standing on one of the gantries.

It was a nightmare, an apparition. Its face was nothing but a black void of darkness that even the brightest light could not dispel. Its eyes, or what could be considered its eyes, were glowing, blood-red orbs of malevolent light. Its cloak was of the darkest black, and as it jumped down, its cloak fluttered open, revealing the dark assassin's armor beneath it.

The hands seemed to be its favored weapons, as each finger ended with a bird-like sharp talon and another set of long, glowing blood-red claws that seemed to appear from around its knuckles. As its right hand went down to its side, a cylindrical object leaped off its belt and into its hand, and with a familiar *Snap-Hiss*, a meter-long blood-red blade with a black core appeared.

"Holy milking Sith! It's one of the barvy, chuff-sucking, terror-mongering, force freaks! Run!" The second goon yelled as he took off as fast as he could.

The third goon, for whom the situation became too much, couldn't take any more and collapsed into a blubbing mess on the ground.

The first goon watched as the figure dropped to the ground. Reaching down, the goon pulled out his blaster and started firing.

The figure watched as the bolts came closer and almost nonchalantly batted the bolts away as they walked toward the first goon. After the fourth blaster shot, the figure slowly brought up its right hand in a stopping gesture. The goon found that his hand seemed paralyzed. He watched as the figure's taloned fingers dipped slightly, and the figure drew its hand slowly back before raising it again and it moving forward.

The goon felt the barrel of his blaster press against the temple of his own head. The figure had sent him a clear message: *Try anything foolish or stupid. And I will make you blow your own head off.*

The goon's eyes darted between the blaster and the figure, who moved forward; and clamped their left hand around the goon's throat and hoisted him into the air. The goon could feel the figure's talons gently touching his throat and spine as he tried to breathe.

"Start talking," the figure said in a cold, lifeless voice.

"I don't know anything!" The goons said in a panicked, gasping, sputtering voice.

The goon could feel the figure's grip tightening, and the talons start to dig into his neck and throat.

"Alright, okay, I'll talk. I'll talk!" The goon gasped. "Look, I don't know why we're here other than we were to take stuff from the dining room, main hall, and the kitchen."

"And yet, here you are in a docking bay," the figure remarked.

"Hey, we didn't want any part of it, honest."

"Liar," the figure replied, tightening their grip as the talons started to dig into the goon's flesh.

"Wait! You don't know who you are after or where they are, but I do. I can tell you."

"Talk," the figure said.

"First, I get a guarantee that I get to leave this planet unharmed and with a decent ship."

Before the figure could answer, a voice broke through on the security comline.

"Praetorian to Shadow Walker. Come in, Shadow Walker," the voice stated.

While still keeping the goon up in the air and using the force to keep the blaster pointed at the goon's head, and with a familiar *Snap-Hiss*, Shadow Walker deactivated his blade and hooked it on his belt. Then he reached up to tap his head where his ear might be.

"Shadow Walker to Praetorian. Affirmative, I read you five by five."

"Praetorian to Shadow Walker "What is your situation?" Praetorian asked

"I have two prisoners detained. There is a third on the premises, possibly somewhere in the administration section," Shadow walker replied.

"Understood, Shadow Walker. Were there any other intruders before you detained your prisoners?"

"Negative Praetorian. The Monolith was clear of any other intruders when I arrived."

Understood Shadow Walker. What is your assessment of the situation?"

"Uncertain. But it does look like, whoever it was, they looted the main hall, the dining hall, and the kitchen. All other sectors appear to be secure and untouched. The only other variable is the third intruder."

"The sweeper teams will deal with that one, Shadow Walker. "Wait... hold on," Praetorian stated, as the comline went dead for several seconds. "Affirmative, Shadow Walker. Be advised, The Emperor is inbound. ETA: five minutes. And he wants to oversee the interrogation of those prisoners. *Personally*," Praetorian added.

"Understood, Praetorian, will comply and hold position."

After shutting down the comline, Shadow Walker looked up at the goon. "It seems that today is your lucky day. The Emperor has requested the presence of your company. He has heard about you and wishes to meet you. And if you are most fortunate, he will show you places that most people do not see in this building." Shadow Walker stated in a mocking tone.

"Hey, wait a minute, Emperor Kamjin is coming here? I've heard about that guy! He's brutal, vicious, and uncaring! You've gotta help me! I have been helpful, and I have been cooperating. If

you want information, I'll give you information. I've got even more information I can share," the goon pleaded.

