

FLASHING LIGHTS

BY: DA THRAN OCCASUS-PALPATINE



Tokare – Palisades District

Seraph

Caperion System

They were already forty minutes late.

“Navy or black?” he said, as he held up the two garments for her to inspect.

“Umm...Navy.” she replied. She neared the end of her patience.

“I was thinking black.” He said.

“Then why did you ask?” Rayne replied.

“Oh, I know! What about red?” Thran exclaimed. He dove back into the depth of his expansive closet.

Rayne pressed her fingers to her temple, careful not to smudge her makeup. Over the years she had grown accustomed to Thran’s fastidious attention to his looks, but this was bordering on the ridiculous. The back and forth between outfits had lasted longer than it took for her to get ready herself. His personal stylist had taken time to find a dress that suited her personally and she was amazed by how well the girl had done.

Her black dress was short, its hem fell well above the knee. Thin straps and panels of sheer mesh exposed enough skin to teeter on the line of suggestiveness. A bare midriff exposed hints of golden skin and the flowy sheer sleeves were certainly en vogue at present. Likewise, one of his staff had aided her in applying the evening’s makeup. It was a reserved look, allowing captivating natural beauty to do most of the work. A smoky eye and some slight contouring drew attention to her cool blue eyes. She could have managed it herself, but having a professional’s hand felt like a treat. Such fineries would be considered a luxury for her, but for Thran it seemed to be a base standard of life.

She nearly regretted making use of their skills, when clearly Thran could have used their strong opinion and expertise to expedite his own readiness. In some ways she found his particularness about his clothing humorous, but on this occasion the laughter was not as genuine as normal. Her years in Imperial Intelligence had driven home the importance of punctuality, but Thran seemed to live in a galaxy where being late was actually being on time. That notion left her somewhere between discomfort, annoyance, and confusion. She could live with the feeling, but it was not one she’d freely choose.

“You’ll look great, no matter what you wear.” She called out.

His head peaked out from behind the mirrored door. "Of course I will, but I need to make a statement, ya know?"

"What kind of statement are you trying to make?" the Firrerreon flicked the tip of her tongue across a prominent canine tooth annoyedly.

"You know...Casual, but formal. Relaxed, but intentional. Party, but professional." Each contradictory phrase, met by a clatter and clang of drawers and chiffonier door slams.

"Oh..." she replied. *What the hell does that mean?* She internalized.

"I know! Here! Gold! Yes. Definitely this one." He hollered.

The exclamation was followed by the sound of a mountain of boxes falling in a heap. "I'm good! Don't worry!" he called out again.

In a short time, he emerged once again, wearing a slim fitting carbon black robe with a smokey grey-black and gold waistcoat. The garment had clearly been hand crafted, with fine embroidery and subtle beadwork. It fit him perfectly and sparkled when the light hit it just right. Thran spun in front of the trio of mirrors, which allowed him to get a good glimpse of himself from multiple angles. He smiled, nodded, winked and blew himself a kiss.

Rayne shook her head slightly. She tried her best not to laugh at him. She looked him up and down. Finally, he'd chosen something that seemed to suit his mood and met whatever oxymoronic definition he had set for the "vibe".

"Wow. You look amazing!" she said, careful not to drop even the slightest hint of sarcasm out of worry that it might send him back into the dressing room for another hour.

"Yeah, its ok. Do you think it makes my butt look fat though?" he asked.

"Fat?" She looked at his rear. "Not at all, perfectly toned and squeezable." Rayne replied.

"I hear that on Coruscant fat butts are the in thing now. All the it people are getting Balosarian Booty Lifts. They take some fungus chemical and put it in your cheeks, puffs em all up. Can you believe that?" Thran said, as he casually strolled over to the valet full of accessories.

He held up a golden chrono to his wrist, tossing it back into the valet after it failed to meet his approval. He continued to poke through the various bracelets, chronos, rings and necklaces as if he were searching for a perfectly ripe piece of fruit at a summer market.

"Wow. I didn't know that." She closed her eyes so that he wouldn't see her rolling them as she replied.

"Like...Honey, if you're not built like that putting mushrooms in your butt doesn't make you more beautiful, it makes you a fake and part vegetable. Are mushrooms vegetables?"

Whatever. Anyway, I heard that the procedure can go wrong and leave you with a deflated party balloon back there. Could you imagine? Oh, the horror! I couldn't even." Thran gasped, settling on a set of rings. Each found their place on the appropriate finger and he held out his hand. He examined them in the full light. "You don't think I need a booty lift, do you?"

"You? Don't be silly. There has never been a nicer butt in this whole universe." Rayne replied to his standard compliment fishing line of questioning.

"Good answer. Now. Shoes." He turned to the rack that held all his footwear.

"Lana already set some out for you." Rayne pointed him to the three pairs of boots that had been set out by his personal stylist.

"Ew. That girl has no taste." He examining the boots.

"She said you'd say that. And she said 'Remember, you're going dancing. Your feet are gonna hurt by the end of the night'. She's right, pick ones that are going to be comfortable." Rayne relaxed a bit, as she leaned into the door jamb.

"Ugh, that girl is so boring." Thran replied.

"She said you'd say that too. Then she said 'Remember the Governor's Ball on Enisu.'" Rayne replied.

"I knew she'd bring that up...Why I oughta..." Thran shook his fist and entirely neglected to share the embarrassment of whatever decision had been made to cause Enisu to be worth remembering. "Fiiiiiiiine. These ones." Thran said, picking a pair of slightly square toed boots.

"Those are perfect. You have amazing natural taste." She affirmed, giving validation to his decision.

"Cha. I know. Duh." Thran sat gingerly on an upholstered bench and slipped the boots on.

"Ok. Are you ready? Let me have a look at you." She gestured for him to rise again and began to examine him.

Thran stood and slipped his hands into his waistcoat pockets. It was a classic modeling pose. He spun, making four or five additional poses. He wrapped his pose session by shooting her a pair of finger guns. Rayne smiled at him. She was slightly annoyed by his high maintenance tendencies, but she understood that a man in his position needed to consider all manner of fashion trends and public opinion when completing such even basic tasks like dressing himself. It was not frequently that he made the choices of what he would wear at a public appearance. Normally, a staff of people made those decisions for him, based on contractual obligation, hot clothing trends, and countless other considerations she could

not quite fathom. He'd done well enough on his own and she couldn't hold his lengthy process against him, but she was glad it was finished.

"Wow! Heartstopping! Come now, we need to go." She said curtly. She grabbed his arm and dragged him from the walk-in closet before he had time to change his mind.

Sundown Overture

Seraph

Caperion System

Spotlights cast fields of bright light across the golden hull. It was a big vessel, by most standards, fifty meters or more from stem to stern, and was completely coated in a polished aurodium covering. It must have cost a fortune and was the furthest thing from discreet that Rayne had ever seen. The vessel's look fit its owner perfectly; sure to draw attention where ever it went.

They crossed the well-manicured lawn, stepping over perfectly placed exotic stones to the mouth of the loading ramp. Rayne glanced back for a moment, the path down to the main house was lit by flame bearing torches. The lights had some form of proximity sensor and the path each torch was extinguished at the same pace with which they had crossed to the landing pad.

Thran motioned to her to join him as they climbed the ramp and boarded the vessel. Awaiting at the top of the ramp was a slew of familiar faces, some she knew better than others. Kevin, Thran's faithful attorney, was among them. She recognized maybe eight of the dozen, they'd been around him in some capacity in the past.

"There he is!" one shouted.

"Damn, boss. You're looking fly as hell." Another said, as he slapped his hand against Thran's shoulder as he boarded the vessel.

"Derc! Baby! My money man! How's my favorite client tonight?" one man said louder than others as he pushed his way through the small crowd.

Rance Templet was as rude as he was loud. He was a clean-cut man, slightly older than Derc, but with the high cheekbones and taut forehead of a person that'd had seen the laser-scalpel one too many times. By the way he held himself, Rayne supposed that Rance was the type of Core World trust fund kid that declared himself a self-made man despite the nepotism that put him in a position to succeed from day one. Still, Templet had a cutthroat mentality. Clearly, he earned his keep if Thran kept him around. He never lost a deal that Thran had wanted in on. He'd stick to studio executives like a mynock to power

cables, gnawing and gnawing until he sealed a deal. In one hand he clutched a communicator and the other reached out to wrap around his client in a customary three-pat half-hug. It was the type reserved for those alpha male types that were afraid of showing too much affection.

"Only client, Rance." Thran said.

"Come on! That's what I said, Derc. You're my guy!" Rance said, with a nervous laughter that washed away the hint of fear in his eyes.

"Good. Good. Cause you know what'll happen if I find out you've got other clients...don't you Rance? Tell him Kevin. Tell him what will happen. Kevin...Tell him." Thran said, as he goaded his attorney.

"Termination...of employment." K'vin said dryly.

"Derc, baby, you're my only guy. I'm working for you twentyfour sev. See, here? Working now..." Rance said looking down at a now ringing communicator. "Bout to crush this one for you Derc! Rance Templet. Talk to me." He said, as he broke away from the group.

"That man is an absolute penis." K'vin said.

"It's dick, Kevin. He's a dick." Thran said, observing Rayne from the corner of his eye. She laughed to herself.

"I stand by my statement, sir." The Bimm replied.

"I admire your conviction, Kevin. I'm told we have a matter to discuss." He extended his hand towards the lounge. It was a gesture for them all to relocate.