"I hope so for your sake," Shadow Walker stated malevolently. "Because if you don't, The Emperor is not as forgiving as I am."

After The Emperor's arrival, Xendar watched as one of the security teams took away the second and third goon. While another team came in and collected the first goon.

Weak-minded fools, Xendar thought to himself as he watched the security teams haul away the three goons. *Perhaps whoever their employer is, they might think about diversifying and hiring someone with more brains and a stronger-willed personality.*

Unknown Continent

Unknown Planet

Krumpett System

40 ABY

"For all the chaos and upheaval in the universe, there will always be something that is a constant certainty. Like a Hutt's ego, vanity, and paranoia," Xendar said quietly to himself as he looked over Claudius's fortress half a kilometer away. He was sitting on a rocky outcropping, cloaked in the force from sight and the perceptions of other force users.

Raising a pair of electrobinoculars to his eyes, Xendar began to analyze the fortress through the eyes of an infiltrator.

To most, the grandiose and ostentatiously lavish fortress stood in stark contrast to the sea of lava surrounding the small mountain the fortress was set on.

Lowering the electrobinoculars, Xendar reached up and tapped his earpiece comlink and began to speak. To anyone trying to eavesdrop electronically or physically, even if they were standing

right next to him, the only thing that would be heard is a noise vaguely reminiscent of the audio code transmission from an old imperial probe droid.

"Shadow Walker to Cypher, reporting in."

"Affirmative, Shadow Walker. We read you five by five; situation report," Cypher ordered.

"Have arrived at target point; you can inform The Emperor that the information he obtained; checks out. Location is littered with ground tremor sensors, patrolling security droids, automated sentry guns, automated AA guns, geosynchronous surveillance satellites, a fortress surrounded by a lake of lava, and as for the last piece of the outer defense. I am guessing a Guardian-class shield generator."

"Understood, Shadow Walker. Keep us apprised, turning you over to Slicer."

"Hey, Ghost, long time no see," a familiar friendly female voice spoke over the comline.

"Hello, Slicer. It has been a while," Xendar responded.

"It certainly has. Do you have a status update for me?" Slicer asked.

"Package has been delivered," Xendar replied.

"Great! So, how do you like my new toy?" Slicer asked.

"From what I have heard about it, your Virus Projector is quite impressive. Right now. It is situated on an AA platform coms relay tower; ready to go when you are," Xendar stated.

"Wait a minute, you didn't activate it?" Slicer asked, a worried tone creeping into her voice.

"No, I didn't. The entire defense grid will still be under their control until I am inside the castle."

"Are you planning on letting yourself be captured and then activating it? That sounds really risky."

"Hardly, I have a malfunctioning droid on the ground right next to me, and it is doing an admirable job of sending out wild signals everywhere. Which I am piggybacking this transmission through. So an investigation team should be here...Ah, there they are. Time check. Virus Projector will activate in T-minus twenty minutes. Shadow Walker out."

"Sec Team One to Base, we have a visual on those strange droid transmissions. It looks to be a Galactic Empire-era Era probe droid," the sec team leader replied as he pulled out a comlink and spoke into it.

"A Galactic Empire Era probe droid? What in the galaxy is that bucket of bolts doing here?" A voice from the comlink fired back.

"Probably from when they were actively hunting for the Rebel Alliance, and they just left this one here. And it looks like it took a bolt of lightning from that thunderstorm that just passed over. Which scrambled parts of its brain and reactivated its com relays."

Base to Sec Team One, is it hostile?"

"Negative, base. We scanned it before we moved in. Its weapons cold."

"Right, bring it in."

"Will do base, Sec Team One out."

The ride to the fortress was tedious, if not exasperating, and mind-numbingly boring. One of the security officers felt it was his duty to share the exploits of his previous leave and spent the entirety of the return trip discussing the benefits of the nightlife on Zeltros, with a heavy emphasis on praising the Paradise Cantina, while repeating the supposed "highlights" of the story several times.

Xendar rolled his eyes as he tried very hard not to sigh and use his force powers to cause the perseverating windbag some distress.

But thankfully for Xendar's sanity, the transport entered the docking bay before the windbag could start the "Highlights" of the story again for the fourth time.

After the ship landed with a gentle bump, the rear doors of the transport swung open, and two beings appeared, reached in, and grabbed the repulsor board that the probe droid was on.