"There are always matters...and judgements...and..." the attorney sighed.

"Hey. I don't pay you for sassing me, do I?" Thran stuck a finger in K'vins chest.

"No...sir." K'vin sighed again.

"That's right. Good answer. Who's a good boy?" Thran ruffled the diminutive attorney's hair.

"I am." K'vin paused. "I'm a good boy." He groaned.

"Yes you are! You are a good boy! Now, let's talk." The actor said, He gestured again to the lounge area.

Thran and Rayne made their way to the comfortable lounge, followed by a few of the entourage. Her eyes scanned the ship's layout and design elements. It was Thran's ship alright. Deep red velvet tones danced with golden accents and accessories, held up by behemoth slabs of darkened black marble. The lighting was soft, casting shadows into the

corners of the large room. His taste was unmistakable; very nearly garish with an unapologetic sense of grandeur.

They sat on the padded lounges and awaited service from the crew aboard the vessel. K'vin, the Bimm attorney sat opposite her, to Thran's right. The attorney tried to keep the discussion quiet. He whispered to his employer repeatedly. Rayne observed her surroundings intently. Part of her was on edge, this routine was not something she was accustomed to. Her mind picked through the crowd, scanning emotions and intentions. The Force revealed what she could not hear through the chatter. She could even feel the nearly imperceptible motion as the yacht lifted free of its moorings and took to the sky.

"I can't hear you, speak up, damnit." Thran hollered in an unnecessarily loud volume.

"Sir, I really don't think it's a good idea...all of these people could be considered witnesses to private conversation." The attorney said. He glanced back and forth between each of the party members.

"Kevin...Stop being so...you. We're out to have fun tonight. In fact, I want to have so much fun tonight that you have business to talk to me about tomorrow! Isn't that right, Derrin?" Thran called out to another man who was drinking at the lounge bar.

"Hell yeah, Derc! We're gonna rage!" the man drunkenly said.

"No. No raging. Can't we just have a quiet, crime-free, peaceful night out at a jazz club?" K'vin said, shaking his head.

"Quiet...crime-free...Firstly, No. Secondly, Also No. Thirdly...Where is it that you think we're going, Kevin? Just to listen to some Bith band play the kloo horn and omnibox while we do the jitterbug?" Thran said.

"Is that...It's not. Oh no...not again." The attorney said. "You've made me complicit in whatever you're going to do...Don't tell me. Please don't tell me...I don't want to know." He stuck his fingers in his ears.

Thran laughed and leaned back into the soft cushioning of the seat. He looked over at Rayne. He could tell that she felt slightly out of place in this environment. The spotlight was often a tough place for a shadow to adjust to being. It wasn't the glitz and the glamour that made her feel out of place, but perhaps it was the shock of seeing Thran in his natural environment. She'd known him for years, but this area of his life was still a rather new experience. She wondered how he kept track of the names and the faces and was constantly making mental notes of names and roles. She felt as though she were doing field work, collecting intel on the Bakuran's organization. Thran put his arm over her shoulder and gave her a little squeeze.

"Easiest way to get him to shut up is to start talking about the potential of catching more cases. Always yap yapping about something. Oh, so I'm wanted in the Commenor system for slapping a child and throwing the town in a dumpster. Blah blah. Boring!" He said with a chuckle.

"What about tonight, Thran? What kind of mischief is rolling around in that beautiful brain of yours?" Rayne asked.

"Mischief? Me? Madam, I'd never." He feigned offense and shot her a grin that betrayed his trumped up act.

"We can all see the gears moving...So, let us in on it...I'm sure...Derrin would be down!" she called out.

"My name is actually Greg, but hell yeah I'm in!" the man Thran had called Derrin replied from across the room.

Rayne shot him a side-eyed glance. It took a moment for her to piece together that Thran didn't even know that man's name, he'd likely been calling him Derrin for years and the man never dared correct him. She smiled at the notion and wondered if Thran even knew what Derrin did in his organization.

"Derrin, what do you do for...Derc?" Rayne asked, consciously making the adjustment to what she called her associate.

"Uh, pretty much whatever Derc says. One time he told me to eat an entire case of expired pudding and I ate pudding until I threw up on a Nexu." He said.

"Ha. Classic Derrin. We got kicked out of the Sarini Island zoo because of that." Thran laughed

"Yeah, epic joke you had Derc! That Nexu was big mad." Derrin replied.

Rayne looked over at Thran, processing the oddness of this whole scenario. She felt like a stranger in this world. She'd never known Thran to surround himself with "yes-men". He always had his loyal Aedile or Proconsul, but they would stop him where need be. It seemed in this double life that he led, he needed something to satiate his need for control. She postulated that he must keep people like Derrin around so that he had a toy to play with to prevent him from excessive boredom. The poor man probably had no clue that he was being used for such a vicious game or his paycheck was large enough that he just didn't care.