"Hey, Klulute," One of the two yelled at a third character. "Where do you want this hunk of scrap?"

"Put it on the other side of this scrap heap of a ship," said a mountain of an Iridonain that came into view.

"It looks like it's in pretty good condition for a scrap heap," one of the sec team members said as they exited the transport.

"Everything onboard leaks, glitches like mad, or won't work like it's supposed to! Look at the main hatch! I had to rip it off in order to get inside." Klulute growled as he pointed to the gaping entryway leading to the interior of the ship. And as if to prove his point, a loud hissing could be heard, followed by a wave of sparks shooting across the interior cabin.

"Yeesh! Someone would have to be extremely desperate to fly that thing in that condition," one of the two beings moving the probe droid said.

"I think that they were. According to the sorry excuse for coms logs that this ship has, and with help from our own coms systems, the pilot got into some kind of trouble with the Brotherhood forces and was trying to outrun them when they had a problem that required the pilot to go EVA to fix something. Then a Brotherhood star destroyer jumped in-system. I guess the pilot of the scrap heap really ticked off someone fairly high up, as a single TIE fighter was launched, and it wasn't a regular TIE. It was one of those really weird tri-wing jobs that some of their ace pilots fly."

"So what happened then?" Someone asked.

"After that star destroyer left, we pulled that thing out of a deteriorating orbit and brought it here. But I can take a guess as to what happened. There is a trail of blaster burn marks across the top of this scrap heap. My guess is that the pilot got hit by blaster fire, and according to com scans, the pilot was shot off the ship and burned up on entry. I think that it was personal; that TIE hung around and watched the show until after the other dweezer burned up in the atmosphere."

Close, my rather large friend. But not quite. Xendar thought to himself. Though if Lord Thran hadn't been as good of a shot as he is, that might have been my fate. Ironically, force powers, special operations atmospheric jump gear, and a nighttime insertion can do wonders for making people think what you want them to think.

As Xendar made his way through Claudius's castle, he kept himself and his force abilities cloaked, avoiding the security cams and guards. As he neared the center of Claudius's endeavors, he was thankful that he had an accurate map of his surroundings, as the castle was much larger than he had been led to believe.

At least that goon's information was correct. Xendar thought to himself. Though I doubt he would have lied to The Emperor. From what I had heard, the goon fainted dead away when The Emperor stepped into the room.

From around the next corner, Xendar heard the cacophony of multiple voices, from Basic to Huttese, from Twi'lek to Trandoshian. The room went silent, and the sound of what he could guess to be a Hutt warming up to speak. Slowly stealing forward, Xendar slipped into Claudius's throne room. And what a shock he saw. On the dais, with every light in the room trained on him, was Claudius. Dressed in a black and red bejeweled cape lined with white fur and holding a portable com unit.

Still keeping in the shadows, Xendar let go of his connection to the force and dropped the cloak. Reaching down to his side, he activated and let lose a small spy cam droid to record what was about to unfold.

"Salutations, my sycophantic underlings. Indeed, shall we not again partake in the festivities set before us?" Claudius said, in a heavily Huttese-inflected basic. Making a grand sweeping gesture, Claudius indicated to the lavishly laden tables about the room that the cooking servants had just finished resetting. "Let us again enjoy this delectable repast of delight."

Claudius gave a pause, then dramatically looked down in thought and then back up at the crowd.

"Though it would be in bad form not to thank The Emperor Kamjin for making this possible, not for the food, nay, for I have seen to that. But for the warm feeling of joy that he has given me. As he looks like a complete fool standing there in the Monolith with a look of complete and utter shock and complete dumbfoundedness. But worry not, my dear Kamjin. We never touched your precious holiday trinkets. But you will pay for them!" Claudius hooted before continuing,

"Indeed, my frivolous-minded minions. I have sent *"The Emperor,"* if he could be called that. A message stating that we had captured a band of villainous blackguards who had absconded with their precious holiday regalia. And that I would be willing to return it to them for a modest finder's fee."

A raucous laughter filled the room as the denizens staggered toward the tables.

"At times like these, as many of you know, in my earlier days. I toyed with the idea of being a holo vid singer. So, in view of my success with the raid on the Monolith, I wrote a song, and I would like to dedicate this song to Emperor Kamjin and Clan Scholea Palantiae."

The lights around the room dimmed, leaving only a single light above Claudius to shine on him.

You're a mean one, Mr. Sith.

You really are a jerk!

You're as cuddly as a Sarlacc.

You're as charming as one too,

Mr. Sith!

You're a stinky Dianoga with rotten halitosis!

You're a monster, Mr. Sith!

Your heart's an empty husk!

Your brain is full of Mynoks!

And you wear a Dark Side musk, Mr. Sith.

I wouldn't touch you with a thirty-nine-and-a-half-foot tusk!

You're a vile one, Mr. Sith

You have the manners of loopy Bantha.

And you have all the tender sweetness

Of a pack of cranky Sand Panthers, Mr. Sith!

Given the choice between the two of you,

I'd take the pack of cranky Sand Panthers!

Okay, Xendar thought to himself. That's enough. There is more than enough evidence for The Emperor.

Reaching up, Xendar tapped his earpiece comlink.

"Security override code: senth, zerek, besh, xesh. Close all access doors to the throne room on my command," Xendar whispered.

"Override code accepted, closing all access doors to the throne room on your command," a computerized voice said quietly.

After finishing his song, Claudius gave a slight bow as he looked across the room; as expected, the denizens were applauding exuberantly as a drunken reveler could.

Making a motion for them to settle down, Claudius waited for the applause to settle down. But just as he was about to start another speech, a loud, slow single clap echoed throughout the chamber.

"Very eloquent, master Claudius. I am certain that Emperor Kamjin would be so honored by your song," a cold, menacing voice in the shadows called out.

"Who said that? Show yourself, you churlish parvenu! Lights!" Claudius demanded.

The room remained the same as it was before, dimly lit with shadows everywhere.

Claudius looked about wildly; *What is going on? The ultraviolet lights should have been activated! And where is that security detail?* Claudius thought to himself.

"It seems that you have a problem on your hands that your usual screeching cannot solve; how truly sad," the voice said this time, sounding like it was coming from the other side of the room.

"Only a contemptible, vacillating coward attacks in the dark," Claudius snarled as he looked about, trying to get even a glance as to where the enigmatic voice originated.

A mocking laugh filled the throne room, "Oh, I don't know about that. I find it quite useful."

There were a few moments of silence, then the voice continued.

"In light of recent events, perhaps you should think about doing stand-up; you are quite the comedian!"

A loud round of applause and boisterous yells of approval came from the inebriated crowd, for in their drunken stupor, they were under the impression that their lord and master was putting on a grand spectacle for them.

Raahhhhh! My fortress for a pair of beings with at least half a working brain! I have all of these ignoramuses in this room, and not one is capable of rational thought! Claudius silently fumed.

An indignant yell pulled Claudius out of his mental rant as the doors to the throne room were sealed shut with a heavy clang, plunging the room into near-total darkness.

"Lights," the voice said.

The light in the room came to life, and a figure dressed in the darkest black that Claudius had ever seen stood in the center of the room, just meters away from him.

"Who are you?" Claudius snarled in Huttese.

"The ghost of your conscience and of holidays yet to come," the figure said quietly. The cold, menacing tone hung heavily in their voice. Then, reaching down to their belt, the figure took off several round objects. After hefting them in their hand for a moment, then threw them at the tables where the revelers were sitting.

"Grenades!" Someone screamed as they tried to find any form of cover. While the first two were in the air, the figure turned and threw another at Claudius.

Claudius knew that he would not be able to get out of there fast enough. But he also didn't care. He saw what type of grenades they were. And the grenade began to do what it was called to do. Claudius began to laugh.

"Very clever, my mysterious adversary," he boomed. "Those glop grenades, at first glance, do bear a passing resemblance to a thermal detonator. But you cannot fool me. And in five minutes, I will be free, and so will the other occupants of this room. And I warn you, they certainly are not pleased with the current set of circumstances."

The figure ignored Claudius and knelt on one knee, then reached into their cloak and pulled out a small satchel. Claudius watched intently as they placed the bag on their bent leg. As they did so, Claudius heard a metallic click, and the pouch popped open.

The figure reached down toward their belt, and a cylindrical object appeared in their hand. Claudius watched as the figure made adjustments to it, then pointed the cylinder at the floor, and a small blood-red beam with a black core appeared as the figure used the cylinder to cut a small hole in the floor. Several seconds later, the figure stopped cutting to inspect their work. They seemed satisfied with what they had done. The figure then pulled a piece of a hollow, slender rod out of the satchel and slid the rod into the hole. Then, reaching around, the figure pulled out a square piece of metal with a smaller rod affixed to the bottom. The figure gently slid the smaller rod into the larger rod and then reached back into the satchel to grab something else. The gloating smirk of superiority was wiped off of Claudius's face when he saw what it was, a Class-A thermal detonator.