"Yeah, that's cool Derrin..." Rayne said, rolling her eyes. "Come on, out with it...What's the play?" she said as she slipped out from under Thran's arm and pivoted in her seat to face him.

"We playing? What we playing? I'll tell ya...Derc Kast is playing The Edjian Prince. Corellia's famous hero." Rance approached and snapped shut his communicator.

"Corellia? Rance...You're thinking small. The only people who give a shit about Corellia is Corellians. We're intergalactic. Get something better...or get a new job." Thran motioned to a crewmember that held a tray of champagne flutes. "But do that tomorrow, I have something for you for tonight...Get on the horn...a horn...all the various horns. I want you to get at the club owners. We need to see what their limit is for an appearance fee." Thran added.

"Woah, Derc, baby. We can't just ask for an appearance fee when we show up unannounced. Those things take pre-negotiations. There are details and margins and contractual obligations...Tell him K'vin. Would you?" Rance asked, hesitantly.

The Bimm sighed. He knew better than to fall victim to the trap of explaining the intricacies of contract negotiations to his employer. He scooped a glass of champagne off the tray of the approaching server. K'vin shrugged his shoulders and raised the glass to his lips.

"Do you honestly think he'd listen to me?" K'vin said in his nasally voice.

"Hey there sassy-pants...I'll lock you in your crate and they'll be no walkies for you!" Thran threatened.

Rayne followed the attorney's lead and grabbed a glass from the tray. She held it by the delicate stem and looked briefly into the hay-colored liquid. She followed a little bubble as it manifested from nothingness, clung to the side of the glass for a moment, then gave up its struggle and floated to the top exploding in a microscopic spray of the sweet wine. She pressed the glass against her lips, her keen nose picked up wisps of acidic citrus, the sweetness of berries and a crisp earthy oaken finish. The champagne hit her tongue, erupting in a blast of euphoric effervescent fizz. She savored the taste a moment, before sipping again.

Thran shot her a side-eyed grin before turning his attention back to his staff. He stood. He moved over towards the server. He had a swagger about him in every little motion, he seemed to drift or dance in casual step. His fingers caressed the narrow wine glass and he raised his glass to the group.

"Let me explain some things to you all. We are collectively acting as an extension of Imperial Intelligence. My darling daughter, who ought to be around here somewhere..." Thran said looking about, but not seeing Jasmine, he continued "brought back mountains of information from Crannix. Nothing about this club is as it seems."

"The Hutt Clan." Rayne said, half in question and half in statement.

"Yes. Quite. The whole of the Empire's peerage, wealthy, and affluent have received invites to this Club Antonia. That is odd. Half of them can't even get a seat at their local yacht club, but suddenly invites are going out to one and all. These Hutts are trying to move in on our golden namana trees. Kamjin knows this...He'll react to it as he always does...braying and kicking about like a common jackass." Thran said, raising the glass to his lips to put back a swig.

"So you're planning what, exactly?" Rayne asked.

"I'm so glad you asked!" Thran said, as he spun around excitedly. "Kamjin isn't a hunter. He thinks all methods are the same. They aren't. You see, catching a big fat worm is not like catching a fish. With a fish you put the bait out and as soon as they bite, you yank the hook and pull them in. To catch a worm, you need to till the earth and find out what is within...then you pluck them out one...by...one" he said, miming the action.

"What the...fuck...are you talking about?" Rance said. "Fish, worms...What kind of bumblefluff are you spitting here? Are you on the spice again?"

Thran squinted his eyes for a moment, as if trying to remember something intently. His finger inched to his chin, where it delivered a few scratches.

"That's so weird...I don't remember asking you to speak." Thran said.

"It's a metaphor." Rayne said and casually tipped the wine glass back again. "We turn things over at the club. We uncover what there are up to. Once their cover has been blown, we'll be able to pick out the big players with ease."

"Yeah. That. Worm...hutt...Metaphor. Precisely." Thran said.

"That's an excellent plan, sir. Might we have some more details? Or at least a shovel?" K'vin said, rolling his eyes.

"Kevin...So help me, Darth...One more sass and you'll go back in the trash compactor...Listen, it starts with little Rancey-poo here. He needs to put out the word. Step one, call whatever contacts he has in the celeb rags and get them to Ulress. I want paparazzi waiting when we get there. Step two, he finds the manager and gets us a nice appearance fee. Say, I don't know, four hundred thousand. Meanwhile...The rest of us enjoy the club, get drunk, dance and all that shit." Thran said.

"Hell yeah, Derc! We're gonna rage!" Derrin called out from nowhere.