With the detonator in one hand, the figure used the other hand to push up on the square plate, which unfolded into an L shape. Claudius, at this point, could not see what the figure was doing other than gently placing the thermal detonator on the plate.

Slowly standing up and putting the satchel away, the figure slowly turned so that they would see everyone and get their attention.

"See this?" The figure stated, pointing toward the object they were building. "This is a tremor switch, and this," the figure said, pulling out and holding up a small remote. "Is the arming switch, once it is activated,

if the sensors from the rod pick up anything larger than a Dinko moving around, that will cause a disturbance in the magnetic field in the outer rod. Which will cause the inner rod to deploy its microblades, cutting the filament holding the switch back. If that happens, you will have less than one second to vacate the premises. And with that, I bid you a happy festive time," the figure said as the door unsealed itself and opened.

After stepping through the open doorway, the figure stopped, then turned toward Claudius, "Think of it as a gift from Emperor Kamjin himself. Don't forget to watch for the green light; if it goes red, well, you won't have to worry about anything anymore," the figure said as they gave a mocking bow as the doors slowly began to shut.

All eyes turned toward the tremble switch; they watched as the metal square that the thermal detonator was sitting on, turned an off-neon green.

"Shadow Walker to Praetorian, The Emperor's gift has been packaged and is awaiting acquisition," Xendar said as he walked down the main corridor toward the central cargo bay.

"Praetorian to Shadow Walker, read you five by five. Understood. The store clerks will see that The Emperor gets his gift. Have the children with the snowballs been sent home?"

"Affirmative, Praetorian. Can verify that Slicer has them penned up in the brig and the barracks."

"Understood, Shadow Walker. Store Clerk's ETA is twenty minutes, Praetorian out."

As Xendar walked into the cargo bay, he was surprised at how everything from the Monolith was inventoried and kept organized. Moving through the various sections, Xendar stopped at the one marked "gifts." Taking off the lid, he began to pull out the various brightly packaged gifts and gently set them on the floor.

"Okay, where are they?" Xendar said as he searched through the pile of gifts.

"Ah ha, there they are," Xendar said as he pulled out several boxes, setting them to one side. He then reached into the pile and pulled out a small, distinctly wrapped box. Xendar inspected the box very thoroughly before putting it into his cloak.

It was at that moment that Xendar felt the presence of something. Thinking nothing of it and dismissing it as a small animal, he went back to rearranging the gifts and putting them together in a neat and orderly pile when he felt a tug on his cloak. Looking down, Xendar was given another surprise.

"How did you get here?" Xendar said in a surprised voice.

"He's coming! He's coming!" Daesha yelled excitedly, jumping up and down in Xendar's arms as she looked over the crowd toward the horizon.

And indeed he was, standing proudly atop a hoversled filled with presents, dressed in his resplendent red armor and a red cape lined with white fur, stood The Emperor, leading a procession toward the Monolith.

But what drew the most attention to the procession was the Hutt pulling the sleigh. Looking incredibly miserable, Claudius the Hutt was dressed in a fuzzy brown deerlike costume, complete with floppy cloth antlers, and as if to add insult to injury, the ensemble included a blinking round red nose.

"Is it true that Claudius nearly had a heart attack when the Emperor walked into the room," Oriyanna yelled to be heard over the roar of the crowds.

Xendar chuckled and leaned near Oriyanna, "I have a copy of the holocam footage; later this evening, I can let you see it. But in all honesty, I never knew a Hutt could hit those notes."

"That is something to see, though—wasn't there a bomb set to go off or something?"

Xendar smiled "That was The Emperor's idea, and it was a fake. The Emperor wanted Claudius to feel the pressure of fear for a while."

"Ohh, can I watch it too?" Daesha asked, turning around and facing Xendar and Oriyanna. "I've never seen a Hutt sing before."

"Say, isn't that *Alor and Aran*?" Xendar said, trying to change the subject by pointing to a tall, striking Falleen female TIE pilot with a head full of long black hair pulled into a braid, who, at that moment, was warmly embracing a trooper in Katarn-class night ops armor.

"They're busy." Daesha pouted.

"They haven't seen each other in a while." Oriyanna said, taking Daesha from Xendar and making her way through the crowds. "And they haven't seen you in a while either."