"What does that guy even do here?" K'vin scratched his head and downed the glass of champagne.

"Do a backflip Derrin!" Thran called over his shoulder.

"Derc, ummm, I...don't know how to do a backflip." The man replied.

"Do a backflip Derrin." Thran said more firmly.

The man instantly crouched over, preparing to launch himself in the air. The first attempt was gruesome. Derrin rotated about one-fifth the way around before landing firmly on his face. He stumbled as he got to his feet and bumped into a server. The clatter of a dropped tray and broken glass filled the lounge. Dizzily, he tried again. Again, he coiled himself like a spring, rotating about half way this time before once again crumpling to a pile on the floor. Thran raised a hand.

"Enough. That was sick, Derrin. You'll get it next time." Thran called out, turning back to K'vin. "He does that. Anyway, what was I saying?"

"You were saying how I am supposed to do all the work collecting nickels while you have a nice night out. I should be making calls getting you a new multipicture deal. This is a gross misuse of my ski-" Rance said, cut off mid-sentence.

"You should be doing what I tell you to do." Thran said plainly.

"He's right. You know what happens if you don't" Rayne drew a single finger across her throat and sticking her tongue out of the side of her mouth, implying the consequence of noncompliance.

"Rance. You're still thinking about your point two one percent. You need to think...bigger. You need to think...Well, you need to think what I tell you to think." Thran said with a grin.

"Industry standard is ten percent, Derc. I can only do so much magic with peanuts." Rance said.

"Rance...If you ever want to work again, I suggest you stop the back talk. Remember...you are MY agent. Key word...my. Got it?" Thran sipped from the flute again, bathed in silence.

"Good. Last part of the plan. Any of the mouth breathing mudlickers that Kamjin sent from the clan we need to distract. I'm not expecting heavy hitters. Kamjin is as short sighted as he is daft. Regardless, They mustn't find anything of use. Worms, not fish. We mustn't let that Alderaanian oaf ruin this opportunity. Got it? Good. Now let's have some fun."

"Derc, just how in the world do you expect me to get an appearance fee negotiated on a whim?" Rance scoffed in disbelief.

"I don't know...by doing your damn job...Wait...Oh, I nearly forgot...I have something that should help with that." Thran said.

Thran reached deep into his waistcoat pocket. "Oh...yep...here...almost...got it..." He dug deeper into the pocket.

Finally, after a prolonged struggle, he pulled his hand free. His fist was balled up. Slowly, he extended his middle finger and pointed it at his agent. Thran laughed to himself. Rance did not find the humor in it. His shit-eating grin turned to a frown. The agent turned and walked away and picked up his communicator to complete his ordered task.

"Cry about it. Do your job, Rance!" Thran called after him. "That guy is an absolute penis." Thran sat back down on the lounge chair and kicked up his feet.

"I completely agree, sir." K'vin said with a wide smile.

Club Antonia Entrance

Uluv

Caperion System

Rayne peered through the tinted glass of the Astral-8 landspeeder. There was a sea of people waiting behind a velvet rope laid out on the pavement. There was all manner of people, but most looked well dressed and with fine taste. She could see the flashing lights of holocams, mounted on small hover droids, spinning about the entrance. She admitted to herself she wasn't quite ready for this.

As a former Intelligence agent, something about wanting to be seen felt inherently wrong to her. In that line of work, being seen meant getting caught and getting caught meant, well, she wasn't quite sure what it meant. She'd never been caught. Nevertheless, this type of entrance was not standard for her.

"Pogo will open the door. You remember Pogo, don't you?" Thran asked.

"Everyone remembers Pogo." Rayne smiled.

"You're not wrong. Listen, its easy. Just smile and wave, move inside as quickly as possible. Hammer will be behind us pushing us forward. I'll try to turn back. Cap and Whiz will grab me and I'll be right behind you." Thran patted her firmly on the thigh.

"You do this a lot?" Rayne asked.

"Woof. Yeah. Game time. Smile and move. Don't let them stop you." He said.

The rear gull-wing door popped and slid open. Just as he said, Pogo was there waiting for her. Though he wasn't wearing his helmet, she recognized his voice immediately. He looked older than she expected. She took his hand and stepped out of the vehicle. He

immediately started chatting her up. There was no time to indulge him now. Her golden sandals hit the pavement and she was in the thick of it.

The lights were dizzying at first, but she turned to the crowd and shot them all a smile. She blew a kiss or two into the unknown masses and waved at them with swift pinching motions. She took a half-step away from the speeder. The crowd erupted a moment later. The flashes tripled.

Calls of "Derc!" and "Over here!" came from every direction. She looked back just as Thran emerged, hand raised and gesturing like a king or perhaps more appropriately an Emperor. His face beamed as he cast falsely humble bows in several directions. She laughed to herself. He loved every second of this, that much was crystal clear. She wasn't quite sure how she felt about all the fuss.