"Hello strangers, long time no see," Oriyanna said as she walked up to the two.

The Falleen and the trooper turned toward Oriyanna and Daesha and smiled.

"Well, aren't you two a sight for sore eyes," Jasten Rathelin said as he looked at his daughter and granddaughter.

Daesha was not one for formalities; the minute she got within jumping distance of Jasten and Deshavarria, she leaped from Oriyanna's arms at them.

"*Alor! Aran!*" Daesha shouted as she threw an arm around each of her grandparents.

"Oh, we missed you too, sweetie," Deshavarria said as she and Jasten hugged Daesha.

"By the way, where's Xendar?" Deshavarria asked.

"I think that I saw him heading that way," Jasten said, pointing to the east. "When I talked to him at the spaceport, he asked if I could do a couple of things for him. The first was to ask Oriyanna

if she could find him; apparently, there are some sensitive preparations for a future mission that you two need to work out.

"Right," Oriyanna said, shaking her head as she started to walk away. "Sometimes duty really gets in the way of things."

"And second," Jasten said as he bent down, picked up a container, and handed it to Daesha, whom Deshavara had put on the ground.

Daesha's eyes widened, "For me?" she asked.

"Yes, it is, and there is a bit of a story of how it got here," Jasten explained.

"We just finished that mission to bring that Hutt fellow here for the holidays. The Emperor thought that he should be invited to take part in the festivities. Anyway, while your daddy and I were at the starport trying to get back here, we were stopped by a mysterious looking stranger who said that they had a gift for Daesha Teeubo Thendaris. Normally, your daddy, being who he is, would have had that fellow pinned to a wall and threatening him with extreme bodily harm at even the mention of you. But there was something strange about the fellow; he was as tall as your daddy, and his clothes were red, silver, black, and lined with white fur. It didn't seem like he wanted to harm you, but he wanted to give you something. And what was really weird was that he knew your full name. There are only five people who know that.

"Do you think that it was the Mysterious Giver?" Daesha asked, her red glowing eyes growing ever brighter.

"Who knows, it could have been," Jasten stated.

Daesha needed no further prompting, setting the box on the ground and ripping it open. As she looked inside, she gave a loud squeal of joy and pulled out a young nexu.

"I've got a Shaydris! I've got a Shaydris!" Daesha yelled happily as she twirled around and snuggled the Nexu.

"Daesha, where are you going?" Deshavaria yelled as Daesha trotted off.

"I need to show mommy and daddy!"

"Daesha, wait," Deshavaria said as she and Jasten broke through the crowds heading for the Monolith, and took off after Daesha.

After a short run, both Jasten and Deshavaria managed to catch up with Daesha.

"Sweetie, I know you are excited to show your mom and dad your new friend, but you can't just run off like that, okay?" Deshavaria said in a worrying tone.

Daesh looked down at the ground, "I'm sorry, I just really wanted to show them Shaydris."

"It's okay, sweetie; I just want you to stay safe," Deshavarria said. After a moment or two, Deshavarria looked around. "I don't see your mom or your dad around here."

"Over there," Daesha said, giggling as she pointed to a clump of flowering trees.

"I don't see them," Deshavarria replied.

"You have to remember, Daesha is a force user, so she can see things when we can't," Jasten said, kneeling down and putting a hand on Daesha's shoulder.

And indeed, she could. Daesha watched as Oriyanna walked up to Xendar, and the two began to talk. After a few moments, Xendar reached into his cloak, and took out a small box, and handed it to Oriyanna. Daesha watched as Oriyanna pulled out a smaller box from within the first box. And just as she was about to open the smaller box, Xendar reached forward and took her hands in his as he knelt on one knee.

Daesha grinned widely as Oriyanna's hands flew up to her mouth, and she started to nod vigorously. And as Xendar stood up, she threw herself at Xendar, wrapping him in a warm embrace and ending with a very passionate kiss.

"Yay! Daddy asked mommy! Daddy asked mommy!" Daesha yelled as she twirled around with Shaydris, who gave a happy-sounding mew.

"He did?" Deshava asked.

"Yes, he did," Daesha proudly stated. She then stopped for a moment, as if contemplating something. Then a huge smile splashed across her face. "I wished for all of us to be together for the holidays. And it happened. I wished for a Nexu like Shaydris, and it happened. I wished for mommy and daddy to get married, and it's going to happen. That means I am going to be a big sister!"