If there was anything that she had learned in her past life it was that adaptation was the best mechanism for survival. There were no physical dangers here, at least none that she could scope, but there were hazards none the less. She'd still need to adapt to the situation if she would make it through to the door. She thought briefly of nature and all the brilliant mechanisms of adaptation that it employed. One came immediately to mind; Mimicry.

While she was not accustomed to this environment, Thran certainly was. If she mirrored his confidence and shadowed his actions even half as well as him, she'd pass with flying colors. She smiled again and wrapped her arm around his. She continued the pattern of waiving and smiling as they pressed forward. She even found herself pausing once or twice to strike a little pose. If she was going to be caught on camera, she might as well look the part and enjoy it.

Thran moved between groups of screaming people, many of whom had their hands outstretched towards him. She stuck close to his side. At one point she even reached out and snatched a holocam from a fans hand, turned away from them, outstretched her arm, and posed with Thran all while snapping a picture of the two of them and the fan. Down the line, one after the other they interacted with the crowd, half seconds at a time.

They had moved within meters of the door. Thran stuck his hand over his left shoulder, grasping for something in the nothingness that was there. As if by some magic or act of the Force itself, Derrin appeared. He was equipped with a bandolier of pens. The writing implement slid between Thran's fingers with the accuracy of a skilled snipers shot.

Thran's hand came down. The pen flourished. Leaving a trail of ink across a man's face. Thran laughed and tossed the pen over his should. Derrin was there again, like some kind of pen ninja, to gather it and holster it.

They pressed on again. Finally, the threshold of the bar. A hulking bouncer, with ruddy orange skin and horns protruding from either side of his chin, cracked his knuckles and lifted

the red velvet rope. The entourage pushed inside. Thran turned back to the crowd, blowing kisses into the sea of people. Rayne followed suit. She tried specifically to make eye contact with each of the cameras, just as she'd seen Thran do. They lingered but a second or two and turned to head inside. The Dowutin bouncer grunted as he closed the rope behind them.

"Color me impressed. Well done. You'll be ready for the red-carpet in no time." Thran said with a smile.

Club Antonia

Uluv

Caperion System

The neon glow of the bar cast long shadows through the crowd. Bodies moved to the electronic beats that blasted through the speakers. The opening act was some kind of experimental smooth jazz fusion duo. Thran suspected that the amount of spice flowing through the cerebral cortexes of the crowd was enough to morph it into something listenable, if only for those few minutes between bumps of fine powders. Drinks had been flowing to their table for some time. Two drinks ago, Thran had forced Darrin to swallow a small green citrus fruit whole.

Rayne didn't think he'd get it down, but in her own way she could sympathize. She was having a hard time swallowing what this evening had revealed about Thran. Of course, her lemon was metaphorical and his was very real. She didn't envy the indigestion that was coming his way, but she could at least settle her own mind.

"How do you get used to all this?" she said softly as she leaned into Thran's ear.

"The truth is, my dear, you never really do." He looked out again over the crowd and swirled the snifter of amber brown liquor on the table in front of him.

"Oh, come on. Share your secrets for once." She laughed, as she delivered a teasingly soft slap to his chest.

"At first, it's a lot to take in. You feel like you're being pulled apart. Like you're a landspeeder and flock of jawas are closing in." he lifted the glass and took another sip.

"A flock?" she smiled.

Thran shrugged and laughed at his improper nomenclature for the collective of Jawas.

The two Sith had spent enough time running their own makeshift racket in pilfered office furniture that they were perfectly able to work in sync. Their conversation was an illusion of

sorts. From across the bar, they looked like two people chatting each other up. They could be discussing anything. Yet the words they shared were not the frivolous chatter one would expect. Their lips spoke of fears and adjustments and their ears held the weight of understanding what the other was saying. Below all the sound and moving lips, the real conversation was happening.

For nearly an hour, both of them had been slipping into the heads of each of the patrons and employees. The Force proved to be a perfect accomplice. It had allowed them to case the joint, without ever standing up. Most of the people were harmless yuppies and socialites, but each had set their marks on those who were of interest.

“Ok, herd, school, jumble. Jumble of Jawas. The point is that over time the abnormality of that whole situation just becomes normal. Then it really gets on its head when you get to a point where you just want it to be gone, to enjoy some privacy for a minute...But when you get it, that now feels like the odd thing. It's not bad or good, just different. I just happen to love my adoring fans. I love the chaos and the attention. In time, you'll get used to it too.” He said, placing the nearly empty glass back on the table.

“I think I can adapt.” Rayne said. “It's all just so different. Don't get me wrong, I love the fancy clothes and champagne.” She raised her glass slightly and passed her eyes over the bar again.

Bright blue and pink lights strobed with the music. Syncopated beats and a wailing horn mixed with the growling and hissing vocals of the club's headline performer. The band was headed by a Trandoshan. The band was uncoordinated and seemed to be poorly rehearsed. From time to time, the vocalist would turn back to his backing performers and snarl. It was a clear sign of disapproval with the quality of performance.

“Kriffin' Hell, this band sucks. They sound like a blown non-sequential power-converter.” Thran remarked.

“It's...unique.” Rayne searched for something to compliment. She too found the band's sound lacking. “They certainly have a whole...vibe.”

Underneath their conversation, they had pointed out four individuals of note. Two were familiar to them. A pair of upstarts within the Clan. It didn't take the unlimited power of the Dark Side to mark them. They stuck out like bright red polka dots on a field of white. Subtle messages, held aloft by the will of the Force, wormed their way into the minds of the two agents.

Simultaneously, from opposite ends of the bar, they turned to look at Thran and Rayne who sat silently smiling in their private booth. Thran extended a finger, curling it towards himself to beckon them. Ellac and Kah'ri glanced at each other, then began to move on a serpentine route through the crowd.

"Oh...My...Kevin is certainly enjoying the vibe." Rayne tilted her head in the direction of the Bimm attorney.

Thran leaned out of booth to witness what Rayne was seeing. Shock hit him like a punch to the face. However, instead of recoiling in horror. He erupted in laughter.

Standing around four feet tall, the furred man was pressed up the chest of an alien female. The alien's two droopy antennae swayed with as she danced with him. It's odd and asymmetrical head twitched as the taller alien leaned in to whisper something to Thran's very drunk attorney. It ran it's clawed hands through K'vin's short brown fur before leaning in with a mouth full of snaggle teeth for a kiss. The Bimm obliged the Vuvrian and his snout met the with the alien's kiss.

It seemed Kevin was indeed enjoying the evening and perhaps had had one too many Hutt Horizons, the bar's specialty drink. Thran leaned over, pulling a holocam from his pocket and began recording a video. The device was likely only picking up the sound of his rolling cackle backed by the clamorous racket that the club called music, but the image it was capturing was pure gold. There was no doubt that this would be used against K'vin at a later time, but Thran did nothing to stop it. Rayne found it amusing too. She'd never seen K'vin cut loose. She supposed that he couldn't be any looser than he was now.

"Derc, baby! What has two thumbs and got that appearance fee?" Rance pointed his thumbs at himself. "This guy!" he exclaimed as he lifted up a camtono and set it on the table.

"Congratulations on doing your fucking job, Rance." Thran pivoted, continually moving his head to maintain a view of the horrific carnal entanglement that was unfolding with K'vin and his new lover.

"Hey, my client needs something done, I get it done. Easy as dunking a Mon Calamari! What are you looking at?" Rance looked back over his shoulder in the direction of the Bimm. "Scrag! Oh...I might be sick." He gagged.

"Rance. Sit down and shut up." Thran gestured to an open spot at the table. Rance complied.

Rayne smiled. Watching Thran in his natural element was a sight to behold. He had such a presence about him. Commanding, but without threat of force. It was as if he could control the legions of his employees by his will alone. She caught sight of Kah'ri and Ellac as they approached.

"Seriously though, I can't yet prove of any criminal activity going on in this place, but I should have the Ministry of Culture declare this music Anti-Imperial on account of it being so shit. I would rather listen to the mating call of a Gundark in heat than this crap." Thran said.

"Do they call it Acid Fizz cause it's like listening to your own ears receiving endless chemical burns?"

"Lady Rayne. Mister Occ-" Kah'ri began with a slight bow.

"Sit down, you Tach brain." Thran failed to let the Mystic finish his introduction.

"We were sent by the Emperor to inv-" Ellac added.

"Yes, yes. You were sent to investigate. Have you found anything?" Thran asked.

"Well...not exactly. This place is very loud. Everyone is very drunk. It's not my type of place." Kah'ri slid into the booth.

Thran looked him up and down. "You don't say." He said with nearing disinterest.

"We have to complete the mission that the Emperor has given us." Ellac said.

"Yes, I am sure he threatened all manner of punishment for failure." Thran said, dismissingly.

"I don't like Rancors." Ellac said firmly.

"If Kamjin was really serious about this mission...why would he send you two?" Thran inquired.

"Hey! We're capable." Kah'ri objected.

Thran chuckled to himself. The pair had no place in an establishment like this. He could sense Kah'ri's discomfort in being sent to a bar. He'd read the report about Kah'ri's tense behavior on Crannix. Social situations were not his forte. On the other hand, Ellac was brute force instrument. More Obelisk than Sith. Thran smiled, Ellac could be a useful weapon in the right hands, but his sole focus on vengeance against Kamjin mixed with his fear of failure made him volatile. These two did not belong here. Kamjin probably knew that and sent them anyway.

"Yes. So, I've read. I'm afraid there are no cliffs here, Kah'ri." Thran grinned. "Listen. I mean no offense by it, but clearly Kamjin has sent you here with the hopes that he could catch a fish or two."

"A fish? What?" Ellac asked.

"That's what I was saying!" Rance chimed in.

"He means we're being used as bait, Ellac." Kah'ri clarified.

"Precisely." Thran said. "And you wouldn't want to get gobbled up, would you boys?"

"Wait...If we're bait...what are you doing here?" Kah'ri asked, as he put pieces together in his head.

"My business is my own to mind. You'd do well to mind your own as well." Thran replied.

"Kamjin sent you to check in on us?" Ellac half-stated half-questioned.

"Ellac...No, honey." Rayne said. "Do you really think that Thran would follow an order Kamjin gave him?"

"Uhhh...Yes?" Ellac replied, confused. "Wait...No. Wait...I don't know. Would you?"

"He wouldn't." Kah'ri said, looking around the table. His eyes landing on the camtono.

"Wait...what's in there?" the gears turned in his head. "You're on the take...We'll turn you in to Kamjin! Come on, Ellac." Kah'ri rose to his feet.

Ellac followed suit, entirely confused by what had just happened. He thought to reach for his lightsaber, but sized up his opponents and thought the better of it. The young Sith practically stumbled as he followed Kah'ri out of the club.

"Don't forget to tell him the band is shit!" Thran called out.

"Wait, was that part of the plan?" Rayne asked, confused by what had just transpired.

"That? No. They are idiots. Let them go. They don't know anything." Thran said, raising a hand to motion for an order of another bottle. "If they go back to Kamjin and the only thing they have is that I am shady, we might be able to start having Kamjin chasing dead ends. It'll keep the mudhorn out of the china shop until we have enough to set the snare for the Clan Tiure. The further we keep Kamjin from the truth, the better chance we have of capitalizing on this."

"We?" Rayne asked.

"You're going to sit there and tell me you're not in for some good old-fashioned chaos?" Thran said with a smile.

"Chaos is fun." Her eyes glinted with excitement.

A waitress made her way through the crowd, holding aloft a golden tray. Atop the gilded tray was an ornate carafe. The grace she had to make it through the crowd without it toppling over would have matched the greatest of prima ballerinas. Eventually, she approached the table and set the carafe down. She laid out glasses for each of them.

"Compliments of the manager, Mr. Kast. We're glad you've decided to join us this evening." She said and gestured across the bar to a tall and muscle bound Quarren who stood overwatching the club.

His tentacled face twitched slightly as he nodded to Thran. Their eyes locked for a moment. His piercing green eyes stared into the endless blackness of the alien's eyes. Rayne wasn't entirely sure what information Thran had gathered in that standoff, but she knew it was enough when he returned the nod.

The group remained at the bar for several more hours. K'vin had disappeared for an extended period of time and rumors were swirling about the club of some graphic action happening in the men's room. K'vin would never live this night down. Derrin danced all night, until he vacated the contents of his stomach on the dance floor. There were lime peels everywhere. Rayne sat with Thran for the night, occasionally getting up to dance with him when he stopped complaining about the music for long enough to do a quick little two-step. It was a good night, but long. They arrived back in Tokare as the sun was rising.

Tokare – Palisades District

Seraph

Caperion System

Thran leaned back into his black marble throne. His mind went over the events of the night before. He wasn't sure what motive the Hutt Clan had for moving in on Imperial Territory. They were so far from Hutt Space it didn't seem to make sense.

He'd learned that their operation had cash liquidity. The camtono full of credits proved that. He'd learned they had poor taste, but a penchant for flash. The terrible Trandoshan band and the neon lights were proof of that. They had rigid structure to their organization. The bar's manager was proof of that.

Sqygorn, the Quarren, was clearly running the operation at Club Antonia. He was likely using it as a front to push sales of spice. Everyone in that place was space-brained for the night. Bars and performance venues were great avenues for laundering money. It was bold to double dip and sell direct to consumers on location. That told Thran that Sqygorn was reckless. But where did he fall in the hierarchy of the Hutt Organization?

Thran was unsure. He thought on it for a moment. Snips of ideas, half plots and plans, danced across his mind. He'd turned over a few worms in this tilling of Earth, but not as many as he'd hoped for. He knew one thing for certain, the Hutts would continue to press their influence across the system. He settled on a course of action. It was a gamble.

He'd wait. Coiled up like a snake, waiting for the perfect moment to strike. Perhaps, with excellent timing, he could take down both the Hutts and Kamjin with a single strike.